

How This God-Defying Government Twisted Upside Down

The stark reversal of Albania's religious life was impossible to miss.

As I walked down the main avenue of Tirana to the location of our final service of celebration, I realized it would take place in front of what many locals dub as "The Temple of Atheism."

That afternoon in the warm September sun, representatives of various faiths, including the president of the Albanian Evangelical Alliance, planted a tree and a colleague gave the location a new name, "The Garden of Faith."

Few of us have ever seen such a rapid upturning of a God-defying government. It now not only allows but also celebrated an open declaration of Christian faith, permitting Sant'Egidio to use the building which had been constructed as the intended mausoleum of the atheistic dictator who had made it criminal to believe.

Those who lament that secularism has no ending and that its dominating presence cannot be broken, need only to come to Albania. Situated on the northwest borders of Greece on the Adriatic Sea, 75 kilometers from Italy, Albania is part of the Balkans.

The Ottoman Empire (Islamic Turks) occupied it for 500 years. Invaded by Italy in 1943, it became a Nazi protectorate. A year later a communist republic was formed under President Enver Hoxha and lasted until 1991. He outlawed any form of worship and religious property was confiscated. Believers, be they Christian or Muslim, were tortured and often executed. In

1967 Hoxa declared Albania “the world’s first atheist state.”

After the Soviet collapse, the walls keeping Albanians locked in also fell. The faltering economy fostered crazy expectations, motivating the Albanians to invest in Ponzi schemes. It is estimated that a third of the population was caught in one or more of these schemes. The inevitable collapse triggered public unrest and a backlash against the government. Although freed from the Enver Hoxha dictatorship, people’s lives were not easy.

And now, in September 2015, I was participant and speaker in a “Peace Is Always Possible” conference. This annual event led by Sant’Egidio, is a Catholic based spiritual movement founded in the 1960s by a group of Italian teenagers with a hunger for the Scriptures, for prayer and with a heart to care for the poor and disabled.

As I sat on the platform, I thought of the hard journey of the Albanians from the prison of not just a faithless secularism but also through an imposed faithlessness.

Secularism is an attitude that presses up against faith saying, in effect, “You have no right to voice your views here.” Imposed atheism says, “We will put you in prison if you even show evidence of belief.”

This kind of controlling atheism rips away at the heart, forcing one to deny what you know to be true. It creates a bifurcated and dysfunctional soul: In public you must be on guard to use language suitable to authorities; but even in private, you never know if your spouse, child, parent or sibling is informing on you to the secret police.

Sant’Egidio has expertise in crafting peace initiatives, fostering contact with a myriad of groups and religions, with the resonating theme, “Peace is always possible.” This optimism isn’t a frivolous attempt to ignore the deep, troubling craters of hatred and violence. Rooted in the

gospel, members fervently believe that prayer is essential to the peace process. My presentation advanced an understanding that prayer is, in essence, spiritual warfare.

While the wars of humanity are triggered by territorial and selfish impulses, the demonic exacerbates human conflict, escalating feelings to hatred, murder, rape and torture.

It is encouraging for me to see this community operating with comfort as they work with other religions, open to hear from any and all. Yet they give nothing away. Founded securely in their Christian faith, they let others say what they wish, believing that within dialogue there may come points of connection that may lead to initiatives and actions of peace.

I wish that among evangelicals—rooted and secure in our doctrinal and theological faith—we might have such conversations, not being defensive or reacting, but following the example of the famous evangelical missionary statesman E. Stanley Jones, who in his organized dialogue with various religious groups in India fostered understanding.

Our evening dinners in Albania opened the door for multiple conversations with significant leaders in countries who bristle with anti-Christian hostility. My prayer is that the Lord will give opportunities to walk through those doors, knowing the Spirit allows us to enter places where in our wildest dreams we won't imagine going.

Life isn't secured by government, the strongest of military might nor a political or philosophical bias or doctrine. But our hope is framed by a deep and settled belief that our lives revolve within the orbit of our Lord's creative presence.

Prayer is not our last resort. It is our only resort.

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