

**FROM HARMONY TO TOLERANCE  
UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE AND MEANING  
OF THE ALBANIAN ENVIRONMENT OF  
INTER-RELIGIOUS INTERACTIONS 27 YEARS  
AFTER COMMUNISM.  
THE CASE OF MALBARDH.**

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Numri i fjalëve: 60076

Tiranë, Prill 2018

## DEKLARATA E AUTORËSISË

Nën përgjegjësinë time deklaroj, se punimi është fryt i punës sime. Punimi është origjinal dhe nuk përmban pjesë të shkruara apo të kopjuara nga ndonjë autor tjetër përveç rasteve të cituara dhe referuara në këtë studim.

Autori

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## **ABSTRACT**

Albanian inter-religious peaceful dynamics at a time of heightened inter-religious strife and violence is bound to catch the attention of the world, and it deserves careful examination because it might hold some promise for the future of inter-religious interactions in this religiously pluralistic world we live in. Albanian religions are not some obscure local religions that may be difficult to understand but traditional versions of the world religions such as Christianity and Islam. This situation where Islam and Christianity have coexisted in the midst of one people group for centuries, without noticeable strife, defies the common experience of most people in the world where such religions are typically associated with separate people groups or ethnicities or nations usually at odds with each other. In this study, we will offer a sketch of the historical context of this reality in Albania but will focus mostly on the current state of the inter-religious interactions between Albanians of the different religions in order to understand from within the nature and meaning of such an environment.

The prominent example of the inter-religious dynamics in one village of Albania, Malbardh, which was publicized widely in 2014 as a good example of the surprising Albanian inter-religious harmony, will be the point of departure for this study. In order to understand this example in a broader Albanian context, capturing the current trends and dynamics that are present, this study will also probe the influential inter-religious environment in the nearby University of Shkodra through a survey and semi-structured interviews of converts. Instead of analyzing the situation through the opinions of other observers, this study seeks to delve through participant

observation and field work into the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions first hand and bring in with as much detail as possible the voice of those engaged in it. The anthropological angle of this study will serve well to understand the nature and meaning of the environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania. The methodological research strategy of ethnography ensures that the perceptions of participants will be presented faithfully and at the end, support the conclusions warranted by the research.

The objective of this study includes understanding the dynamics of the inter-religious environment of the village of Malbardh in relation to the building of the Catholic church of Shen Mehil in the village with the participation of the predominantly Muslim population there through participant observation, a focus group and interviews with religious converts from the village.

There are many who like to wax eloquently about the Albanian inter-religious harmony, but here we need to have reliable research and reasoned conclusions reflecting a good understanding of religion and social dynamics in Albania. This study seeks to provide the transparent exploration and analysis of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions that would give confidence to anyone defining such an environment as harmonious in one sense and not yet tolerant in another sense. Defining well the goals of the research and the operational principles used to gauge the makeup of the reality on the ground is one of the advantages in this study which builds on the philosophical contributions in the area of tolerance as well as the appreciation for theological depth of the two major religions involved in this environment. The reasoned and nuanced conclusion of this study is that the nature of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions can be best defined as harmony between

people of different religions, but the meaning of this will need to be specified as social harmony without sufficient theological awareness and thus without a robust inter-religious tolerance. Such a conclusion is not to be seen as an indictment but as clarifying an opportunity to build toward harmony with established inter-religious tolerance. The conclusion of this study is that Albania has the best chance to continue toward such robust tolerance at the level of theologically informed tolerant inter-religious interactions building upon the cultural and social harmony while living with religious others in the shared common space.

## **ABSTRAKTI**

Në një kohë përplasjesh dhe dhune ndërfetare, dinamika e harmonisë ndërfetare shqiptare patjetër që do të kapë vëmendjen e botës dhe meriton një shqyrtim të kujdesshëm, meqenëse është premtuese për kontribut në këtë botë pluraliste të intensifikimit të marrëdhënieve ndërfetare. Fetë Shqiptare nuk janë ca fe të panjohura lokale që mund të jetë vështirë të kuptohen gjerësisht, por janë versione tradicionale të feve botërore si Krishterimi dhe Islami. Kjo situatë, ku Islami dhe Krishterimi kanë jetuar së bashku në mesin e një populli për shumë shekuj pa ndonjë shfaqje dhune për t'u shënuar, sfidon përvojën e shumicës së popujve që zakonisht gjenden me grupime fetare në pozita kundërshtuese. Në këtë studim ne do të skicojmë kontekstin historik të këtij realiteti shqiptar, por do të fokusohemi kryesisht në situatën e tanishme të marrëdhënieve ndërfetare midis shqiptarëve të feve të ndryshme, me qëllim që të kuptojmë nga brenda natyrën dhe kuptimin e këtij mjedisi shoqëror.

Shembulli i evidentuar mediatikisht i dinamikës ndërfetare në një fshat të Shqipërisë, Malbardh, që u publikua gjerësisht në vitin 2014 si një shembull i mirë i harmonisë befasuese ndërfetare shqiptare, është pika e nisjes së këtij studimi. Me qëllim që ky shembull të vendoset në kontekstin më të gjerë shqiptar, duke eksploruar rrymat e tanishme dhe dinamikat e pranishme, ky studim do të shqyrtojë edhe mjedisin ndërfetar influences në hapësirën fqinje të Milotit dhe të Universitetit të Shkodrës përmes një ankete si edhe përmes intervistave gjysmë të strukturuar me persona të konvertuar fetarisht. Në vend të analizës së situatës përmes opinioneve të vëzhguesve të jashtëm, ky studim synon të zhytet direkt përmes vëzhgimit me pjesëmarrje në mjedisin e ndërveprimeve ndërfetare, duke nxjerrë, me aq nuanca sa është e mundur,

zërin e atyre që janë të përfshirë në këtë mjedis. Këndvështrimi antropologjik i këtij studimi do të shërbejë mirë për të kuptuar natyrën dhe kuptimin e mjedisit të marrëdhënieve ndërfetare në Shqipëri, prandaj intervistat dhe hulumtimi në terren përmes vëzhgimit me pjesëmarrje, përbëjnë kryesisht metodologjinë e përdorur, duke rezultuar në një etnografi që prezanton besnikërisht gjetjet dhe ofron në fund konkluzionet e mbështetura mirë nga hulumtimi shkencor transparent.

Objektivat e këtij studimi përfshijnë kuptimin e dinamikës së ambientit ndërfetar të fshatit Malbardh në lidhje me ndërtimin e kishës katolike të Shën Mëhillit me pjesëmarrjen e shumicës myslimane të fshatit. Ky hulumtim do të kryhet përmes vëzhgimit me pjesëmarrje, fokus grupit dhe intervistave me individë nga fshati që janë konvertuar në një fe tjetër.

Të shumtë janë ata që lakojnë madhështinë e harmonisë ndërfetare shqiptare, por ne kemi nevojë për një argumentim të besueshëm dhe konkluzione të arsyetuara që reflektojnë një kuptim të mirë të fesë dhe të dinamikave sociale në Shqipëri. Ky studim synon të sigurojë pikërisht këtë, përmes një eksplorimi transparent dhe analize rigoroze të mjedisit shqiptar të marrëdhënieve ndërfetare që do t'i jepte siguri të argumentuar atij që e deklaron me të drejtë harmonik mjedisin shqiptar ndërfetar, por, në një kuptim të rëndësishëm, rezervon gjithashtu të drejtën e argumentuar për të mos e konsideruar akoma si një mjedis fetarisht tolerant. Duke përkufizuar mirë qëllimet e këtij studimi dhe kriteret e punës kërkimore për të nxjerrë domethënien e realitetit në terren, është një nga avantazhet e këtij studimi që mbështetet në kontributin e filozofisë në fushën e studimit të tolerancës, ashtu si edhe në thellësinë e kuptimit teologjik të feve të prezantuara në këtë mjedis shqiptar. Argumenti i nuancuar i këtij studimi është që natyra e mjedisit shqiptar të marrëdhënieve ndërfetare përkufizohet më së miri si

harmoni midis njerëzve të feve të ndryshme, por me një kuptim që duhet specifikuar si harmoni shoqërore pa thellësi teologjike dhe kështu pa arritur në tolerancë ndërfetare. Një konkluzion i tillë nuk duhet parë si një akuze apo kritikë, por si një kontribut qartësues për mundësinë e gëzueshme të ndërtimit të tolerancës ndërfetare si një forcim të harmonisë ekzistuese. Konkluzioni i këtij studimi është që Shqipëria ka mundësinë më të mirë për të vazhduar ecjen drejt zhvillimit të kësaj tolerance të vërtetë ndërfetare në nivelin e njerëzve të mirinformuar teologjikisht, që ndërveprojnë në përputhje me kulturën dhe harmoninë shoqërore ndërfetare shqiptare.



**DEDIKIMI**

*Gruas time, Nikki!*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am greatly indebted to many people with regard to this project of research into the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions. I want to start by thanking all of the different individuals and groups that were willing to help me by sharing their experiences and their time with me, including Marenglen with his brother Agron Rexha and his fellow villagers of Malbardh, Gusti Bushgjoka and his team at the University of Shkodra, as well as professor Jozef Bushati of the academic staff at the University of Shkodra who helped tremendously with facilitating the students to do the survey at their computer lab. I am grateful for many partners who have helped financially to make this project a reality, including Kurt Tillman and his team, for providing everything needed for a wonderful environment for me to conduct a sixweek long research intensive during the summer of 2015 at Wheaton College near Chicago, which also provided generous use of their excellent library and professional help through their extraordinary library staff. Special thanks go to the anthropology professor at Wheaton, Dr. Brian Howell, who helped me tremendously during those weeks to familiarize myself with the latest in the field of anthropology and sharpen the focus of my research to make more room for the importance of conversion.

One of the great privileges in my life and in working on this project is the support of my American professors; philosophers Douglas Groothuis PhD and Stanly Obbits PhD, who have sharpened my abilities during my Masters studies in philosophy of religion at Denver Seminary and have faithfully surveyed my writings for this current project offering valuable insights, corrections and encouragement. Special

thanks also go to Nathan Kaoulupek for checking my English at an early stage of my writing. The editor of the latter stage of this work, Kathy E. Passerine, who helped me tremendously to clean my English from inept phrases and many mistakes does agree with me that long sentences are my “weakness.” My daughter, Abigail A. Doci, also combed through the whole final manuscript for any remaining English mistakes.

It goes without saying that whatever problems still remain in my writing are my responsibility and the result of my stubbornness in preferring my complicated sentences that those who know may call more appropriately “convoluted.”

Closer to home, I need to say special thanks to many people at the European University in Tirana who have enabled me to do this research: Pride of place goes to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Tonin Gjuraj who added overseeing my thesis work on top of a tremendous load as the academic dean of the University. My previous advisor, Arjan Curri PhD, was a great encouragement to me with his engaging philosophical discussions and administrative responsibilities during the major part of the process of my doctoral studies at UET, as well as with his friendship and support in many ways. The library staff of the UET was very helpful at different times, tracking and securing for me some needed material. Several professors deserve special praise for their advice and help in particular aspects of my work, including the professor of anthropology at UET, Prof. Dr. Aleksander Dhima and professor Prof. Dr. Ylljet Alicka, as well as all the staff of the doctoral program at UET who have helped in various ways to make my experience at this institution unforgettable.

My wife and my two children have had to endure some tense days and weeks, but it is their love and support for me, their “old man still in school,” that make everything worth it.

## TABLE OF CONTENT

### CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

<b>1.1. Now is a crucial time in Albania .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1.1. Motivation for this study.....	2
1.1.2. Resurgence of religion in Albania since 1991.....	2
1.1.3. Religions are powerful life-transformative entities .....	3
1.1.4. Generational transition is here.....	4
1.1.5. Relative ignorance of religion.....	5
1.1.6. Albanian uniqueness needs to be explained.....	5
1.1.7. Albanians are not insulated anymore.....	6
<b>1.2. The research question, the hypothesis and scope of this study.....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.2.1. The hypothesis of this study: “from harmony to tolerance.” .....	8
1.2.2. Malbardh, a revealing case indicating the scope of this study.....	9
1.2.3. The broader social context of Malbardh cannot be ignored.....	13
<b>1.3. Other preliminaries for this anthropological study.....</b>	<b>14</b>
1.3.1. Explaining the title: the revealing exemplary environment, and the implied trajectory.....	15
1.3.2. Period under study.....	15
1.3.3. Geographical area of reference and the relation to communist past.....	16
<b>1.4. Importance of conversion studies to understand the environment.....</b>	<b>17</b>
1.4.1. Is conversion a challenge to Albanian identity? .....	18
1.4.2. Religious conversion and national identity questions .....	18
<b>1.5. Summary of the introductory elements.....</b>	<b>19</b>

### CHAPTER II: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

<b>2.1. Albania, Religion and Nation.....</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1.1. Importance of context.....	22
2.1.2. The intersection of world religions and modernity in Albania.....	23

<b>2.2. Albanian renaissance and the five traditional religious communities.....</b>	<b>27</b>
2.2.1. One nation in one state with different religions.....	29
<b>2.3. Albanian communism and religion: Closing a century of discussion about religions.....</b>	<b>30</b>
2.3.1. Albania and Religion during Communism.....	30
2.3.2. The demographic dimension and the unparalleled war against religion....	30
2.3.3. The ironic importance of Communism for Albanian nationalism.....	31
2.3.4. Consolidation of Albanian national identity remains apart from religion...	33
2.3.5. The fall of Communism: continuities and discontinuities.....	35
<b>2.4. Albania and Religion after Communism: reopening the religious question ..</b>	<b>36</b>
2.4.1. The generational dimension of Albanian inter-religious environment.....	37
<b>2.5. Summary of the relevant elements in the historic section.....</b>	<b>38</b>

### **CHAPTER III: THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

<b>3.1. A phenomenological study philosophically.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>3.2. The Anthropological angle methodologically.....</b>	<b>44</b>
3.2.1. An interpretative or symbolic anthropological study theoretically.....	45
<b>3.3. Epistemologically interpretivist .....</b>	<b>47</b>
3.3.1. Concept of culture in expectations for this study.....	48
<b>3.4. The “variables” in this study: as reference factors .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>3.5. Model, strategy and methods.....</b>	<b>53</b>
3.5.1. Three main probes of this study.....	54
3.5.2. Limitations of the study and commitment to objectivity and reflexivity ....	56

### **CHAPTER IV: FROM HARMONY TO TOLERANCE**

<b>4.1. Albanian inter-religious tolerance in the case of the village of Malbardh.....</b>	<b>59</b>
4.1.1. The broader context of inter-religious tolerance.....	59
4.1.2. Qualifying the representativeness of Malbardh for this study.....	60

<b>4.2. Toward a working definition of inter-religious tolerance.....</b>	<b>62</b>
4.2.1. Tolerance, ideas and persons.....	62
4.2.2. The disappointing promise of relativism.....	63
<b>4.3. Inter-religious harmony and tolerance viewed theoretically and contextually.....</b>	<b>65</b>
4.3.1. A working definition of “tolerance”.....	67
<b>4.4. Understanding the case of Malbardh regarding inter-religious tolerance.....</b>	<b>69</b>
4.4.1. Questions arising about the Albanian inter-religious tolerance in Malbardh.....	69
4.4.2. Preliminary issues about the purported Albanian (Malbardhian) religious tolerance.....	69
<b>4.5. The case of Malbardh as an ethnographic study.....</b>	<b>71</b>
4.5.1. Malbardh, the media’s take on the story and methodology.....	71
4.5.2. Removing the superficial clutter in the discussion of Malbardh.....	74
4.5.3. Some elements relevant to understanding Malbardh’s inter-religious harmony.....	75
<b>4.6. Malbardh’s harmony is familial, organic or natural as parts of a whole.....</b>	<b>76</b>
4.6.1. The building of the church was building the village’s church.....	79
4.6.2. Harmony without reference to any specific religious teaching.....	79
4.6.3. The media publicity and the future of harmony in the village.....	81
<b>4.7. Inter-religious harmony or inter-religious tolerance? .....</b>	<b>83</b>
4.7.1. Harmony as a team play vs. tolerance as endurance of competition.....	85
4.7.2. Caution: Theoretical vs. contextualized harmony .....	86
<b>4.8. Do Malbardhians intentionally or knowingly endure religious others? .....</b>	<b>87</b>
4.8.1. Lack of awareness of religious significance.....	88
4.8.2. Display of a relativistic stance.....	89
4.8.3. Display of low level of commitment.....	89
4.8.4. What do the cases of conversion in Malbardh mean? .....	91
<b>4.9. Conclusion on tolerance in Malbardh is harmony.....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>4.10. Significance of Malbardhian harmony for inter-religious tolerance.....</b>	<b>95</b>

## CHAPTER V: MEASURING TOLERANCE

<b>5.1. The broader context of our study.....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>5.2. The considerations of probes related to the goal of this study.....</b>	<b>98</b>
5.2.1. Importance of the village school and its teachers.....	100
5.2.2. The importance of the environment of teacher formation.....	101
5.2.3. The measuring of tolerance in the environment of the students of education in Shkodra.....	101
<b>5.3. Theoretical considerations in measuring tolerance.....</b>	<b>103</b>
5.3.1. Conversion as one explicit aspect missing in the questionnaire.....	106
5.3.2. Tolerance and Relativism in the questionnaire.....	113
<b>5.4. Lessons from the questionnaire on tolerance in Shkodra .....</b>	<b>109</b>
5.4.1. Understanding the tool used to measure tolerance.....	110
<b>5.5. Reflections and observations on the questionnaire results.....</b>	<b>111</b>
5.5.1. Looking at the whole .....	111
5.5.2. Looking at the specific categories .....	112
<b>5.6. Conclusions on the second probe.....</b>	<b>117</b>

## CHAPTER VI: THE BATTLEGROUND OF TOLERANCE

<b>6.1. The third probe: Interviews with converts .....</b>	<b>119</b>
6.1.1. The privilege of exploring conversions .....	119
<b>6.2. Conversions and the truth of tolerance.....</b>	<b>120</b>
6.2.1. Conversion and the truth of tolerance in Albania; the working definition.....	121
6.2.2. Importance of conversion cases for positive proof of tolerance .....	121
<b>6.3. A theoretical framework for studying conversion: The “stage model” .....</b>	<b>123</b>
6.3.1. Utilizing the “stage model” .....	123

<b>6.4. Context, type and motifs of conversion .....</b>	<b>124</b>
6.4.1. Attention to the type of conversion .....	124
6.4.2. Considering the “tradition transition” as the ideal type for our interview.....	125
6.4.2. Awareness of the conversion motifs.....	125
<b>6.5. The non-probability and chain referral sampling of candidates for interview .....</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>6.6. General observations about the sample of the conversion stories .....</b>	<b>127</b>
6.6.1. Number and makeup of the sample .....	127
6.6.2. Why the preponderance of conversion cases of one kind is not problematic.....	128
<b>6.7. Theologically informed phenomenology needed .....</b>	<b>129</b>
6.7.1. Theological and phenomenological considerations .....	130
6.7.2. Sticking with descriptive but informed phenomenology .....	130
6.7.3. Conversion stories will enhance the understanding of the related environments .....	131
<b>6.8. Probing through the semi-structured interview format .....</b>	<b>132</b>
6.8.1. The value of the semi-structured interview .....	132
6.8.2. The ultimate focus of our interviewing .....	132
6.8.3. Building the interview format .....	133
6.8.4. Projecting the methodological path of utilizing the interviews .....	133
<b>6.9. The structuring of the narrative of the interviews: Presenting the findings ...</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>6.10. The story of Malbardhian conversions described through the stages of conversion .....</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>6.11. The context of conversion .....</b>	<b>137</b>
6.11.1. The macrocontext of the conversions in Malbardh/Milot .....	137
6.11.2. The immediate context of the converts of Malbardh and Milot .....	137
6.11.3. The context of encountering the new faith: “the ecology of conversion” .....	142
<b>6.12. The Crisis .....</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>6.13. The quest .....</b>	<b>145</b>



<b>6.14. Encountering the new faith .....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>6.15. Interaction: The environment of the new group .....</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>6.16. Commitment: The turning point .....</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>6.17. Consequences .....</b>	<b>154</b>
6.17.1. Besnik's case as the best testing case in Malbardh .....	155
6.17.2. Besnik's wedding ceremony as a curious case of Malbardh's openness .....	155
6.17.3. The interactions in the family .....	156
6.17.4. The interactions in the circle of friends and coworkers .....	156
<b>6.18. Exploring interpretatively the responses to Malbardh converts .....</b>	<b>156</b>
6.18.1. Interpreting the responses in Malbardh .....	159
6.18.2. Interpreting the experience of the converts from nearby Milot .....	160
<b>6.19. Relevant findings including the third category of interviews .....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>6.20. Operational categories to gauge the different elements     in the interactions .....</b>	<b>164</b>
6.20.1. Correlation of religious awareness and response .....	165
<b>6.21. Evaluating through operational categories of perceptions     about tolerance .....</b>	<b>167</b>
6.21.1. Analyzing perceptions of Catholic converts of the environment of conversion .....	168
6.21.2. Analyzing perceptions of Muslim background converts about the environment of conversion .....	169
<b>6.22. Conclusion combining the perceptions of all converts .....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>6.23. Interpreting and explaining the import of the interviews .....</b>	<b>171</b>
6.23.1. Interpreting what we have observed .....	172
6.23.2. An explanation of designating the environment as harmonious without tolerance .....	178
<b>6.24. Summary on the third probe of conversion stories .....</b>	<b>179</b>

## CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

<b>7.1. Explaining the interpretation of harmony and the way forward to tolerance.....</b>	<b>182</b>
7.1.1. A word about culture and pluralism.....	183
7.1.2. We need to develop the religious pluralism of Albania.....	183
<b>7.2. Integrated Conclusions.....</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>7.3. Answering the main research question and the hypothesis of this study.....</b>	<b>185</b>
7.3.1. Correlation of such factors as religious buildings and religious teaching to toleration.....	188
7.3.2. Arriving at the thesis supported by the evidence of this study.....	189
<b>7.4. Explanation of the harmony: Albanian Epistemological Principle of Closeness (AEPC) .....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>7.5. Suggestions toward an Albanian environment of inter-religious tolerance.....</b>	<b>193</b>
7.5.1. Context for community building, intentionally, inter-religiously.....	194
7.5.2. Protecting the freedom of conversion.....	195
<b>7.6. Helpful Albanian traditions in the progress toward tolerance.....</b>	<b>197</b>
7.6.1. Kumbaria and inter-religious tolerance.....	197
7.6.2. Inter-religious marriage and religious tolerance after Communism.....	198
7.6.3. Cultural tradition of visitation, participation and greeting inter-religiously.....	199
7.6.4. Clearing the charge of relativism and self-contradiction.....	200
7.6.5. Clearing some theological scruples.....	201
<b>7.7. Public education and inter-religious tolerance.....</b>	<b>202</b>
7.7.1. We need a coherent national vision for relating religion to national education.....	203
7.7.2. Paradigm on Religious education.....	204
7.7.3. Maintaining the Albanian public square toward tolerance.....	206
<b>7.4. Recapitulating for the last time.....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>END NOTES .....</b>	<b>210</b>

## **APPENDIX A**

Initial preparatory notes for the field work in Malbardh (As prepared in Albanian) .....	242
Fokus grup, Spring, April 25, 2015 (In Albanian).....	244
Field notes with some details (in Albanian)from the focus group in Malbardh ..	247
Other notes from research in Malbardh (In Albanian).....	251
Notes from a conversation with two people in Lezha (In Albanian).....	252
Notes from informal interviews in Malbardh in September 2015.....	253

## **APPENDIX B**

Questionnaire “Religion and Tolerance” (As translated in Albanian).....	257
Analytical tables of the questionnaire (In English)..	263

## **APPENDIX C**

“Interview Guide” (As formulated in Albanian) .....	275
Transcribed interviews (In Albanian).....	276
Summary of interviews with converts from Malbardhe and Shkodra Area 2017 .(In English).....	375

<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	377
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## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Results of the completion of the questionnaire.....	263
Table 2.	Rearrangement of table 1 from the greatest mean to the smallest mean ....	265
Table 3.	Religious makeup of the sample (inculding comparisons) .....	267
Table 4.	The differences between the ‘liberals’ and the ‘stricts’ for Albania .....	268
Table 5.	Factor analysis categories .....	270
Table 6.	Reliability of results on the six factors for Albania .....	272
Table 7.	Results on the six factors (including comparisons).....	272
Table 8.	Results with strict and liberal (including comparisons).....	273
Table 9.	Reliability of results (inculding comparisons) .....	274
Table 10.	Summary of interviews with converts from Malbardh and Shkodra Area 2017 .....	375

## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

**Introduction to the study of the nature and meaning of the Albanian inter-religious environment 27 years after communism: the case of Malbardh.**

### **1.1. Now is a crucial time in Albania:**

Albanian inter-religious tolerance is at a crucial time as Albanians are becoming aware of religion like never before. Only 27 years after the fall of communism, the religious life of Albanians has changed dramatically. Everyone, in one way or another, has had to “convert” relatively recently with regard to religion, even if they did not choose to become religious, because they now live with religion as an accepted reality that cannot be avoided and, moreover, has to be reckoned with.

Some of the infamous ISIS fighters, albeit very few, speak Albanian (Mejdini 2016). There should be no surprise that one can find Albanian Muslims among terrorists because Albanians are not immune from any ideological virus that can catch any human being. For Albanians who are used to telling themselves and the whole world that the Albanian way is to live in harmony with all religious others, this fact must give them some pause. What are their assurances that these Albanians from our neighborhoods will not turn our very neighborhoods into bomb ridden Kabul? These Albanians are but one insignificant sliver of the much greater number of people in Albania who have become aware of religion as a greatly motivating power for life. This is a very recent phenomenon in Albania.

### *1.1.1. Motivation for this study:*

While Albania still enjoys a remarkably peaceful inter-religious environment, a poor understanding of the underlying reasons for such harmony and the understandable eagerness for exaggerating the apparent inter-religious tolerance of Albanians may induce a sleepy ignorance of the existing inadequacies and weaknesses of the Albanian inter-religious environment in the face of the present global social and religious currents. These developments could easily result in upheavals similar to those experienced in other countries with mixed religious populations.

Twenty-seven years after communism fell in Albania has given the nation sufficient time for a new reality to assert itself with regard to inter-religious interactions both continuous with the past and pronounced discontinuities. Now we have a whole generation of Albanians who grew up in a very free religious environment, completely unstructured with multiple opportunities to explore different spiritualities.

### *1.1.2. Resurgence of religion in Albania since 1991:*

A recent study singles out Albania in its early introductory pages with these words: “After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, large numbers of the non-religious returned to religion. One of the most profound examples is Albania, the first officially atheistic state, which in 2010 was 62.7% Muslim and 31.6% Christian” (T. M. Johnson 2013, 12). The stories of people converting to some kind of religious belief abound, and most Albanians today would say they are religious. What this actually means for most, however, is that they belong to the religion their family is designated to because of the religious background tradition. These 27 years since the renewal of religious life in Albania has seen the restoration of all of the traditional religious communities visibly

with many mosques and churches throughout the country and many adherents filling public spaces in religious rituals.<sup>1</sup>

*1.1.3. Religions are powerful life-transformative entities:*

Religious ideas are powerful forces that shape individuals and groups in such a way that have radical practical consequences for the world in which we live.<sup>2</sup> Religion is not avoidable now in Albania even by people who do not want to have anything to do with religion; and in a reality where different religions are exercised and propagated freely, there is a need for understanding how the rights of all people, religious or not, are upheld without infringing on the free exercise and propagation of different views and religions.

To explore religion in Albania after 27 years of freedom, we have a new reality of religious groups multiplying and growing by propagating their faith enthusiastically. Even if we ignore the great variety of faiths now operating in Albania and focus on the two main religions with their different traditions, namely Christianity and Islam, we have to appreciate that both of these faiths are inherently expansionistic faiths, meaning they naturally seek to propagate their faith and draw everyone in their ideological fold. We may want to imagine that there can be some Albanian versions of this or that religion, and there may well be some unique specifics in how a religion is practiced, but we must not forget that it is proven for many centuries and in many cultures that the world religions we have in Albania, Christianity and Islam, will not be bent by the local culture as much as they will transform the culture where they are planted.

#### *1.1.4. Generational transition is here:*

Between 1967 and the early 1990s, when Albania was officially declared atheistic as a state, there were no churches or mosques open anywhere in the whole country. During this period there was an unparalleled war against religion in Albania with the clear goal of a “creation of a totally atheistic society” (Jacques 1995, 570). People were denied the opportunity to practice religion with others in any meaningful way, and the discussion of religious ideas was not allowed. The irony is that those who grew up and lived during these 20 some years of religious ignorance and the most thoroughly atheistic of any historical period became the generation to revive religion in the 1990s.

Those born around the 1960s belonged to the generation who brought about the changes at the fall of communism in the 1990s. Yet having no experience with religion, they viewed religion as just another forbidden ideology to be liberated as such, not because it was valued in itself. The full impact of this change with regard to the social cohesion of Albania is yet to be felt because the first generation living with religious freedom, those born in the early 1980s, is only now coming of age and influencing society; this is the “generation of democracy” as we say in Albania, otherwise also labeled as the “millennial generation.”

Those who were born between the 1980s and the 1990s would have had an opportunity to explore religion freely, with many naturally being involved as conscientious believers. Now they are the generation coming to influence society and politics in greater numbers. Those born in the 1960s who were in their 20s at the time of the fall of communism and presumably thoroughly indoctrinated by their atheistic education, are the generation who are now the parents of this “generation of democracy.” The parents are still around and still calling the shots, but more and more



we are going to see this new generation, “the converted generation” raised in the period of the freedom of religion in Albania, defining our society. Therefore, we want to look into what is the reality of the environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania now after 27 years of freedom and what is the prognosis for the upcoming future.

#### *1.1.5. Relative ignorance of religion:*

The assumption in the general Albanian public was, and apparently remains, that all religions are benign, gentle, harmless and kind, so there has been little concern to carefully evaluate what has been flourishing in the religious fields these past 27 years. But, with the growth of religiously-based terrorism, more attention is now directed to regulating this field. The study of religion in Albania is very deficient; and for the general public who are not involved in religious practices, there is very little opportunity to be well informed about religion. Such lack of understanding about religion is present at the higher levels of leadership in government, education and media also reflects the dismissive attitude inherited from communist times. This situation presents the current danger of having relatively uninformed leaders of society and politicians who are driven to knee jerk reactions, presumably with good intentions.<sup>3</sup>

#### *1.1.6. Albanian uniqueness needs to be explained:*

Albania is different from most of the Balkan countries with regard to its environment of inter-religious dynamics because different religions are practiced in Albania by the same ethnic group living in close proximity. This is considered as something that can serve as a good example especially because Albanians of different Muslim and Christians persuasions, reflecting different traditions, have lived peacefully

side by side for centuries. But, beside just presenting this as an historical fact, there is need to explain how and why this is the case in a way that does justice to how those who are insiders would express it.

#### *1.1.7. Albanians are not insulated anymore:*

There is truth in saying that we have had these world religions practiced peacefully side by side in Albania for centuries and, therefore, we should not expect anything different now, but I would plead to differ because only at this time, for the first time at such a scale, we do not have the protection of the insularity of the Albanian mountains and the stability of the traditional Albanian family due to massive urbanization, emigration and internet penetration. There is no place in Albania now that has not been lured and enabled to be virtually and physically involved in the current world trends because highways now penetrate the secluded areas, and the Albanian populations from the mountains have drained into the large and smaller cities of Albania, and the internet is available to children with little protection from the parents who are very distracted in trying to make a living at a time of great economic uncertainties.

### **1.2. The research question, the hypothesis and scope of this study:**

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in one revealing case. This study seeks to help us understand from the inside the environment of inter-religious interactions in one selected case that is accepted by many as an example of Albanian inter-religious harmony: the case of Malbardh, a village where a Muslim majority

population built a Catholic church (“Myslymanet ringrene kishen, katoliket xhamine.” 2014).

The main research question of this study is: *What is the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions 27 years after the fall of communism as evidenced in one revealing case of the village of Malbardh?*

Many questions accompany this study such as: What are the dimensions of a robust tolerance? Do we need to qualify tolerance, as I just did with the word “robust,” assuming there are levels of tolerance? How does relativism relate to tolerance? How can there be harmony between people who believe contradictory religions? How can harmony and tolerance be understood in relation to describing the inter-religious environment? What is religious pluralism and how does tolerance relate to it? How important or integral to the religion itself is the propagation of the faith for the different religions that exist among Albanians? How can we have freedom of competing religious claims in a harmonious society? How is inter-religious coexistence affected by this legitimate dimension of the free exercise of religion that includes propagating the faith with the expectation of gaining converts? What is acceptable and what is not acceptable in the free exercise of religion and who decides that? Does conversion into another religion jeopardize Albanian identity or social harmony? These are only a few questions from the many complicated questions this study grapples with in understanding what the environment of inter-religious interactions should be and in gauging what it is like at this point.

This study seeks to explore these questions relevantly, but it is not simply or primarily seeking a theoretical understanding of inter-religious tolerance; it seeks to understand the nature of inter-religious interactions in Albania from the inside

perspective of its actors. Therefore, it is primarily a descriptive and empirical study of a specific group of people who by implication become also an analytic study of a specific case of inter-religious interactions.<sup>4</sup>

*1.2.1. The hypothesis of this study: “from harmony to tolerance.”*

The Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions can be described as harmonious. But in distinguishing the role of religion in the informing of the interactions between people of different religions, the perception is that inter-religious tolerance is not fully developed, and the social harmony present between people of different religions in Albania needs maturing toward harmony that includes a robust inter-religious tolerance. The hypothesis to be borne by this study can now be presented as: *The Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in Malbardh is characterized by social harmony of people belonging traditionally to different religions with potential to include inter-religious tolerance of religiously informed people.* Therefore, a shorthand for this study is “from harmony to tolerance.”

Since we have set out to study the environment of inter-religious interactions, it is important to determine what it means for these interactions to be called “peaceful coexistence,” “harmonious” or “tolerant” and what a good environment of inter-religious interaction looks like. As we observe the dynamics in the environment we are studying, it is natural for us to consider the future implications so at the end of our analysis we will explore such questions as: What challenges can we expect to face as the trends we see developing assert their force in the future?

But, before we even start to analyze the environment of Albanian inter-religious interactions, there are other questions to consider: Where and how should we investigate

and reasonably expect to come up with a correct understanding of the Albanian reality? We cannot presume to encompass in this study the whole of the Albanian reality of inter-religious interactions, so which part of Albanian reality should we study? This initial starting point for determining the scope and area of the study was made easy by the media sensationalizing the story of the inter-religious environment in the village of Malbardh in 2014.

*1.2.2. Malbardh, a revealing case indicating the scope of this study:*

Necessarily, we would focus in a relatively small group of people among the broader Albanian population and, intentionally, a widely recognized good example of a village is selected here: the revealing case of the village of Malbardh.<sup>5</sup>

In February 2014 there was an impressive news documentary aired by one of the main national media television channels in Albania, “Top Chanel,” which told the story of a church build by the majority Muslim population in their village of Malbardh as an example of the wonderful inter-religious tolerance in Albania among Muslims and Christians (“Myslymanet ringrene kishen, katoliket xhamine.” 2014). Pope Francis came to Albania on September 21 of that year to inaugurate his first trip in Europe as pope and extolled Albania as a “model of peaceful coexistence between religions” (Konferenca Ipshkvnore e Shqiperise 2015, 7). An article from the Agence France Presse (AFP) on September 20, just one day before the pope’s arrival in Albania, chose to focus exactly on Malbardh and the building of this church, again extolling this reputation of Albania with the title “Albania’s lesson in Muslim-Christian tolerance” and writing of Malbardh’s church as “a symbol of the religious tolerance Pope Francis will be celebrating here on Sunday.”<sup>6</sup> Right around that time, only a week later on September

29, there was a big event at the church of Malbardh where many dignitaries recognized the example of Malbardh as a good Albanian example of inter-religious tolerance and where the representative of the U.S. Embassy in Tirana gave the award “Act Now” in recognition of this exemplary inter-religious cooperation (Kastriot Marku 2014). To conclude this special year for Malbardh, in December of 2014, the Union of Albanian Journalists gave the award for the best reporter of the year to Marin Mema as “author of one of the most followed program in Albania.” After his speech at the award ceremony when asked about his favorite news documentary, he said: “the case of the village of Malbardh ... which shows the great treasure we Albanians enjoy: inter-religious tolerance” (Kastriot Marku 2014).

In such a context of a small country like Albania, where for a full year one small village has been showcased several times on national television as an example of inter-religious tolerance and where different journalists wrote without dismissing its representativeness whatever else they said in debating each other, it seemed obvious to me to start my anthropological research in Malbardh. As we will discuss later, I do not take Malbardh as a representative case but as a revealing case study.

Malbardh is a village in northwestern Albania, adjacent to the city of Milot, and is situated on the left side of the river Mat (as it comes out of the mountainous region into the flat area before draining into the Adriatic Sea). The village is situated on an important crossroads connecting the northern areas of Shkodra and Lezha with the north eastern areas of Mirdita and Mati as well as with Kukes and further north in Kosovo. Milot was a major hub for train and bus travel in the northern part of Albania, especially during the communist period when transportation was intensified.

Malbardh (1543 inhabitants) is one of 12 villages in the area of Kurbin centered around the city of Milot (12 119 inhabitants) and the second largest of these 12 villages next to nearby Fushe-Milot (2300 inhabitants).<sup>7</sup> Malbardh is a mixed village though predominantly Muslim, about 95% of the population, and only about 70-80 Catholics who make up 14 families in the village (see Appendix A).

There are other villages in this immediate circle of villages around Milot, like Gallata, Shkopet and Skuraj that are typical Catholic villages without a Muslim population, and there are villages like Vinjolle or Shullaz with Muslim populations basically without Catholics or at least without “autochthonous” Catholics. In this regard, Malbardh represents a more typical Albanian environment with a mixed population and predominance of Muslims.

Malbardh satisfies our criteria for selection, being a small enough area for an effective anthropological study, and it is even better than most because it is already touted as an exemplary case of good Albanian inter-religious environment providing recognition from many different quarters, both as insiders and outsiders. While Malbardh may be only wishfully at this point a representative case of Albanian inter-religious dynamics, it is definitely a revealing case of inter-religious dynamics because the building of a Catholic church with the participation of a predominantly Muslim population in the village is evidence of significant interaction and investment with symbolic significance and lasting impact in the village definitely revealing active interaction between people of different religions there.

We could discuss further how representative Malbardh is in the context of the history of Albania during communism, but the importance of Malbardh being publically recognized as an exemplary case should not be minimized. I have heard of villages like

Derven as representing a similar story of Muslims helping Catholics rebuild their church and others that have a reputation of harmony because of the existence of families where one part is Christian and another part is Muslim. Thus, the occasion of reflecting inter-religious interaction with the building of the church in Malbardh claiming broad attention recently is a good case to research promising broader relevance. We want to capture the meaning of the inter-religious dynamics while it is still ongoing, and Malbardh presents itself as ideal in this regard for as I was conducting interviews about the building of the church, there was a mosque going up in the same village.

If this is a good example, how good is it? We are interested in understanding this case, presumably as a good case of revealing a desirable reality of inter-religious interactions in Albania, in hopes of delineating the important elements of this environment and preserving what is good while intelligently building toward an even better future. This means that if the Malbardh inter-religious environment is confirmed by other studies researching its representativeness to be “as good as it gets” in Albania, then we have a great opportunity now to learn “how good” it is. But even if it turns out that Malbardh is not a representative case, we still want to learn here what makes this environment what it is and the nature and meaning of its “goodness.”

Our choice of Malbardh as a good example does not presume on what is the case in all other villages of the same area let alone in the whole country. The cases like the nearby village of Gjorm (see interview with B.H. of Malbardh), which might paint a different picture of inter-religious environment in Albania, would not undermine my claim that the situation in Malbardh is an exemplary Albanian case because somebody else would need to evaluate which case is more representative in a scientific way while each can be an example. The meaning of the word “revealing” for the case of Malbardh



is with relation to a uniquely important Albanian situation of inter-religious dynamics even if it is not the only Albanian situation worth exploring. Our advantage is in not trying to prove a negative such as “there is no tolerance in Albania” for which we would have to investigate every Albanian social environment or give a definite and comprehensive judgment on the inter-religious dynamics of Albania. Rather, we are starting a careful and substantiated research into this important field by first seeking to understand the nature and meaning of one given situation that reveals a significant result of inter-religious dynamics in one ordinary village, the unusual result of a high level of inter-religious interaction in building the church of Malbardh, which stands as an exemplary case of purported inter-religious harmony in Albania easy to recall from the relatively recent media coverage.<sup>8</sup>

*1.2.3. The broader social context of Malbardh cannot be ignored:*

In order to better understand the situation in Malbardh, it is helpful to connect with observations from its broader context so we will look at the influence of the adjacent city of Milot and the city of Shkodra, the central regional city with its university. Hence, this is not restrictively a study of Malbardh’s inter-religious environment. The village is part of a larger context as it interacts daily with the city of Milot only a few minutes away by foot, where the high school and social hub for its young people exist.

The region of Kurbin where Malbardh belongs does exhibit some common characteristics noted by other students of the region (Marku 2017; Gjuraj 2013). By exploring through a survey the level of tolerance in the university setting of the regional capital of Shkodra where villagers from Malbardh go to study and by interviewing students from Malbardh and its surrounding area, including Milot, we are integrating a

broader context in which the people of Malbardh live and interact with and are influenced by. This broader investigative approach is also related to the foreseeable future impact of tendencies and influences in the discernable developments with regard to inter-religious interactions in the village after the media publicity of the building of the church precipitated the quick building of the mosque in the field below. In addressing the question of the future tendencies in the village, one cannot ignore the immediate centers of influence on the village such as Milot and Shkodra as the two centers where its young people go for study and are socialized from high school on, the environments that have also served as catalysts of the conversions we undertake to analyze in this study.

### **1.3. Other preliminaries for this anthropological study:**

Looking at the inter-religious interactions in the revealing case of Malbardh as a good example of Albanian inter-religious interaction, we will ascertain through a methodological approach the nature and meaning of such interactions through the perspective of the actors themselves. This is an anthropological study that by its nature seeks to bring the voice of the insiders into view and allows the outsiders to understand this reality in terms set by the people involved in the study. More clarification will be given about the nature of the anthropological perspective in the methodological chapter, but here we need to explain some other elements of the scope of the study from the meaning of the title itself.

*1.3.1. Explaining the title: the revealing exemplary environment and the implied trajectory.*

I have titled this study “From Harmony to Tolerance: Understanding the nature and meaning of the Albanian inter-religious environment 27 years after communism in the case of Malbardh.”

To be clear again, “the Albanian inter-religious environment” means one example of the Albanian environment, the case of Malbardh, and not necessarily the all-encompassing environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania. While in due time we need to define what is meant here by harmony and tolerance in order to appreciate the specific situation in our Albanian environment, it is not assumed by this title that this move from harmony to tolerance is the only possible direction but arguably the better direction in the trajectory of desired social developments. This means that I will have to explain in what sense harmony is not the best to be expected in this case; and, as we shall see, it has to do with the nature of the specific religions in the Albanian society. “From harmony to tolerance” implies not loss of harmony where harmony is possible but developing tolerance in the theoretical and theological dimensions of the inter-religious interaction where harmony is not possible. So, while this is not a study in comparative religions, it is necessary to interact with the insights from that branch of social studies and with the philosophy of religion in particular.<sup>9</sup>

*1.3.2. Period under study:*

It should not be thought that we are strictly interested here with a clear beginning and end of these 27 years that are mentioned as the period under study. In the minds of different people there may be different dates as to when communism fell in Albania or

when religions started their new life subsequently, but I will go generally with the year 1991 when obvious changes and freedoms allowed religious ideas to be manifested publically without fear. And, as for the end of this period, we simply can take the year this study was finished, 2017. The purpose for focusing on this period is not in order to list all the relevant happenings with regard to our Albanian inter-religious environment because, rather than a quantifiable study of interactions, this study is more interested in the nature and meaning of such dynamics in the Albanian inter-religious environment as revealed in Malbardh in a more qualitative measuring of the phenomenon in a relatively small area. The 27 years should be seen more as the age of the environment signifying maturity qualitatively not as the years to be outlined with their contents quantitatively.

#### *1.3.3. Geographical area of reference and the relation to communist past:*

The geographical borders of this Albanian inter-religious environment we have in view does not include the Albanian societies of Kosovo and Macedonia. Being anthropological, the nature of this study makes the personal involvement of the student in the lives of specific people in the specific environment necessary, and focusing on Malbardh, a small village in northwestern Albania, limits the scope of the research in one revealing case of the Albanian environment of inter-religious dynamics. There are several reasons to believe that Albanian societies in Kosovo and Macedonia have developed somewhat differently from the society in Albania proper, primarily but not exclusively, because of the different experience with regard to the particularities of communism in Albania.

The title of this study intentionally suggests there is some relationship of the particular shape of the society under study with the preceding period of communist

dominance so we will explain its significance at some length later. There are reasons to assume that the Albanian situation in all the regions within Albania is more similar than it is different as the result of the homogenizing forces at work during the period of communism. Therefore, the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions in Kosovo and Macedonia is not in view here.

#### **1.4. Importance of conversion studies to understand the environment:**

In the course of description and analysis, we will also discuss what a good definition of tolerance includes. The working definition of tolerance formulated in this study is: *Tolerance exists between two people or groups when intentionally or knowingly one respects the other who holds and practices opposing views to the point of having both parties endure, without unjust hindrance, even the free conversion of anyone to the other's point of view.* As part of our study in seeking to understand the nature of the Albanian inter-religious environment in one revealing example with the village of Malbardh, interviews with some converts are also included with the goal of looking at these interactions from the perspective of those to whom tolerance means most. This is a crucial aspect of this study in understanding the nature and meaning of the inter-religious dynamics through the firsthand experience of the participants in that environment. But the study of conversion involves many more dimensions that are valuable to consider with regard to the culture change it engenders.<sup>10</sup>

Studying conversion with its implied heightened specificity in the Albanian context is important in order to understand what it means to respect the rights of individuals with their specific understandings while preserving a common cultural space for each of

the different religious traditions to flourish in a pluralistic and tolerant society. We are interested with both dimensions in this study because we are asking questions related to the nature of the environment in a community and at the same time we are looking at this environment through the experiences of individuals in it.

#### *1.4.1. Is conversion a challenge to Albanian identity?*

Is Albania on a cultural passage into a different Albania? This is a macro-level question which cannot be answered fully here. But, bringing this down to the level of our study, it is more a question of the change expected to come into Malbardh as the result of the intensification of the religious dimension of life in this village simply by the presence of the two religious buildings now functioning fully in their midst. What changes can we expect to appear in Malbardh as a consequence of this new reality? I have included in this study one case relevant to this question (Interview with Altin M.) which tells the story of religious intensification with perceivable impact in behavior.<sup>11</sup> What change can we expect in Malbardh with the reality of some of its people converting from one tradition to another as is the case of a few university graduates converting to Christianity when studying at the University of Shkodra? These questions will need further research, but our findings from interviews with these converts in researching the question of the nature and meaning of the environment of inter-religious interactions now will help answer additional questions in the future.

#### *1.4.2. Religious conversion and national identity questions:*

It is very tempting to get into the discussion of Albanian identity with this study because at the beginning of my research I was wondering if we should look for the basis

of Albanian inter-religious peaceful coexistence in the deeper awareness of Albanian identity as prior to religious identity, but soon I realized there are more preliminary issues to investigate before we can address such issues. It is justified to ask where is this fear of confused identity based since the Christian and Muslim traditions are already “Albanianized.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the issue of conversion is pertinent to such concerns regarding the impact on identity, and for that reason I included one question in my interview with converts related to this.<sup>13</sup>

### **1.5. Summary of the introductory elements:**

The focus of this study is the Albanian inter-religious environment of interactions of people of different religions as revealed in Malbardh. Many would wonder why do we need to talk about religion in Albania when living one’s life in Albania need not engage religion to achieve the goals one may have for a good life? Why do we need to talk about religion when in Albania it does not matter what religion you want to follow as long as you do not hurt others? Why do we scare ourselves with stories of other countries where religious fanatics kill people when in Albania we do not have this problem after centuries of diverse religions in the land?

Here we recapitulate the several reasons that require paying attention to this study: the resurgence of religion in Albania since 1991, the general ignorance of the nature of religion, the impact of the generational change, and the easy access of world trends into every segment of Albanian society. Other important questions regarding the cultural change, the national identity issues related to religion and the explanation needed for the multi-religious makeup of ethnically homogeneous

Albania need to be answered also. It is equally important to understand the nature of religions in influencing life in multiple ways. Thus, we need to pay attention and protect the common space with freedom of all people as we meet them in their transitions worked by their conversions.

There are several reasons why the Albanian societies of Kosovo and Macedonia should not be thought of as included in this study of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions while the case of the village of Malbardh is taken to be an revealing case of the environment in Albania. This micro- to mid-level analysis of the environment which includes interviews with individuals, surveys and focus group holds promise to a useful characterization with its findings about an exemplary environment as a reference for studying other exemplars because of the focus on understanding the nature and meaning of an inter-religious environment.

Simply put, this evaluation and understanding of an inter-religious environment in Albania is critical now. This study includes such questions as “What should a good environment of inter-religious interaction look like?” or “What is included in such an environment?” and more as it seeks to answer the main research question: *What is the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions 27 years after the fall of communism as evidenced in one revealing exemplary case (the case of Malbardh)?* The hypothesis is: *The Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as revealed in Malbardh is characterized by social harmony of people belonging traditionally to different religions, potentially including inter-religious tolerance of religiously informed people.* As an answer to the main research question, this hypothesis puts forward “social harmony” as distinct from a society defined by inter-religious tolerance. This dimension of



“inter-religious tolerance” to be included in the makeup of the desired future of Albanian “social harmony” is a serious deficiency which the following research purports to substantiate in its findings and interpretation.

## **CHAPTER II: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**The historical context for understanding the nature and meaning of the Albanian inter-religious environment 27 years after communism in the case of Malbardh.**

### **2.1. Albania, Religion and Nation:**

#### *2.1.1. Importance of context:*

As in any effort to gauge the meaning of some concept, it is the context that determines the specific shape of the meaning to be derived. Since we are concerned with understanding thoroughly the nature and meaning of the environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania as revealed in one exemplary case, it is important to remember that we cannot arrive at a good understanding neglecting the context (Gration 1983). Thus, we need to start our study by looking into the context of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions, which includes the historical context. It is important to consider why we have entered a crucial time in the history of the Albanian nation with the resurgence of religions in Albania since the last decade of the 20th century. Due to the previous time of Albanian insularity and the peculiarities of the developments in today's world, which is more interconnected than ever before with defying national borders, it seems that the impact on the cohesiveness of the Albanian nation will be felt now like never before. Therefore, we have never needed inter-religious tolerance as much as we need it now. It is in order to appreciate the weight of this change that Albania has been going through during these past two decades that we try to put our study here in some historical context.

Different studies have revealed the importance of the historical context into the motivations of people to convert to different religions (Bulliet 1979; MacMullen 1984). This being said, the fall of communism in Albania is, therefore, of momentous importance with regard to the environment of inter-religious interactions and conversion. Professor Lewis R. Rambo correctly observes that:

“Contextual factors shape avenues of communication, the range of religious options available, and people’s mobility, flexibility, resources, and opportunities.” Distinguishing between micro-context and macro-context he further explains: “Macro-context refers to the total environment, including such elements as political systems, religious organizations, relevant ecological considerations, transnational corporations, and economic systems” (Rambo 1993, 21–22).

Although we would not be able to do complete justice to the many dimensions of the influences felt in Albania before or since the fall of communism, it is important to highlight the broad reference points that would help to better understand the issue we are focused on here with regard to the environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania. In seeking to understand the issue at hand, we are not interested in opening controversial discussions favoring any particular view of Albanian history as this blurs the focus on the main issue. This is why I seek an uncontroversial rendering of history here. At least my intention is to start here from such a common and uncontroversial understanding that will allow more people to be better prepared to make sense of the phenomenon of religion in Albania today.

### *2.1.2. The intersection of world religions and modernity in Albania:*

In order to make sense of the Albanian situation of its inter-religious dynamics today, it is helpful to have an idea of the way Albanians think of themselves as belonging to one nation and the role of religion on their identity. One way to arrive at a valid idea about this is to explore briefly how religion entered Albania in the pre-

modern period and then consider also the influence of modernity with the formatting period of the nation state especially during communism. There are five officially recognized religions as embedded or traditional now among Albanians: Catholic, Orthodox, Islam, Bektashi and more recently Evangelical Christianity.<sup>14</sup> It is valuable for the context of this study to trace the way these religions became part of the Albanian scene.

The winds of modernity started to be felt in Albania as they were filtered through the changes brought by the Ottoman Empire in the early 1800s, the rising of the nationalist aspirations of the people in the Balkan region, and the influence of Western European ideas and states (Anscombe 2014). The author Diane Austin-Broos writes: “Weber’s view of modernity had definite direction, and his world religions were a part of it. They were systems that subsumed others and, with their systematicity, acted relentlessly to homogenize the world” (Austin-Broos 2003, 4). In this relation, it is easy to see why most of our modern nations consolidated around one of the world religions. In our region we find only Albanians, constituting one nation with differing religions in their midst. Such a phenomenon is important to understand as it holds some promise for understanding how Albanians think about religion today.

With regard to the history of world religions in Albania, it is commonly understood that Christianity came to Albanians through the preaching of the Apostle Paul in the first century as evident in the Bible (Rom. 15:19) where Illyricum included the territory of the Albanians. The dynamics of the Eastern and Western versions of Christianity in their administrative arrangements of the activities influenced Albanians in creating two distinct forms of Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic churches, basically with Catholics in the north and Orthodox in the south of Albania. Over the many centuries of

Christian influence among the Albanians, some deep-seated traditions were formed. Most importantly, the mentality of life in the context of a small community where family and clan were crucial was consolidated using the rhythms of religious life of celebrations and other social rituals as evidenced at least in one significant document, *Kanuni i Leke Dukagjinit*.<sup>15</sup> I emphasize the small scale of social organization of the Albanian society because whatever broader scale of societal developments Albanians lived in before the 1500s, they changed after the Ottoman conquest at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Albanian cultural life relied primarily on the smaller circle of the family and the clan up in the mountains. That is to say that by the time Islam came along in their experience with the Ottoman rule, Albanians had consolidated their simple way of life in their mountainous abode speaking a distinct language whose first written document came in 1555, right around the time of the consolidation of the Protestant Reformation in Europe and the Ottoman domination of Albania.

Receiving Islam in the course of living under the Ottoman Empire beginning with the end of the 15th century, Albanians were adding another religion to their midst rather than converting to this different religion and breaking away from the Albanian milieu. Albanians would love to tell you of the many specific instances of Albanian families where one of the brothers became Muslim while the other remained Christian in order to be able to hold arms and be more mobile in the world now defined by the Ottoman rule.<sup>16</sup> This means, simplifying a rather complex situation, that the two brothers remained close in the same society after one of them became Muslim and the other remained Christian; and even though the future generations could identify with Islam more strongly, they never lost the awareness of belonging together with the rest of the family that remained Christian.<sup>17</sup> The forms of preserving these familial bonds must

have included inviting each other to their celebrations and cooperating in times of need, which was usually the kind of life Albanians have always lived, life in survival mode.<sup>18</sup> Beside Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, together with traditional Islam, it was also the Bektashi form of Islam that was distinguished from the rest of Islam in the configuration of the religious life of Albanians during the period of the Ottoman domination.<sup>19</sup>

With the weakening of the Ottoman power in the early decades of 1800s and the greater influence of the European powers, there came among Albanians the Protestant religion through facilitating the publishing of the Bible for the first time in the Albanian language in 1827 and establishing Albanian education for girls in 1891, which became part of a significant contribution in the Albanian renaissance movement.<sup>20</sup> This constant wind of influence from the world religions in Albania seems to have never been felt very deeply ideologically by Albanians so as to divide them in different nations forged around any one specific religion.<sup>21</sup> In the Albanian experience, religions as different “universes” within the same local life of a relatively small nation came through the earliest Christian missions and historical clashes with Ottomans in the distant past or through European influences in the modern times. The differences, however, between these religions remained relatively irrelevant in the face of the practical struggles of daily life and survival needs that required cooperation of Albanians across such religious divides. This became evident also with the emerging of the independent Albanian nation made up of people with differing religious backgrounds after the end of the Ottoman period of domination in 1912. Compared with all the other nations in the Balkans that were formed around a specific religion, Albania is surprising and does not fit well in the theories some historians like to build (Anscombe 2014, 250–53).

## **2.2. Albanian renaissance and the five traditional religious communities:**

The most important period of Albanian history with regard to the emerging of the issue of the relationship between religion and national identity started with the Albanian renaissance movement (1878-1912) and its first organized expression with the League of Prizren. As one Albanian scholar explained referring to (Clayer, 2009, 143):

“The Albanian nationalist movement started from the middle of the XIX century. Four phenomena gave birth to this: (1) the emergence of Western Albanology, (2) the identity research in the part of some Arbereshe (Albanians of Italian diaspora); (3) the dissemination of Christian writings in the Albanian language from Protestant missionaries; and (4) the national movements of neighboring people in the Balkans, especially Romanians, Serbs, and Greeks, in the context of the Eastern crisis” (Sulstarova 2015, 26).

From the beginning of the Albanian national renaissance there has been acute awareness of the problem of religion. Up until that time Albanians lived with different religions in their small communities without the need for hashing out the issue of national identity vis a vis religion. But with the envisioning of a nation along the lines of a modern concept of the nation by the Albanian leaders in the 1800s, the need to deal with the issue of different religions among Albanians became reality. Albania’s national poet and inspiration of Albanian renaissance, Naim Frasheri, said: “All of those who are from your nation and speak your language are your brothers.” There is agreement that “[a]wareness for the language, teaching its writing, was for the renaissance the laying of the foundation of the political union of the nation” (Sulstarova 2015, 31).

We see the effort of our early renaissance fathers clarifying the relationship of language, nation and religion in the words of Jani Vreto:

“The connection through language for a nation is a natural and eternal, while the connection of people through religion and a teaching is invented and transitory, because history tells us and we see it with our eyes today, that there are different faiths and religious teachings that come and go one after another” (Sulstarova 2015, 32).

There is agreement with considering this argument of language as most important for Albanians while their neighbors were united around their religion. It is beside the point if Vreto is right in dismissing religion as invented and transitory because Albanians simply take it for granted that their language betrays their belonging to each other as to a natural family.

The slogan of renaissance was Pashko Vasa's "the religion of Albanians is Albanianism" because "religious and regional divisions were the main concern of the Albanian nationalists" (Sulstarova 2015, 26).<sup>22</sup> According to the testimony from one of the leaders of the first Albanian movement of independence, Koto Hoxhi, it was exactly such religious cleavage that the Turks used to crush the Albanian movement, the League of Prizren. Koto is reported as saying: "We cannot possibly become an independent nation until we enlighten our people and help them to understand that, though we differ in religion, still we are all Albanians. Education is the weapon which kills tyranny" (Quanrud 2016, 138).<sup>23</sup>

The Albanian religious scene today is complete<sup>24</sup> with five traditional religious communities –Bektashi, a mystical version of Islam not as well known outside of Albania, Evangelical/Protestant Christianity as the lesser known in Albania, and the more broadly known religious communities of Islam, Orthodox and Catholic– and during the time of the renaissance we see members of all five of these religious communities together, naturally and without need to point out their religious distinctive in any way, in the modern formation of the Albanian nation.<sup>25</sup>

Having a rudimentary understanding of the history of these five religions in terms of the perceived appeal of each of them is helpful in appreciating this study's description of interactions in Malbardh, especially with the introduction to Evangelical



Christianity through the religiously leaden wedding ceremony of one of the converts from that village.<sup>26</sup>

Now that we see how all five of the religious communities have become part of the life of the Albanians, we are better prepared to understand the nature of the harmony that exists between Albanians of these different religions. The following periods of Albanian history reflect a continuity with the view of religion constructed during the Albanian national renaissance period.

### *2.2.1. One nation in one state with different religions:*

The renaissance leaders envisioned the modernization of Albanian life along the lines of a western ideal that implied the development of the national life in a national state not divided along religious lines, meaning religion would not be a determining factor in the defining of the population as a whole.<sup>27</sup>

While the Albanian renaissance period (1878-1912) was crucial for the founding of the national ideal, the turbulent years of independence and the monarchy (1912-1939) up until World War II established the contours of the Albanian national state. During those years, the writing of the Albanian language was consolidated, Albanian schools started and the exercise of Albanian rule over the country through King Zog I began to take shape with important signs of westernization.<sup>28</sup>

Yet the most important period of history accounting for the mindset and attitudes about religion at the outset of the period under our study (1991-2016) and informing the current leadership generation of the country is the period of communism in Albania starting at the end of World War II and ending in 1991.

### **2.3. Albanian communism and religion: Closing a century of discussion about religions.**

#### *2.3.1. Albania and religion during communism:*

The case of Albania being the most extreme case of atheism is worth emphasizing in order to reveal some important aspects of the relative indifference of Albanians toward religion in general as an aftermath of effective communist rule. It is hard to miss the irony of the situation in Albania during communism when the “United Nations Chapter (chapter 9, article 55) declares that religious freedom is an inalienable human right” at the same time as communist Albania adopted a new constitution on 28 December 1976 where “Article 55 provided that ‘the creation of any type of organization of...religious...character...Religious activities and propaganda are prohibited....Article 55 specified the penalties...imprisonment was not for less than 10 years, and the death penalty could be imposed” (Jacques 1995, 501, 573).

#### *2.3.2. The demographic dimension and the unparalleled war against religion:*

The demographic context of Albania at this time is significant to note:

“... the population of Albania went up from an estimated one million in 1945 to 2,594,600 in January 1979. With a median age of 19, the population was extremely youthful: 42 percent being under 15, 37 percent between 15 and 39, 16 percent between 40 and 64, and only 5 percent over 65. Thus 80 percent of the population had known no government other than that of Enver Hoxha. During this ... [period 1976-1980] the average annual rate of population increase was over five times that in the rest of Europe” (Jacques 1995, 501).<sup>29</sup>

The methodical communist indoctrination was unparalleled in its efficiency through a controlled system of education from the earliest age (6 months after birth when every baby was to be enrolled in the state-run childcare) through university armed with a well-organized body of atheist propaganda with people on the ground monitoring the

dissemination and applications of the ideology continuously, systematically and meticulously covering all of the Albanian territory even in the most remote villages.<sup>30</sup>

I find it relevant to quote at length here a passage reflecting the deep level of attack against religion undertaken with great success by the communist regime in Albania especially since abolishing all religion in 1967:

“... all religious ideologies are antinational ... It is an anti-Marxist concept that ‘religion is a natural right of man.’ Too many persons have passed easily to anticlerical positions without rising to positions of active atheism. They retain remnants of religious preconceptions, backward customs, and certain practices. They still frequent the ‘good places,’ to find a cure or good fortune or prosperity. Practices associated with death, burial and cemeteries must be conquered. Personal names given to children reflect the imprint of faith and superstition. Religious and foreign personal names are being used to a considerable extent even today... and express nostalgia for religion. It is legitimate to insist on the use of national names... so that the names of people do not become an indicator of the religious affiliations and divisions of yesteryear. Another ongoing problem is that of marriage ties between young people of different ex-religious backgrounds. Such intermarriages can be a defiance of religion, and strengthen the moral, political and ideological unity of our people. But it’s not an easy matter even today. ... The old does not disappear automatically; neither does the new establish itself automatically. It is the activity of the Party... which will result without any doubt, in the creation of a totally atheistic society in our country” (Hako 1986, 24–32).

### *2.3.3. The ironic importance of communism for Albanian nationalism:*

The irony of communism in Albania is that this most anti-nationalist ideology (any Albanian would be readily executed when going against the communist ideology) did in fact solidify a very strong Albanian national awareness in the most far and deeply reaching way that has ever been done in any other period of our history.<sup>31</sup>

With regard to nationalism and religion, communism in Albania forged an interesting alliance to marginalize religion and strengthen nationalism. Sulstarova brings an insightful observation supported by several other authors:

“If in the other countries of Eastern Europe who still were under the influence of Moskva, nationalism tended to militate against the authority of the Communist party, in Albania, after parting ways with the Soviet Union, Enver Hoxha used nationalism to increase the power of the party and his own rule over the country (Champseix & Champseix, 2000:6; Prifti, 1999:19-20)” (Sulstarova 2015, 61).

The communist regime used the renaissance ideas to legitimize its nationalistic ideology but wanted to carve away the religious dimension of the patriots, which because of the tendency already present among those patriots to relativize religion for the sake of the nation, was not difficult for the Albanians to accept. While communists marginalized some of the important people of the renaissance for ideological reasons it was during this time that the popularizing of the works of some of these very same people impacted the formation of the feelings and national identity of the new generation (Sulstarova 2015, 75).

In *Albanian Identities* (Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer 2002), the editor appears almost condescending in trying to assure us that she does not mean ill will toward Albanians as challenging their national identity. Academics have a job to tease minute aspects, and this book may give the impression that the Albanian identity is in flux or that there are many such identities; but, exaggerations aside, if Albanians became aware of belonging to each other so as to form a nation at the breaking down of the Ottoman Empire, today they are much more established in their national identity and no one should be concerned about Albanians feeling confused and doubting their Albanianess. In its strange way, Albanian communism contributed toward strengthening this identity.<sup>32</sup>

During the communist period, the national education, which started with the first Albanian schools in the late 1880s and was consolidated during the reign of King Zog I between the two World Wars, was intensified and provided a strong national building influence in spite of the communist ideology that thoroughly permeated it.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of the communist period, Albanians were more aware of their identity as distinct and separate or even unrelated to religion than ever before. Thus, with regard to

these foundational elements of Albanian nationalism, language, history and symbols, there was continuity with the ideal of the Albanian renaissance patriots.<sup>34</sup> With the fall of communism in 1991, the shaking of the Albanian identity could not result in the loss of the Albanian identity as such, except as far as the falling off of the addition of the communist color of that identity, while retaining the deep seated and wholesome awareness of belonging to a specific people with a specific language and culture including much more than what communist propaganda slapped on it.<sup>35</sup>

#### *2.3.4. Consolidation of Albanian national identity remains apart from religion:*

The government homogenized the national population maximally with planned movements of people from the village into the city and the other way around as well as from one area of the country into another area of the country, and this effectively created a situation where no higher or fuller consciousness of the extent and makeup of the nation could have been achieved if people were left free to live following their natural inclinations. The priority of the national identity above any other kind of identity including the regional one was emphasized strongly and “Albanians were more like each other than at any other time in the history of the nation. The most important cultural action of the regime was the unification of the Albanian language in 1972” (Sulstarova 2015, 64).

The communist regime attitude toward religion was effectively inculcated in the population as well because it was based on the need for unity:

“All of the religions which exist among us, are brought in Albania from the foreign conquests and have served to the ruling classes to extort the country. Under the cover of religion, of God and prophets, was hidden the harsh law of the foreign usurper and of their servants within the country. The history of our people clearly testifies what suffering, misery and bloodletting, what crushing has experienced our people from religion, how it divided, and made enemies of brother against brother to secure our total demise, to enslave us more easily and drink our blood in the name of religion” (E. Hoxha, 1970a:205).

It was only a small percentage of the population, those who were born at the beginning of the century and had lived during a different regime, who could see through this propaganda. But this group was less than 5% in 1980.

The extreme action of abolishing religion in 1967 and by constitutional law in 1976, thereby declaring Albania officially the first atheistic nation in the world, was the ultimate achievement of communism against religion in Albania, with deep consequences in the perception of the generation that grew up during that time. Yet, this is the generation who opened the door wide for freedom of religion in 1991 even though it is the most unreligious generation of Albanians of all time. I cannot emphasize enough the homogenizing power of the Albanian communist regime which effectively and thoroughly influenced Albanian society most broadly to give a very high probability that if sampling any part of the Albanian society anywhere in Albania, in the village or in the city, you would find a very similar ideological makeup and very similar attitudes toward religion, especially up until the end of the 1990s.

In this connection, therefore, I would consider Malbardh not only a revealing example but, given the other factors of demographics mentioned earlier, most probably also a good representative example of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions even now at the end of the transitional period from communism. Among the reasons for presuming such representativeness I would include that being a village it is more likely that Malbardh has preserved better the continuity with the past and not being far from the city it may represent the new influences as well. Albanians are not primarily city people, even if they are crowding the cities now; and the family connections, which the village life preserves better, would also influence one to say that

the typical Albanian society today is not the recent crowded city population because the majority of Albanians still think in the context of their extended family community.

The transitional period from the fall of communism until now, over two decades of free interaction with all kinds of ideologies and people and places, should give us pause to consider the different influences that may have produced different realities in different communities with regard to religion and social dynamics. To take Malbardh as a representative case, we have to test several cases and compare them, but this is not our goal since we first want to know what we have in Malbardh that we can then compare better with what is to be found in other communities.

#### *2.3.5. The fall of communism: continuities and discontinuities.*

Upheavals of any kind in a society open the door for searching outside of the immediate world for new reconfigurations of its habitat; this is definitely the case with Albanians after the fall of communism. Views on life and morality or views on the economic system and political perspective would be more readily exchanged for those of the apparently victorious capitalist system. Thus, Albanians could see that they were mistaken on the issue of the political system, but that did not mean that they had ceased to be Albanian.

Many of those who made the transition to accept capitalism as a superior system and gave up their communist ideals did not automatically become friendly toward religion. At best, the religious dimension of life in the capitalist system was, for them, something to consider as a harmless atavism of prescientific ages.

With regard to religion, the achievement of the communist period was the thorough breakdown of divisions between people of different religions reflected in widespread

intermarriage like never before (Jacques 1995, 570). After the fall of communism this reality of mixed marriages created an even more fertile ground for free experiments with different religions other than those inherited by the parents. This is the reality inherited in 1991 when Albania came out of isolation and opened the door to the influences of the outside world so eager to rush in with all its bewildering variety, newness and promise. Religion was effectively driven out of the Albanian life for more than one full generation, influencing deeply both those born in the 1940s (today's grandparents) and those born in the 1960s (today's parents), and leaving primarily only those born after 1980 (today's young generation) as the first generation to engage religion as an important factor for social change in a truly free environment.

#### **2.4. Albania and religion after communism: reopening the religious question**

This is the period we want to understand as we find it at the end of a 27-year development, and here we need to emphasize the freedom and influences present from the beginning of the post-communist period. A young generation in their 20s or early 30s is now coming to influence the country with a different understanding and experience of religion.<sup>36</sup>

For those over 40 today, those who grew up during communism, the religious question is the “bothersome” reopening of the discussion which was closed when everybody believed in science.<sup>37</sup>



#### *2.4.1. The generational dimension of Albanian inter-religious environment:*

The numbers of inter-religious conversions in these past 27 years in Albania are significant and noticeable by every common observer. In an ideological sense, Albanians were left without a home when communism fell in 1991; thus, almost all have had to restructure their philosophical home even if it is to simply make room for others believing differently around them and getting used to the change of social rituals and language.

One can talk about Albanians of today in general as a “converted” people because Albania was declared the first and only officially atheistic state, and for all practical purposes Albanians lived as atheists at least for one full generation from 1967 until 1990.<sup>38</sup> But having no faith of their own, generally speaking, this intermediate generation (parents of today’s students) that lived twenty plus years under communism and another twenty plus years after, has allowed their children to explore religions without much supervision or enthusiasm. Nor do they care about religion as long as it remains manageable for them. Therefore, they lack an important ideological influence within this area of life in Albania. It is interesting to note that in spite of a few exemplars there are not many leaders in the religious communities from this generation; most are from the generation born after 1980, and this generation will be featured prominently in this research.<sup>39</sup>

Since the fall of communism and the developments of different religions, the concerns have not included the fear that somehow our national identity or our national cohesion is endangered. National identity or social cohesion in post-communist Albania would not necessarily be threatened by delving into the newly opened religious options

because it was easy to assume one was simply going back to one's family's inherited religious tradition that had coexisted with other religions for centuries in Albania.<sup>40</sup>

Political pluralism that ensued after 1992 was a taste of living with tolerance toward others who sprung out of nowhere with opposing views and activities to alter the common social space for all inhabitants through propagating a certain message and soliciting "conversions" to be revealed through voting. Religious pluralism, in the way it is perceived socially with religions being considered as political parties, need not be much different from this kind of political pluralism, especially with regard to the public aspect of religions or those elements of religion that organize life with others in society.<sup>41</sup> This seems to be the mentality of the generation currently in charge of Albanian society but it is not clear what the new generation, the 20 and 30 year olds, think about the role of religion in society.

## **2.5. Summary of the relevant elements in the historic section:**

It is difficult to keep the whole flow of history in a simplified way to make sense of the context because necessarily the simplified way disregards important aspects that can be interpreted differently and with different weight by others. But like everybody else we can only make our choices.<sup>42</sup> So let me put it again in a simplified version the way history helps provide the relevant context for our question of the nature and meaning of the environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania. Our study seeks to gauge the impressions of the people in today's environment and should be judged on the merits of doing justice to that reality while the historical context is meant to help emphasize the importance of this study at this time in the flow of Albanian history.

While it is important to have an idea about the general Albanian perception of its history as a nation as far back as it goes, it is with regard to the history of the different religions that we focused the retelling of the history until communism. By the time of the Albanian renaissance in the late 1800s, we could see how each of the present “official” religions had appeared on the scene and become part of the Albanian life. It is also important to note the continuation in the later historical periods of the emphasis of the renaissance patriots away from religion because religion was not the unifying factor for the nation.

The immediately preceding historical context for our study is the most important context to set off the understanding of the current environment in Albania, that is the period of communism with its impact on shaping the environment of inter-religious interactions.<sup>43</sup> It also happens to be the period of the most thorough mixing of Albanians inside of the insulated borders of Albania homogenizing the population more thoroughly than it ever was possible before into a common mindset about religion, namely one that pushed religion farthest in the edges of life and outside of the common life socially, which was reflected clearly also in the increased numbers of mixed marriages between people of different religious traditions. The simple fact of Albania declared officially as the first atheistic state in the world in 1967 and developing a generation of people formed in this environment of religious irrelevance, until the door was opened again for religion to come back in 1991, is obliging to accept that Albania is a unique case in terms of antecedents for the study of the resulting current environment. These are important reasons to consider the case of Malbardh as more representative than not for the general Albanian environment, but for this study it suffices that it is a revealing case of inter-religious dynamics in one Albanian segment of this environment.

In no other former communist country was religion so thoroughly erased from the social environment yielding a generation reared in an environment that gave credibility to the insistent vision of a life emancipated from religion as the wisest way to live. It is in the middle of the life of this most convinced generation about religious irrelevance that religion has come back with its full force 27 years ago. Albanians are now reaping the results of this dramatic change through the impact of the upcoming generation now in their 30s.

The dominant mentality of that generation coming out of communism (the parents of today's students) is broken in two ways: (1) through the breaking of the plausibility structure of that mentality with the fall of communism and emerging of religion as a social reality, which for these past 20 plus years has grown to dwarf many other influences as a giant among the few competitors for giving meaning to life, and (2) through the coming of age and the challenge put forth by the new generation (the students and recent graduates of today) who have grown up in this environment of religious resurgence with the opportunity to assert, not least through assuming leadership positions in the country, their new vision for our society.

The more debatable interpretation of the history of Albanians with regard to religion is to say that Albanians have never been able in the past to resolve fully the challenge of belonging to two differing religions because they had more existential issues to solve. The renaissance patriots focused their unifying efforts away from religion, and King Zog I focused on establishing the Albanian modern nation, again keeping religion under some control. Communism abolished religion altogether. Now that religion has come back with renewed energy, we need to revisit the issue in a new context. The fact that all of the other nations around us are configured around one major religion is not

insignificant to raise important questions about social cohesiveness and points out that Albanians have the unique opportunity again today to show how their history and national tradition can help solve the problem of having different major religions in the midst of one nation.

It may be clear for some that this issue is already solved pointing to the obvious fact that Albanians are an undisputed nation who for a long time existed with at least two major different world religions claiming adherence of sizable percentages of its population. I do not dispute such facts that the Albanian nation has clearly existed long enough for everyone, even those who come up with strange criteria for nationhood to agree, or that the reality of Islam and Christianity among the Albanians is of the same basic kind these two world religions have shown it to be all over the world; but I dispute the fact that the current inter-religious environment of Albania can be best defined as “tolerant” or that it is immune from ruptures along religious lines even today.

The reasons for this concern are not historical or presumptive of the makeup of the Albanian religiosity, which as such is probably similar with how people use religion everywhere, but are borne out of an anthropological survey and description of the reality on the ground in one of the exemplary cases of Albanian inter-religious environment. To this study we are now ready to turn.

### CHAPTER III: THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

#### **The theoretical underpinnings of the study of the Albanian inter-religious environment 27 years after communism (the case of Malbardh).**

Theory is important to be explicated because it is related to the way we understand the data. Therefore, in this chapter we seek to clarify the perspective deemed the most appropriate and the reasons to approach and evaluate the subject of our research in this way. Keeping in mind that our research question is *What is the nature and meaning of the inter-religious interaction in Albania?* we need to answer now another question: *What is the best way to find out about this phenomenon?*<sup>44</sup>

When discussing meaning we are reminded that “[T]o discover the nature of internal and subjective structures is to discover their meaning. Meaning is accessible to analysts only if they interpret cultural structures in and of themselves... Interpretation proceeds from understanding, not simply from observation” (Alexander and Seidman 1990, 3). We need to understand here the distinction of the kind of scientific work this study consists of compared to the more commonly recognized one, the natural science; this is *geisteswissenschaften* (human science) and not *naturwissenschaften* (natural science).<sup>45</sup> Although I do not see the study of meaning and culture as divorced from the other aspects of society and nature, there is an emphasis here that needs to be appreciated before we proceed any further. In relation to theory it makes a major difference whether the anthropologist is seeking a *nomothetic* explanation or an *idiographic* explanation. These two terms and the concepts they represent were developed by Wilhelm Windelband,<sup>46</sup> a philosopher of science in 1894, in continuation of the insights gained from the earlier distinction made by Wilhelm Dilthey mentioned

above as human and natural science. A *nomothetic* explanation is a generalization while an *idiographic* explanation consists in a rich description of a particular case (Howell and Paris 2011, 227). The difference is that the first, the nomothetic explanation, being a generalization seeks to analyze many relevant samples to test one hypothesis and present testable theories which involves the study of material and measurable aspects of social life. Explaining the second approach, Howell and Paris write: “The understanding gained from such work is not meant to be directly compared across contexts nor generalized to all contexts. Instead, it *provides a detailed understanding that becomes background for future research on related issues in other settings*. Research that is directed toward idiographic explanation relies on theory differently than research designed for nomothetic explanation” (Howell and Paris 2011, 227).<sup>47</sup> In our case, therefore, it is important to see that we are seeking an idiographic explanation about the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as revealed in Malbardh. We are not out to test any theories with this study, but there are informing theories that are suited to understanding the reality in question. The Weberian theory in emphasizing the role of ideas is best suited for my work here, and it is blended with insights from other theories as I will try to explain here to make room also for the influence of culturally specific views which shape life and action.

### **3.1. A phenomenological study philosophically:**

According to an important social scientist, Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), “[T]he only way to understand social reality,...[is] through the meanings that people give to that reality” (Bernard 2006, 24). Schutz was interested in understanding the way in which

people grasp the consciousness of other people while, at the same time, they are immersed in their own stream of consciousness. His ideas, once published, gave birth to “phenomenological sociology,” coining such concepts as “*intersubjectivity*,” which in its broader sense meant the way of knowing the social world indicating the social nature of knowledge as well (Berger 1960). The study we are undertaking here is not what is usually understood as a sociological study because it is not simply what this author thinks about the phenomena under study. This is an anthropological study of a social environment, and here I will go to great lengths to be faithful to what is considered a “phenomenological study,” the kind of study where the researcher tries to see reality through another person’s eyes describing that perspective in detail. The goal is “good ethnography – a narrative that describes a culture or part of a culture – [which] is usually good phenomenology” (Bernard 2006, 24). So while the research model would be characterized as “a case study” or a study of a revealing case, the research methodology is ethnography.<sup>48</sup>

### **3.2. The anthropological angle methodologically:**

Trying to distinguish the sociological from the specifically anthropological angle of this study may be helpful in clarifying the integrity of the methodology used.<sup>49</sup> The main distinctive would include a preference of the anthropologist for an interpretative approach with using qualitative research methods in order to understand the nature and meaning of the phenomena. While sociology would look at underlying laws and function of structures of society, anthropology looks at the human element in society, collecting facts and reasons as perceived by the actors of society and as surroundings are



influenced by their activities, which we observe and investigate. Anthropology then is more focused on understanding “the other,” using culture as the central concept rather than using society or its institutions as organizing principle of study, which would imply that instead of “the other” the focus is on understanding one’s own environment (Adams 1998, 1). As Howell and Paris put it: “The *anthropological perspective* refers to an approach to social research that seeks to understand culture from the point of view of the people *within* that cultural context” (Howell and Paris 2011, 4). This is the attempt by the anthropologist to explain a cultural context from the inside, understanding the motives, actions and beliefs of others in their own terms. This is what we strive to do here with the semi-structured interviews of converts.

This description of a culture implies working hard at capturing the way the insiders make sense of their environment and their life, including their symbolic representation of such realities embedded in their cultural forms.<sup>50</sup> This means that participant observation is an integral part of doing the work of an anthropologist while seeking to be as objective as possible. My several visits to the village and participation in their meals and celebration yielded rich understanding of the Malbardh culture.

### *3.2.1. An interpretative or symbolic anthropological study theoretically:*

Interpretative anthropology is the chosen anthropological perspective of this study, but it needs to be distinguished in the context of the theoretical developments of anthropology. Throughout the history of the development of anthropology, there have been different anthropological theories such as unilinear evolution (Edward B. Taylor 1832-1917), diffusionism and then historical particularism (Franz Boas 1858-1942), functionalism (Bronislaw Malinowski 1884-1942), structural functionalism (Alfred

Radcliffe Brown 1881-1955), and structuralism (Claude Levi Strauss 1908-2009). Anthropologist Sherry Ortner calls these “theories of constraints,” (Ortner 2006, 1), meaning the researcher sought to fit the description of the environment with such an explanation of the social reality he had in mind. Clifford Geertz comes along in the 1960s with his interpretative emphasis suggesting interpretive or symbolic analysis as the framework for anthropology (Geertz 1973). Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) is considered the most influential scholar in promoting interpretive or symbolic analysis as the overall agenda for anthropology as a discipline, but Mary Douglass (1921-2007), Victor Turner (1920-1983) and Sherry Ortner (b.1941) can serve as good representatives of this perspective as well.

Ortner (Ortner 2006) says that after the dominance of functionalism which was asking “How do things hang together?” Geertz came asking, “What do they mean?” Among the strands of theories interwoven in my perspective, I include aspects of “phenomenological sociology” as represented by Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), who was concerned with the way in which people grasp the consciousness of others, and “ethnomethodology” of Harold Garfinkel, who represents a fusion of Parsonian (Talcot Parsons) and Schutzian ideas thus referring to the study of the way people process their understanding to act in the circumstances in which they find themselves in (Ritzer and Goodman 2004, 14).

In the context of analyzing the social world through the theoretical lenses of constraining structures of society that functionalism or structuralism would naturally impose on the researcher, I consider symbolic anthropology as best suited in seeking to understand without setting procrustean beds of generalizing theories in the study of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions.

I am informed by this blend of a theoretical perspective implied in interpretive anthropology, but I am not constrained to prove any theory in my research of Malbardh. Borrowing an illustration used by Geertz, I will look at Malbardh much like a physician looks at a patient to understand what is going on based on the descriptions of the patient and the physician's observations, making use of different theories and knowledge from other cases with the goal of understanding the situation of this one case, hopefully providing at the end one body of knowledge that can help others in understanding other cases by reference to this one noticing the similarities and differences.

### **3.3. Epistemologically interpretivist:**

Interpretive or symbolic anthropology “views culture as a system of symbols that people create, alter and share with each other” (Howell and Paris 2011, 238). While this view absorbs the insights of other theoretical perspectives, it seeks to follow more the Weberian view of the importance of ideas and multicausality in the shaping of culture. In short the two main theoretical flows blended in the theoretical perspective of this study at hand are primarily the Weberian theory and some strands of postmodern theory as related to perspectivalism.<sup>51</sup> Howell and Paris explain: “Perspectivalism..., also known as standpoint theory,... states that knowledge is generated by a knower who is positioned in a particular place and time, and therefore reflects a specific and limited perspective” (Howell and Paris 2011, 240).

Interpretative anthropology seeks to focus and understand the symbolic world of others by immersing oneself through observation and participation, extensively describing as fully the observed phenomena as one can, and not letting the preconceived

ideas or generalized theories to become the organizing factor of research. All anthropology is empirical since it is based on observations and fieldwork. While I do respect and glean from the perspective of sociology that is mostly done from a positivist perspective and some anthropology that also employs a positivist stance epistemologically, I do here ascribe to the interpretivist camp.<sup>52</sup>

Dealing with social dynamics and ideas, it is more appropriate to use qualitative methods; and whenever in parts it is appropriate to measure attitudes quantitatively, the findings will still need to be qualified to account for the nuances that cannot be captured in numbers. This will be obvious in the course of this study not just because it is primarily descriptive but also because even in the case of the survey, I keep asking questions such as “What does it mean for this score to be low?” inferring the possibility of qualifying differently the understanding of the questions of the survey.

### *3.3.1. Concept of culture in expectations for this study:*

The view of culture represented here accepts the reality that culture, although slowly, changes over time. My view embraces the truth that while society does shape people it is also the people who shape the culture. We can see this study broadly in line with Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration,<sup>53</sup> which in itself is one way of interacting with and critiquing classical 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century social theorists from Comte to Habermas serving also as a good exercise in clarifying many issues. Ortner says: “... the long term implications of present practices their effects in terms of social reproduction and social transformation are often not visible, nor interpretable, until some time after the fact” (Ortner 2006, 9).

This view of culture gives this study a sense of urgency to understand now, as best we can, what is important to preserve intentionally in view of the forces at work on the Albanian culture we live in because I believe with Anthony Giddens that members of the culture are actors with at least some “partial knowledge” (Giddens 1979, 5) of the dynamics of the powers at play in their lives and are able to understand by reflection their situation and influence to some degree their circumstances going against the constraints in the culture.

I am not an essentialist in my concept of culture. One explanation of essentialism is that “... ‘essentialism,’ [is] the idea that ‘the Nuer’ or ‘the Balinese’ had some single essence which made them the way they were, and which, moreover, explained much of what they did and how they did it” (Ortner 2006, 112). This would be like me saying that Albanians are defined by “Albanianness” and, therefore, they act in this or that way conditioned by such a definite influence. We need to resist such oversimplification and allow the actors we observe to give us the specific reasons for their way of behaving in the world. Nevertheless, I do expect to find more or less a distinct body of values and practices persisting over some considerable time, albeit with changes in the edges. Therefore, I cannot altogether drop the concept of some influential cultural fact, akin to Durkhemian nonmaterial fact, as it seems the journal *Public Culture* has done by looking at culture completely as an expression or segment of a global culture flow (Ortner 2006, 13).<sup>54</sup> I do believe in a concept of culture that is both enabling and constraining that is close to the classic concept of culture. I also believe in culture change, and not just theoretically, as I have personally witnessed the change that Albania has undergone in the last 27 years after communism. I can imagine, especially with

regard to religion, the change taking Albania to a different place with the arrival of leadership by the generation of “democracy” as we may call those born after 1980.

In the language of Durkheim, religion being considered as nonmaterial fact or simply as a form of society’s consciousness, I would have to say I am dealing with nonmaterial facts such as norms and values that still exert influence on the social actors, and I will be aware of the social structures as well in analyzing the environment in question (Alexander and Seidman 1990). I am intrigued by the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu with regard to the relationship between habitus and field: *Habitus* consisting basically in the internalized mental structure through which people deal with the social world and *field* considered as a network of relations among objective positions with the field conditioning the habitus and the habitus constituting the field. It is possible then to see the Malbardhian students’ habitus formed initially in the context of their village life interacting with the network of relations among increasing objective positions during their years in high school and especially in the university, which constitute the field. This then should naturally condition in turn the habitus in a way that may influence the life in their village as they return back there reconstituting the field. As we shall see in the interviews with some of the students of the University of Shkodra who are from Malbardh, we can appreciate the dynamics set to militate toward changes in the environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh.

Clarifying my perspective one more time I offer Ortner’s observations:

“Geertz argued that culture should be understood as public symbolic forms, forms that both express and shape meaning for actors engaged in the ongoing flow of social life....Geertz’s specific interest has been in the forms of subjectivity that cultural discourses and practices both reflect and organize....Geertz provides powerful displays of his method at work, interpreting Balinese cultural forms – person terms, calendrical systems, rules of etiquette, cockfighting events – for the modes of consciousness they embody. It is important to keep the interpretative method and the concern with subjectivity (historical and cultural consciousness) together” (Ortner 2006, 114).

In looking at specific aspects of the environment of inter-religious interaction in the village of Malbardh, I will seek to uncover and understand the mentality or “subjectivity” of the actors in this environment by describing and interpreting the particular cultural forms of interaction between differently labeled religious people there.

At the end of pointing out all of these attractive theories which inform my perspective, I again emphasize that the Weberian theory with the role of ideas and insights from some strands of postmodern theory (perspectivalism)<sup>55</sup> is the guiding theoretical perspective of this study. It is in this context that understanding of the doctrines of Christianity and Islam as well as philosophical considerations of the nature of tolerance become important elements in the interpretation and analysis of the data from this study.

### **3.4. The “variables” in this study: as reference factors**

In anticipating the answer to the research question about the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions, the hypothesis is that the conclusion is harmony, namely that *the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in Malbardh is social harmony between people of different religions, but it does not reflect inter-religious tolerance yet.*

Tolerance is understood here as a dependent variable to be evaluated in correlation with other variables where more prominently we focus on (1) the awareness or understanding of religious teachings that is related closely to (2) the existence of religious buildings as centers of social and religious activities in the proximity of the

people; (3) the variety of religious activities such as training children in catechism or Muslim rituals; and (4) religious celebrations varying in their frequency and importance in respective populations, including other practices that may reveal their awareness and religious understanding.<sup>56</sup> This language of “variables” may give the wrong impression that we are about measuring quantitatively these factors; but keeping in mind the anthropological angle of this study, we are simply identifying here several of the factors we expect to be important to refer to in order to understand their role in the perception and experience of the participants we interview and engage by participant observation.

A future study may choose to measure more directly and quantifiably the level of the amicability and good will between people of different religions in Albania looking at some variables in a more quantifying way; but in this study, we are more interested in the nature and meaning of the interactions as such, capturing the characterizing elements of this environment, not necessarily measuring quantitatively the different values of each perceived variable. We are more like measuring the temperature of the environment by primarily asking the people to describe how they feel rather than giving a full account of the causes of this state of affairs after conducting the array of tests which should come in the future if it is deemed important. This is where I see some truth in Bernard’s discussion of the timing of the methods:

“...at the early stages of its development, any science relies primarily on qualitative data....Qualitative description is a kind of measurement, an integral part of the complex whole that comprises scientific research. As sciences mature, they come inevitably to depend more and more on quantitative data and on quantitative tests of qualitatively described relations. But this never, ever lessens the need for or the importance of qualitative research in any science” (Bernard 2006, 25).

I believe this study should prove in its own way, anthropologically, that the environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania demands attention and care because the signs of the normal development of the problem of intensified religiosity in



a religiously pluralistic context, which in other countries has brought big challenges for the social cohesion of the country, are present in Albania 27 years after the fall of communism.

### **3.5. Model, strategy and methods:**

It should be clear by now why ethnographic fieldwork as direct experience in the culture will be the primary methodological strategy used in this study describing my interactions and personal observations in the environment of the village of Malbardh through in-depth interviews with converts from that village. Ethnography as description and analysis of a cultural phenomenon is, therefore, the appropriate form that the presentation of this research will take in the whole. *The research model of this study fits in what is called “a revealing case study” with ethnography as its closely related research strategy.*

This also means that qualitative research methods or interpretative approaches will include participant observation, interviews, and some document analysis. But, I will utilize a quantitative method as well by conducting a survey with the students of the University of Shkodra to measure tolerance in their environment, which was the environment of conversion for all of the converts from Malbardh that I interviewed. Thus, according to our objective to answer the research question related to understanding the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions, we will utilize a mixed methods approach.

### *3.5.1. Three main probes of this study:*

The objective of this study is to understand the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as presented in the revealing case of Malbardh. It was necessary to consider the interaction with the two other contexts that emerged as important in the religious life of the villagers of Malbardh, namely Milot where all young people go to high school and socialize during their teenage years as well as the University of Shkodra where almost all of the converts from the area were converted.

These considerations gave shape to three probes: (1) conducting anthropological fieldwork through participant observation, a focus group and interviews in the village context; (2) surveying the environment of the University of Shkodra with regard to tolerance through a questionnaire; and (3) conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with converts from Malbardh and these related contexts. The village is the repository of the traditional mindset. The university is the hotbed of engaging with new ideas and forming one's convictions for life both in continuity and discontinuity from the traditional context. The conversion stories put us in touch with the real life situations of converted people and shed light in the sharpest moments of testing the depth of tolerance and revealing the nature of the environment of tolerance in Malbardh in sharper focus because of the broader context it is distinguished from.

These probes are not necessarily exhaustive, but their findings are good indicators of what we may find true more broadly than Malbardh evaluating the perceptions of Malbardhian converts and those from the broader area the other participants came from.

*Focus groups* are good for collecting data about content and process. Thus, in the beginning phase of my research, I conducted one focus group followed by more

informal group interviews in the village of Malbardh, gathered the first data about the reasons for the kind of interactions of the inter-religious environment in the village and envisioned the process through which those elements were developed and drawn to investigate the connections more carefully (Bernard 2006, 236–37). The makeup of the focus group and other relevant notes are put in Appendix A, sparing the reader from irrelevant details, but the description and their perceptions are presented in the body of this study.

In seeking to understand the makeup of the environment of inter-religious interactions, it seemed that the life stories of converted individuals from Malbardh would probably be the most fertile ground where we can explore the impact of conversion and religion on identity and belonging as well as revealing the attitudes of those in the immediate environment with the characteristics we need to capture in order to understand the nature of that environment. Interviews with converts thus became a major part of this study. This required thorough preparation of a general script covering a list of topics and then scheduling and conducting more than 20 in-depth *interviews of a semi-structured format* (Bernard 2006, 210).

I also conducted some *unstructured interviews*. I had a clear plan in my mind geared around three basic questions, but the conversations lasted a long time and took different turns before coming back to the original question asked. In this way, I listened to people express themselves in their own terms and at their own pace later writing down my notes and reflection.

Throughout the course of this study, but especially in the early stages, I conducted many *informal interviews* trying to remember conversations and writing them down soon afterwards. Thus, I built greater rapport with several of the villagers of Malbardh

uncovering topics of interest and pursuing them in different ways at a later time, some in the formal process of interviewing or conducting a survey at the University of Shkodra.

### *3.5.2. Limitations of the study and commitment to objectivity and reflexivity:*

From the nature of this ethnography as an idiographic study, it is normal to not seek generalizations from our conclusions. What we find in Malbardh is not to be generalized but to be seen as the profile of one revealing example to be used as reference in other cases. *This study on Malbardh is to be used as a heuristic tool, not as a generalizing model.* So for the kind of goal this study has, namely to ascertain what is the nature of the much praised inter-religious environment in Malbardh as a revealing example of the Albanian inter-religious dynamics, our limitations are understandable and appropriate. Agreeing with *perspectivalism*, which suggests that all ethnographic knowledge is partial, I seek to carefully acknowledge my bias in the process of this study.

It seems appropriate to emphasize also that since we seek objectivity with this study to understand the nature of the environment of inter-religious tolerance in Albania, we have done our best to heed Dilthey (1833-1911) who wrote:

“...[there is] a conflict between the tendencies of life and the goal of science. Because historians, economists, teachers of law, and students of religion are involved in life they want to influence it. They subject historical personages, mass movements, and trends to their judgment, which is conditioned by their individuality, the nation to which they belong, and the age in which they live. Even when they think they are being objective they are determined by their horizon, for every analysis of the concepts of a former generation reveals constituents in them which derive from the presuppositions of that generation. Yet every science implies a claim to validity. If there are to be strictly scientific human studies they must aim more consciously and critically at validity” (Dilthey 1976, 187).

We have striven in this study to look at the phenomena we are studying from different angles and have employed different probes consisting in a mixed methods approach to discover more information that would be relevant to exploring the Albanian

environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in Malbardhby participant observation in light of the hypothesis that the environment is characterized by social harmony yet lacking true inter-religious tolerance.

## **CHAPTER IV: FROM HARMONY TO TOLERANCE**

**Presenting the research on the nature and meaning of Albanian inter-religious environment 27 years after communism (the case of Malbardh): Probing first the environment of the village of Malbardh.**

The point of departure for this study was the highly publicized story of the village of Malbardh as a good example of Albanian inter-religious harmony with the building of a Catholic church by a majority Muslim population of the village. The truth is that Albania still enjoys a remarkably harmonious religious environment, but the hypothesis of this research is that the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in Malbardh is characterized by social harmony yet lacking inter-religious tolerance and that what is required is adding pluralistic wisdom to the Malbardhian goodheartedness.

To set up this important discussion, I shall present an analysis of the Malbardh case contrasting what I call inter-religious harmony with tolerance. I shall then suggest a way to develop an informed and enduring Albanian religious tolerance. This ethnographic presentation describing the observations from the fieldwork in Malbardh will consist in the first probe of the overall study of the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions that includes a survey and 21 semi-structured interviews with converted individuals from Malbardh and related environments.

#### **4.1. Albanian inter-religious tolerance in the case of the village of Malbardh.**

##### *4.1.1. The broader context of inter-religious tolerance:*

Through the media we learn of frequent conflicts and acts of violence throughout the world that are religiously motivated (Broer et al., 2014: 78). The history of religion is not comforting with regard to inter-religious tolerance. As indicated in a recent review (Gorski and Türkmen-Dervişoğlu 2013, 194) quoting several studies (Gleditsch et al. 2002, Blatman and Miguel 2010, Fox 2004), more than half of the wars between 1946 and 2001, 115 wars out of 225, happened in one decade between 1989 and 2001. The world since September 11, 2001, is even more readily apparent as wallowing in countless atrocities motivated mostly by religious ideologies.

Surveying the situation until 2013, the review continues:

“Over the past two decades, there has been a dramatic upsurge in ethnic, nationalist, and religious civil wars. [Moreover]...from 1980 onward, religious nationalist ethnic groups were responsible for increasingly more violent conflicts in comparison to nonreligious nationalist groups”(Gorski and Türkmen-Dervişoğlu 2013, 194).

Now that religions have moved even closer to each other in a world that is more interconnected and permeable than ever, inter-religious tolerance is needed all the more for as philosopher Michael Walzer said: “it sustains life itself” (Furedi 2012:30).

In this disturbing context, the religious harmony in Albania is very refreshing and possibly important in suggesting ways to foster inter-religious tolerance in our world today. At the same time, now that “Albania has become entwined in global processes”(Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer 2002, 25) threats for turning this “garden of religious harmony,” as Abdi Baleta considers the Albanian inter-religious environment (Baleta 1995), into another theater of conflict are already at work with the

globalizing currents felt among Albanians, including reports of hundreds of Albanian Muslims in ISIS ranks (Mejdini 2016).

Albanian inter-religious tolerance is held up as a good example by many, including Pope Francis who visited Albania in September 2014 (Konferenca Ipshkvnore e Shqiperise 2015). But before we go any further in understanding one sliver of this purported Albanian inter-religious tolerance with the revealing case of the village Malbardh, we need to clarify the nature of the value of the case of Malbardh in its historical context as gleaned from the interviews with the people in the village.

#### *4.1.2. Qualifying the representativeness of Malbardh for this study:*

According to the opinions of the people of Malbardh I interviewed, the communist regime shaped Malbardh in a way similar to what one may find in any Albanian village. After a generation of active anti-religious propaganda in a country declared officially atheistic and characterized by effective indoctrination coupled with harsh punishment for detractors, religion in Malbardh did not fare any better than in any other part of the country. Religion was reduced to a very marginal reality. It was felt only in the presence of the church ruins or in some sense of a person's traditionally having a Muslim or Christian background, both equally irrelevant as life orientations.

Experience of communism is a major reason why I believe with many of the interlocutors that Malbardh represents fairly the general Albanian society. For over a generation, 1967-1991, religion was relegated to complete obscurity in Malbardh as in every part of Albania. The thorough mixing of people during communism with most young men serving for two years as soldiers far from their home coming into contact with people and parts of the country they would not otherwise know while those who



went to universities were socialized and indoctrinated even more intensively and teachers or other educated people from different parts of the country serving in villages other than their own for long periods of time impacting many impressionable young lives along with the many other ways of influencing people through major building projects enlisting youth as volunteers for weeks and months and intensive regular propagandistic activities including mass media and publications complemented with harsh punishments for nonalignment created a more or less homogeneous situation in terms of ideas and mentality throughout Albania much as in Malbardh as the villagers I talked with in Malbardh gave evidence of each of these aspects of life during communism.

Malbardh's demographic makeup is predominantly traditionally Muslim, that is more than 95% of 1543 inhabitants. There is also an indigenous Christian population of 70-80 people in 14 households living side by side with the Muslims, which is similar to the general Albanian population mix of Christians and Muslims although percentages vary in different areas of the country.

But the value of the example of Malbardh, as we have explained in the introduction for this study, is not a function of the similarity of the environment of Malbardh with the general Albanian environment as much as the evident example of the kind of inter-religious environment that most people in Albania want to believe is typical of their inter-religious interactions. The case of Malbardh is a revealing case of an inter-religious dynamic that is considered an Albanian value: inter-religious harmony or tolerance or coexistence according to the normal parlance which does not care to distinguish the specific significance of each term.

## **4.2. Toward a working definition of inter-religious tolerance.**

### *4.2.1. Tolerance, ideas and persons:*

Defining tolerance is an essential prerequisite for this study in seeking to understand the nature of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions. In this part of the study we will develop a working definition of tolerance that will serve throughout this study as the reference point for gauging the approximation to tolerance of the nature of the inter-religious interactions we will analyze. In our second and third probe we will add some other elements in our measuring approaches that are relevant to a questionnaire and the semi-structured interview, but here we will follow a rigorous line of the reasoning about tolerance and then contemplate the significance of the observable patterns of the interactions of the villagers of Malbardh through the anthropological methodology of fieldwork by participant observation, informal interviews and focus groups in order to understand the elements of content and process in this environment.<sup>57</sup>

To address more clearly the issue of the inter-religious tolerance in Malbardh we need to start with the question: What is tolerance and when can we say that tolerance obtains? I am bypassing here the discussion of observational terms such as “coexistence” or “cooperation,” which are used frequently to describe the Albanian situation of Muslims and Christians, choosing instead to focus on the more qualitative terms of “harmony” and “tolerance,” which focus on the nature of interaction between Albanian Muslims and Christians.

Jay Newman, a philosopher and distinguished professor at the University of Guelph in Canada, points out that there is a distinction between “tolerance” and “toleration”

(Newman 1982, 5), but here we shall seek to come up with and use a working definition of tolerance. The main discussion at this point focuses on distinguishing the important emphasis in tolerating people with differing or opposing ideas rather than tolerating differing or opposing ideas *per se*.

So, what does it mean to tolerate another's beliefs? This is important to clarify because there are different perspectives on this issue (Broer et al. 2014, 82). I would put forward that to tolerate another's beliefs does not mean that one accepts them as true. As Newman clarifies, "Tolerating a religious belief, then, does not involve a half-hearted acceptance or endurance of the belief *in itself*, but rather it involves acceptance or endurance of *someone's holding* that belief, that is of a certain case of believing"(Newman 1982, 8).

This definition by Newman is important to grasp, especially with regard to inter-religious tolerance, in order to avoid the common practice of slipping into the stance of tolerating ideas rather than people. Barua advocates this latter approach in his article "Ideas of Tolerance." He writes: "To tolerate X, which may be an idea or activity, is to voluntarily exercise some form of self-restraint towards X which we otherwise object to or believe to be deviant" (Barua 2013, 74). My disagreement with this suggestion is not to say in any way that ideas are not important in the existence of tolerance. On the contrary, my main point in this writing hinges on the importance of ideas for the existence of inter-religious tolerance, but it is people and not ideas that we tolerate.<sup>58</sup>

#### *4.2.2. The disappointing promise of relativism:*

Relativists who adjust the meaning of tolerance to make it more of a propositional attitude, which considers respecting another's religious beliefs as being of equal

truthfulness to the truth claims of one's own convictions, open the door for this stance being considered as nonsensical. This is the case because a person could end up holding as equally true both propositions: his own and at the same time and in the same respect that of the religious other, even if they are obviously contradictory. My concern here is not the important discussion of the concept of truth but the impact of the relativistic view of truth on tolerance if it is the view of the religious adherents. It practically dissolves the ground on which tolerance depends, and this is a serious deficit in a pluralistic context.<sup>59</sup>

It is appropriate in this respect to listen to the concerns of an astute social observer of our time, namely Frank Furedi, who argues that tolerance can become a vice. In his words:

“Tolerance as an act of not interfering or attempting to suppress beliefs that contradict one's own sentiments has given way to the idea that it also involves not judging other people and their views. So instead of serving as a way of responding to differences of views, tolerance has become a way of not taking them seriously. Arguably, when tolerance is represented as a form of detached indifference or a polite gesture connoting automatic acceptance, it becomes a vice rather than a virtue”(Furedi 2012, 31).

We need to detect and expose the relativistic stance because it actually removes the conditions for tolerance to exist. Newman writes:

“Tolerance, after all, does not demand that one believe that every other person's metaphysical views are as true or as reasonable or as profound as his own. Indeed...*tolerance is possible only because we are capable of putting up with things that we do not like...or agree with*”(Newman 1982, 61).

The conditions for tolerance then include: (1) having a certain belief and (2) interacting with another person who holds beliefs with which we disagree. If we did not have to put up with those who hold beliefs contrary to ours, there would be no need for tolerance. If all believed the same thing or basically “truths” of the same value, then all religious beliefs are not to be taken seriously. They could be considered merely as

different keys on a piano, which may be different but not true or false. What, then, would there be to tolerate (Stetson and Conti 2005, 75)?

#### **4.3. Inter-religious harmony and tolerance viewed theoretically and contextually:**

Tolerance can be exercised in different contexts—political, social, religious and personal (Stetson and Conti 2005, 169–73); and it is important to keep in mind these overlaying contexts in order to ascertain the nature of the tolerance we witness in Malbardh. As it will become clear in the course of this study, we need to distinguish the sociological or contextual dimension from the theological dimension of the nature of the harmony or tolerance in the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions. It can be said, and this is actually the hypothesis of this study, that in Albania we may have social harmony between people labeled as religious because of family background but with a “thin” theological dimension because of inadequate awareness of religious teaching counting as without true inter-religious tolerance. Depending on where you want to put the emphasis, we may end up sounding contradictory saying we have inter-religious harmony but not inter-religious tolerance so we will spend some time clarifying these terms.

When we speak here of “inter-religious harmony,” we mean “harmony” in the sense of sociologically observable harmony between people of differently designated religions interacting in the same social space with each other. The problem is that if by the phrase “inter-religious harmony” we mean a theological emphasis or an overall worldview incorporating the differing visions of life represented by each religion we would be

wrong because each religion comes with its own unique and differing view of reality that sometimes contradicts another religious view.<sup>60</sup>

So with the term “harmony,” we can then address the dynamics of parts in a whole. It is, therefore, appropriate to speak of harmony with regard to a social context of people with different life concerns in a given common social space that includes aspects in addition to religion. But it does not seem appropriate to speak of harmony with regard to religious teachings of different religions that are more like wholes in themselves because of belonging to a specific self-contained worldview. Christianity or Islam are not like parts of the same whole that can be made to have the same specifically theological goal without truncating one or the other in ways that its adherents would not agree.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the language of tolerance is more appropriate with regard to religious concerns in general and about Christianity and Islam in particular.

“Inter-religious tolerance” used in the sense of a worldview accommodating discussion or presentation and dialectic development of understanding toward resolutions and progress in the social interaction between adherents of different religions, such as conversion or agreement to disagree, is possible in the pluralistic and democratic environment where different religions are evaluated and discussed encouraging critical thinking and analysis. “Inter-religious tolerance” in the sense of a social environment where people of different religions who are well informed and acutely aware of their differences interact respectfully in a pluralistic environment is the possible goal desired.

Again, “inter-religious tolerance” designates the inclusion of the theological dimension of the social environment as significant while “inter-religious harmony” can be accepted only as sociologically descriptive. There can be harmony at the descriptive

or social level when the circle of common concerns is limited to living together peacefully in the same common space, and you can have such harmony without inter-religious tolerance, at least until religious goals do not predominate. Yet, it is much better to have inter-religious tolerance in the context of social harmony, and that is what is meant by “from harmony to tolerance.”

#### *4.3.1. A working definition of “tolerance”:*

From an analysis of the conditions for tolerance, the following may be inferred: For tolerance to obtain there needs to exist (1) *some appreciable level of conviction* with which religious beliefs are held in order to feel the dissonance with the beliefs of another. This implies a perceivable level of awareness of the difference or contradiction of one’s ideas vs. the other’s views. As it is made clear in reference to Boersma (Boersma 2012), tolerance is perceived “as a social concept about which one has to reflect philosophically” (Broer et al. 2014, 83). Another condition is (2) *some real life context* where two people or groups in interaction can exert some level of restraint or endurance toward the other holding the opposing view or idea. This amounts to (3) *some level of observable respect for the space and freedoms* of religious others to live according to their convictions.

Thus, for tolerance to appear there needs to be some level of personal conviction, interpersonal interaction, and respected personal freedoms. We need to appreciate that tolerance “involves decision-making based on a certain value system, ethical behavior, reasonable argument, difference, as well as a spectrum of behavior” (Broer et al. 2014, 83).

The level of this freedom is important to ascertain as well along a certain spectrum.

With regard to the measuring of freedoms, endurance of the other, we can have a spectrum of strength (1) to refrain from unjustly hindering the other to *declare* freely whatever view he chooses to hold and (2) to *propagate* his idea for the consideration of others. It also includes (3) refraining from hindering unjustly the free *conversion* of anyone to the other's idea. Thomas Schirmacher is helpful with the discussion of the meaning of religious freedom indicating the legitimate limitations in light of other human rights and pointing out illegitimate ones while emphasizing "a famous ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) dated May 25, 1993,...[saying] 'The freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a democratic society'"(Schirmacher 2014, 15:72–75). This is in agreement with Furedi who writes: "...tolerance can be measured in relation to the extent to which people's belief and behavior is not subject to institutional and political interference and restraint"(Furedi 2012, 31).

Now we may put forward a working definition of robust inter-religious tolerance: *Tolerance exists between two people or groups when intentionally or knowingly one respects the other who holds and practices opposing views to the point of having both parties endure, without unjust hindrance, even the free conversion of anyone to the other's point of view.* As we indicated earlier, when "opposing views" are religious, we have inter-religious tolerance, but if the views are about political or otherwise not specifically related to religion, we may have tolerance or harmony of a different kind. Granted this working definition of tolerance, we can move on to reflect on what is considered to be an example of Albanian inter-religious tolerance: the revealing case of Malbardh.



#### **4.4. Understanding the case of Malbardh regarding inter-religious tolerance.**

##### *4.4.1. Questions arising about the Albanian inter-religious tolerance in Malbardh:*

From my visits to the village of Malbardh, several questions arose in my mind about the nature of inter-religious environment I studied there: (1) One villager expressed the view, common to many Albanians, that religions are actually nothing more than political parties. What are we to think of this reduction of religions to human creations (Interview with L.A, Sept. 29, 2015)? (2) How does our analysis of inter-religious tolerance fit with the view in this village that a reason for religious harmony there is the absence of foreigners<sup>62</sup> (Interviews and focus group in the spring and interviews in the fall of 2015)? (3) What is signified by the fact that the greatest distinction the villagers are aware of with regard to their inherited religions has to do with who eats pork and who does not? More correctly, who is supposed to because as they told me jokingly, “the price of pork has risen due to the Muslims consuming of pork” (Malbardh focus group in April 2015).

##### *4.4.2. Preliminary issues about the purported Albanian (Malbardhian) religious tolerance:*

Applying this logic then to the case of Malbardh in Albania, we would need to evaluate (1) *therelativist vs. absolutist stance*- whether the Albanians hold to a relativistic view of religion or a more absolutist view. The assumption here would be that the less relativistic the perspective, the more tolerant the attitude has the potential to be.

We also need to evaluate (2) *the depth of awareness* or whether the importance of such beliefs in the lives of the people is small or great related both to the clarity and level of adherence to beliefs. In the third probe of this study when evaluating the responses of the converts from the interviews we used a simple scale from “insufficient” to “sufficient” with the category of “moderate” in the middle. The level of “sufficient,” both in the third probe with the interviews and here during the analysis of Malbardh in our first probe, is gauged with regard to the perceptions of the participants gathered during semi-structured interviews regarding the specificity of the religious teachings that they would consider as a significant factor in the belief system of people in their environment when engaging religious others.<sup>63</sup>

Beside the specificity of the religious teaching there is also the factor of the level of importance in which that particular belief is held. The greater the importance and the seriousness with which Albanians would hold their beliefs, through living them out faithfully, the greater would be the strength needed to be tolerant of those with opposing views for it would seem to be more difficult, hence more admirable as an achievement, to be tolerant the more your beliefs matter to you.

While the inner strength needed to administer tolerance is more admirable the greater it is seen to be enduring the countering of one’s strongly held important belief, it does not amount to tolerance without displaying relevant behaviors that would reveal (3) *the level of allowed freedoms* with some perceived distance from “basic” to “high.”

Again, in evaluating the responses from the interviews with converts, we included the category of “perception of tolerance” with three simple more qualitative distinctions of “indifference,” “tolerant,” and “excluding.” This distance can be evaluated by the amount of space for freedoms bequeathed to the religious other, both as compared with

one's own freedoms and the theoretical ideals inherent in the concept of tolerance among equals.<sup>64</sup>

We will explain the observations about the behaviors and freedom experienced in the environment of Malbardh as we go through describing them and evaluating them together with other relevant observations. Especially in this first probe of the environment of Malbardh, we will rely on the qualitative methodology of ethnography through in-depth description of the realities we observed keeping in mind these factors we underlined here as references for boundaries rather than as exact quantitatively defined variables.

#### **4.5. The case of Malbardh as an ethnographic study:**

Now we can proceed to describe in some length the picture we get from Malbardh in order to be better positioned to answer the questions above. We will start with a short overview of the discussions from the media. Then we will present relevantly selected descriptions of comments from my interactions with 30 people in personal conversations, interviews, a focus group and observations acquired during my participation in the life of the village from spring 2015 until fall 2017.

##### *4.5.1. Malbardh, the media's take on the story and methodology:*

We are interested in Malbardh because of a televised story aired in February 2014 ("Myslymanet ringrene kishen, katoliket xhamine." 2014).<sup>65</sup> It portrayed the alleged tolerance between the Muslim majority and the Catholic minority as being expressed through the participation of Muslims in the building of the church in their village.

It is significant to mention that several people I met in the course of my visits to the village said that reverence for the ruins was deeply ingrained. Even during communism this was shown by not taking livestock to graze in the vicinity of the church ruins. Most interestingly, this reverence extended to not even using for fire the dead wood of the many big trees around there. The villagers told me a story of not allowing even a priest, more recently, to take some of the wood from the church vicinity as firewood away from their village, saying they would have used it themselves if it was acceptable. The son of the communist party secretary of the village told me in person that even his father, a communist and the foremost communist in the village, would tell his children the same thing with regard to the church and its vicinity as an untouchable, out of bounds place for mundane needs.

After communism fell in 1991, there was freedom for the villagers of Malbardh to worship however they wanted. They could celebrate religious holidays openly while the Catholics would celebrate inconspicuously even during communist years. The church, though, remained in ruins until the middle of the 2000s and, as mentioned, no one would use its wood.

The history of the building of the church can be told in different ways. The way it was told by Marin Mema through the aforementioned television documentary captured the attention of many and set the stage for the discussion of Malbardh's inter-religious tolerance nationwide. The point of this television presentation is that religious tolerance between Christians and Muslims in the village is expressed unmistakably in the building of a Catholic church with the enthusiastic participation of the Muslim majority population in the village.<sup>66</sup>

Another way the story was told by another journalist, Kastriot Marku (Marku 2014), included bringing in the details of financial arrangements, which revealed the underbelly of the at first glamorously painted picture of the documentary. The import of this other presentation is that the building of the church was not done by the voluntary work of the Muslim villagers but by paid work of these same villagers financed by the Catholic church in the region. While this article brings a welcome balancing of facts, its author also did insist on the wonderfully harmonious relationship between Muslims and Catholics in the village so the substance of the story being the admirable harmony of the people of Malbardh and the Muslims participation in building the church still stands.

Others, like Marenglen Rexha, who is one of the villagers from Malbardh, described the nature of the harmony between the Muslims and the Catholics in the village with the provocative title “Our Harmony is not Religious”(Rexhaj 2014). This piece offers insights for questions to ask in order to understand the dimensions of the obvious harmony between the villagers of different religious backgrounds in Malbardh, a harmony accepted broadly by others who discussed the case of this village as well (Xhai 2014).

In the following, I shall attempt to provide a better understanding of the main issue of the story: the makeup of the inter-religious tolerance purported to exist in Malbardh in connection with the building of the church there and the resulting developments. In order to find what the fuller picture was, I spoke numerous times and interviewed several times one friend from that village both in Tirana and in the village with his brother and mother and other family members. In addition, I went to the village in the spring and autumn of 2015 where I met with more than 30 individuals at different times, spending full days in conversation, interviewing and conducting one focus group, eating

and socializing with eight people in a more relaxed interview, and participating in the celebrations at the occasion of the church's namesake day, the day of Shen Mehilli on September 29, 2015.<sup>67</sup>

#### *4.5.2. Removing the superficial clutter in the discussion of Malbardh:*

The members of a poor village, such as Malbardh, cannot be expected to give more than they did. The fact that the villagers needed to have the road paved did not overcome the truth of their sincere respect of what the church signifies and their genuine desire to have the church built to facilitate their pilgrimages and candle lighting. It is important to note that the church was actually built almost eight years prior to this media sensitization of the broader public opinion about it. It is curious that this fact did not figure much in the whole discussion with the village representatives, but it definitely shows that the building of the church was not instigated by outside factors, there was obvious momentum in the village for it.<sup>68</sup> Such inter-religious attitudes on the part of the villagers would become clear to any sincere observer who interacted with them.

Therefore, the discussion should not be framed by an analysis of financial statements that, admittedly, show the undeniably important role of the leaders of the Catholic church in the region. More relevant in this context is the respectful and even reticent attitude of those Catholic leaders who were convinced by the efforts of the religiously mixed group of representatives of Malbardh who instigated the project to invest in building this church in such a predominantly Muslim village. The Catholic leaders recognized that they were receiving a sincere and unanimous request of the villagers through their representatives without any known reservations by the whole village to have the church built (Interview with M.Gj. in April 2015).<sup>69</sup>

The first time I was in the village I did not meet any women, but during my second visit I did. I was glad to confirm that no significant change should be expected about the perspective on this issue because of gender. The hostess at the house where we ate during the celebratory meal was introduced to me as a reputedly hard working widow and mother of many grown-up and married children and was still busy working all day around the house. Here she was all smiles and friendly in conversation offering celebratory food at the occasion of a Catholic celebration being from a Muslim tradition herself and with all traditionally Muslim family and guests.<sup>70</sup> The main conversation was with the men of the village though, and they gave me the perspective of the main actors in this story of the building of the church.

*4.5.3. Some elements relevant to understanding Malbardh's inter-religious harmony:*

Some of the villagers' concerns when communicating with me required care to communicate in a way as to not jeopardize the apparent groove this tolerant image now publicized on national television seems to have positioned the village with potential toward acquiring attention and funds for more practical building projects such as a road and possibly more. They were very upset with the second journalist, Marku, who in their opinion, had sought to undermine the good image of tolerance that had garnered them attention from the U.S. Embassy and others possibly to some practical advantage. The village had considered different forms of getting the attention of someone who could invest in a road, including the Catholic church or other benefactors who, while building the religious shrine, would also fix the village road.

My awareness of such issues from my discussions with a friend from this village helped in avoiding some sensitive topics that would sidetrack the conversation.<sup>71</sup> My goal was to get to their religious reasoning and posture. I did genuinely care for their needs and made allowance for their mixed motives in their words and actions toward me, an outsider, even though I came as a friend of their co-villager. I was, thus, well prepared from several conversations with the villager friend before I set up informal meetings with chosen representatives in as natural of a setting as possible, participating also in their village celebration of the saint Shen Mehilli from whom the church gets its name (see Appendix A).

In those conversations and observations, by personal participation, some understandings and attitudes were crystallized that would be readable in the interactions with the Malbardh villagers by any sincere observer. I double-checked my perceptions of the conversations with my villager friend who even told me that he learned a lot by them himself. I went into this analysis with the confidence that being an Albanian myself I would be able to see through everything, but my villager friend's help with the background information and correction of some of my takes on the conversations was invaluable.

#### **4.6. Malbardh's harmony is familial, organic or natural as parts of a whole.**

The villagers I interviewed and talked with in different contexts around the village emphasized the fact that they would involve their fellow villagers of either religion in celebrations of weddings and in their funerals, not simply as participants but with significant functional roles. One needs to appreciate the importance of such celebrations



among Albanians to appreciate the significance they attach to such roles. But it suffices for our purposes here to say that such roles meant they relied on people of other religious persuasion in their village just as they would rely on their own family members for the successful management of important social functions. The formal interfamily bonds akin to alliances of close kinship called *kumbari* between Muslims and Christians were also examples of this long-standing harmony that I noticed.<sup>72</sup> Several of the villagers emphasized the widespread practice of *kumbari* in order to forge such strong family ties that marriage would not be allowed between their families as now they were considered related as brothers. The wisdom of such partnerships is seen in serving not just the purpose of unity across religious lines but at the same time avoiding the more religiously significant problem of mixed marriages. They remained close as families. They welcomed each other to their celebrations as brothers, but marriage was reserved for preserving the religious integrity where it mattered most.

The more telling statement, which was not intentionally presented as a reason to believe the existence of their harmony but which was said in other contexts of the conversation, was their statement: “we have no foreigners in our village.” This meant that anybody who was not a descendant of the original inhabitants of their village was a foreigner. There is no doubt in their minds and no reason to challenge their conviction that they are all descendants of two families that came to that place from further up the mountain about 200 years ago, namely, the Smaci and Buzebolla families. This self-understanding as living without foreigners shows their perception of their fellow villagers as indistinguishably equal partners of the community without any reference to religion. Very interestingly, my interlocutors in the village did not even consider it important to mention the religious change from Catholics to Muslims. Explaining to me

in much detail how their ancestors, before coming to Malbardh, exchanged land related to a previous church they belonged to, the Shen e Premte church, for land in the area around Shen Mehil church in their current village. This shows how they still keep alive by celebration the memory of their first church affiliation, Shen e Premte, which is not in their village. This is so even though, as my friend from the village clarified the chronology for me, they had become Muslim by the time they arrived in the village of Malbardh. My friend also said that this conversation helped him to understand why his village celebrates faithfully every 25th of July the day of the “Shen e Premte” church, which is not in their village.

I heard for hours the elaborate stories of this ancestry weaved in the story of a continuous harmonious living together of Malbardh people from the beginning of their history in the village without a hint of any change when they accepted Islam. The term “accepted Islam” seems in the case of Albanians more appropriate than saying “converted to Islam,” but arguments for this need to wait for another time.

A Catholic man in the group said that his mother used to keep a whole set of separate plates and utensils for their Muslim guests who might be concerned about touching pork simply to show consideration and respect for their guests. In the same conversation, a Muslim villager jokingly said “the price of pork now has increased, and the Catholics are mad at us Muslims because we are eating it, too.” We laughed together as one, as Albanians, though we were Muslims, Catholics and Protestants in that conversation.

#### *4.6.1. The building of the church was building the village's church.*

One reason mentioned to me as an argument given by the village representatives in their request for the building of the church was that every family of the village visited the church's ruins to light candles at least yearly or whenever the need was felt (Interview with M.Gj. in April 2015).

During my participation in the celebration, I was not prepared for a very unique greeting I had never heard before: "t'nimofte," which means, "May it help you." The villagers said this to each other as they came across each other coming and going in the vicinity of the church but not outside of the church area. My friend told me later that it meant "may the church help you" or may this sacred place help you.

Truly, the villagers seem to have built a special place, even when it was a ruin, to bring their concerns and needs for some miraculous help. In this context what the representative of the U.S. Embassy gave in 2014 as a description for the award to this village's participation in building the church seems observationally correct, namely a "place of all-inclusive worship" (Kastriot Marku 2014)—a place where Muslims and Catholics come for worship on their own without distinctions. In one comment from the television program, one of the villagers, Muharrem Capani, said "... we don't specify that it is a church only for Catholics, but it is a general church, for Catholics and Muslims together," ("Myslymanet ringrene kishen, katoliket xhamine." 2014).

#### *4.6.2. Harmony without reference to any specific religious teaching.*

The existence of the harmony between people in Malbardh is easy to see, but the motivation for this harmony is important to understand. In this context, the response I received from one old villager in answer to the question "What is religion?" is

significant because it is very common: “religions are like political parties” (Interview with L.A on Sept.29, 2015).

Another older friend of this 76-year-old man, who was one year short of 90 years old, answered my direct question about what a villager would understand of the religion in his village to which he does not adhere. In answering this question, he gave me a long and complicated speech mentioning Martin Luther and concluded with “the builders of the mosque have spent the money in vain,”<sup>73</sup> referring to the new mosque built that summer. In analyzing the difficult answer, he gave me with my villager friend afterwards, in order to decode the different tracks he was running on and see through the intention to show off his extensive reading, we came to the simple conclusion that he, though traditionally a Muslim, was saying that he like others would rather come up the mountain on foot, as he already had done that day, and hang out in the church vicinity, considered a sacred place, rather than go to the mosque that was literally around the corner from his house. Voting with his feet, even though a Muslim by tradition, he was also expressly saying that the villagers did not care about the labels of Muslim and Catholic. They knew that if there was a place to go for help from God, this sacred ancient place, Shen Mehilli church, was it.

Fitting his answer to my question then, he basically was saying that the villagers do not care about the content of their religions; and thus, even if they know the stories or respective religious symbols, these do not mean much to them. They all believe that this sacred place of the church is important for spiritual concerns, and they go there without bothering to evaluate what one’s religion is supposed to say about this practice. They do not suspect there exists a contradiction in a Muslim going to a church for help from above. These older men represent the view of the majority of the villagers who lived

during communism, and they are also the group that built the church so it is representative of the mindset and understanding behind that event.

The upshot of these observations is that the understanding of religion is very weak in the sense of the specific teachings. At least the level of conviction about the truth or value for adherence to such specific religious teaching is very low. If there is one specific religious belief that the villagers can distinguish as of some importance to distinguish between the two religions in the village, then it is pork consumption, which, as we said earlier, is the butt of jokes already.

#### *4.6.3. The media publicity and the future of harmony in the village.*

When I visited the village during the celebration of the patron saint of the church, the mayor of the village, a Muslim, took me to stand close by the entrance of the church where one of his friends, another Muslim, offered me a martini to raise a toast. He then apologetically said that the celebration this year did not include music and other entertaining events because of some deaths in the village during the summer. All around there were groups of people grilling meat and socializing around food, obviously enjoying the day. I knew that the previous year, 2014, was a bigger celebration because they received the award for their inter-religious harmony; and in relation to that, I understood why the mayor was apologetic – the media had set a glamorous standard which they somehow felt was lacking this year.

The impact of the media attention has produced a long-lasting influence on the life of the village because it is easy to connect it with the building of a new mosque during a few weeks in the summer of 2015.<sup>74</sup> I could see a very tangible indication of what I suspected to be happening in Malbardh as the result of media attention when I saw the

mosque's foundation in my first visit to the village that spring. In that same April conversation, the mayor let slip that somebody from outside Albania had called him<sup>75</sup> and asked if they wanted to build a mosque "now that they had the church." He was offered help with the funding, which he had naturally accepted (Focus group in April 2015).

According to one villager I spoke to personally, another thing that happened for the first time that summer (2015) is the coming of a Muslim leader to perform a Muslim religious ceremony for the death of a young man of the village. Even though this villager is in his 30s, he had never seen a Muslim cleric perform a funeral in his village. This also took place after the media publicity and after the mosque was being built (Interview with M.R. Sept. 2015).

Now that the mosque is built, and the Muslim call to the prayer ritual may be heard every day through the amplification of a recording, a new reality has dawned, one where the distinction of the invisible religious divide between Muslims and Catholics is emphasized visibly and audibly every day. This was not the case only a short time ago, not before the news of the church building was publicized, and going back at least two generations.<sup>76</sup> My interview with Altin M. in the spring of 2017 confirmed the intensifying hypothesis with the building of the mosque in the village shortly after the media emphasis (Interview with Altin M.).

I asked the elders of the village directly how they think they will protect their inter-religious harmony now that the distinctions are set to be developed between the two poles of Albanian religiosity, especially in light of the new mosque that was not there for generations. Their answer was spontaneous, and obviously not pre-considered. It amounted simply to a declaration that the forms of life in this village will not change at

least as long as they are alive, but no one can predict the future. It was obvious that they perceived the possibility of change, but it had to be far away and after they died.<sup>77</sup>

I do agree that the strength of tradition should not be underestimated, but there is more pressure underfoot at this time on any community to rely on the natural movements of life as we always knew it.<sup>78</sup>

#### **4.7. Inter-religious harmony or inter-religious tolerance?**

Now we can discuss better the nature of Malbardhian inter-religious harmony. Talk about “inter-religious harmony” is based on the truth of the apparent harmony between Albanians of different religious backgrounds in Malbardh, namely people assuming the labels “Muslim” and “Christian” chiefly because of perceived traditional continuity.<sup>79</sup> But talk about “inter-religious tolerance” seems not to be justified by the reality on the ground if tolerance implies enduring of another while understanding the views at variance or contradictory to one’s own.

My observations on the matter in Malbardh include:

- a. The people of Malbardh have an admirable harmony between themselves as co-villagers of different religions.
- b. The building of the church is an important indicator of this harmony.
- c. The basis of this harmony is without any strong connection to an understanding of any specific religious teaching.
- d. The media publicity about the building of the church has brought about a new reality with significance for the future of tolerance in the village.

We defined tolerance as obtaining “... when intentionally or knowingly one respects the other who holds and practices opposing views to the point of having both parties endure, without unjust hindrance, even the free conversion of anyone to the other’s point of view.” It is also important to note the specific religious dimension of these interactions that would qualify the nature of the harmony present in Malbardh.

I need to clarify again here the difference I see between “harmony” and “tolerance” as they apply to the situation in Malbardh. The reason why I accept, with reservations, calling the obvious harmony of villagers of Malbardh “inter-religious harmony” is because it is the harmony between people whom we have to call “Muslim” or “Catholic” based on the perceived different traditional religious background. Thus, my reason for using the term “inter-religious” is strictly sociological and descriptive. I have reservations because of the unqualified assumptions carried with the term “religious” in that phrase.

The language of harmony<sup>80</sup> when talking about different religions is misleading if religions are correctly understood as represented according to their historic and publicly available scriptural profiles.<sup>81</sup> Inter-religious harmony, theologically, would imply syncretism or the kind of pluralism envisioned by the likes of John Hick (Hick 1989) but not what almost all religious traditions uphold. Religions by nature, including the two religions represented in Albania, Islam and Christianity, despite many similarities are mutually exclusive in their theologically imbued visions of ultimate reality with different goals and means for their religiosity.<sup>82</sup>

These two religions are more like two different teams with a mutually exclusive goal to bear witness to the view of reality they believe to be true. So defining the “rules



of the game” as it were, we need to let these two teams play their game with integrity and “good sportsmanship.”<sup>83</sup>

#### *4.7.1. Harmony as a team play vs. tolerance as endurance of competition:*

There is a sense in which harmony is a higher development than tolerance, and there is another sense in which harmony and tolerance relate to two different kinds of possibilities. In order to illustrate this important second sense of the relationship of “harmony” and “tolerance,” it seems helpful to understand the difference between the environment of a team effort in which “harmony” is the appropriate optimal result and the environment of a competition between teams in which “tolerance” is the desired result, usually called “good sportsmanship.”

The sense in which “harmony” is higher than “tolerance” would relate to the progress of the relationship between people who come together as strangers on one team from different families or even regions who initially make fun of each other’s dialect and later learn by tolerating each other’s differences of personalities that they are playing for the same goal and are, therefore, on the same team. Harmony of the whole team is achieved as the team members tolerate the aspects of life and behaviors of their teammates, playing together for the same goal as one body and feeling similarly about the success of shared effort toward victory.

But when you are dealing with two different teams, you do not expect harmony between the two teams in the same sense. Each team has its own goal and idea to shoot for. They do not need to change their team’s goals in order to respect the other team’s goal, which by definition is opposite to theirs and mutually exclusive. Tolerance is more like giving the other team the opportunity to play against our team according to rules of

equal respect. This requires enduring, according to the rules of good sportsmanship, the other's moves to outdo one's own team without interfering unjustly in a field of acceptable competition of human goals.

#### *4.7.2. Caution: theoretical vs. contextualized harmony*

This distinction of a theologically driven vision is theoretical and with regard to the theological teachings of different religions. With regard to teachings, harmony cannot be expected as the specific goals of each religion are different or contradictory due to their specific theological emphases. We also cannot see the religious groups as parts of one team but more like different teams in one kind of sport. This may sound irreverent and almost the same as the view we criticized about religions as political parties, but considering religions at the level of their social function, we need to approach them as particular ideological enterprises as well.<sup>84</sup>

Earlier we said that for tolerance to be obtained, there needs to exist (1) *some appreciable level of conviction* with which beliefs are held in order to feel the dissonance with the beliefs of another. This implies a needed level of awareness of the difference or contradiction of one's ideas vs the other's views; (2) *some real life context* where two people or groups in interaction can exert some level of restraint or endurance toward the other holding the opposing view or idea. This amounts to (3) *some level of observable respect for the space and freedoms* of religious others to live according to their convictions. With regard to the measuring of "freedoms," endurance of the other, then, can have a spectrum of strength achieving (a) refraining from hindering the other unjustly to *declare* freely whatever view one chooses to hold, (b) to *propagate* his idea

for the consideration of others and (c) refraining from hindering unjustly the free *conversion* of anyone to the other's idea.

Now we will compare the findings of the ethnographic study of Malbardh presented here with this proposed definition to determine the proper name for the nature of the admirable inter-religious interaction in Malbardh.

#### **4.8. Do Malbardhians intentionally or knowingly endure religious others?**

A Catholic together with a Muslim were part of the delegation from the village that went to the regional Catholic leadership to ask for funding of the village church building in the early 2000s. During a meal with a few villagers, this Catholic man told me that the Muslim representative approached him in 2014 to ask him to go back to the Catholic leaders and ask them to provide money for the building of a mosque. Again, we should not lose sight of the timing of this asking for a mosque as it is in the context of the brewing of the media attention to Malbardh's inter-religious dynamics about the building of the church eight years prior.

The Catholic villager pointed out the ridiculousness of that request in the presence of two other villagers there with us who are Muslims. "How could Catholics build the place of worship of a religion they do not agree with?" His point was clear without these words, but not much was said in the awkward situation created as we pondered the significance of the Muslim's request.<sup>85</sup>

It seems that the Malbardh Muslim representative is not aware or does not care about the significance of the difference of beliefs between Islam and Christianity and assumes that at least the Catholics of his village and their leaders should think the same as he does. A likely interpretation is that the Muslim representative did not suspect his

request as strange because he assumed religions are simply different labels for the same reality, much like the work in each other's harvest.

Making sense of the above-mentioned request by a Malbardhian Muslim representative, beside the descriptions offered above and other comments available even in the television program aired nationally, indicates that our Malbardh Muslims were not really building the church as Muslims. Malbardh Muslims did not act as Muslims *per se* but as members of the same community who go to be helped in the same way and in the same place, the church, perceived by them as “an all-inclusive place of worship.” The same Catholic villager told me, “I would see frequently everyone from the village walk by my house going to the church ruins to light candles so it was obvious everyone would like the church rebuilt.” By implication, it seems to me that the idea for the building of the mosque was possibly missing an important motivation from inside the village until the media coverage in 2014 (Interview with M.Gj. in April 2015).

#### *4.8.1. Lack of awareness of religious significance:*

Comparing this conclusion with the requirements for obtaining tolerance, namely the awareness of the significance of religious differences, this condition for tolerance is missing in Malbardh. Thus, Malbardh Muslims did not show tolerance in building the church but goodhearted village harmony as if working in each other's fields to the benefit of everyone.

Here we have the harmony of people as parts of the same whole, the community of Malbardh who had the same extra religious goal of building a road in the village. If building a church or a mosque would be the price to pay for the road they needed, they were happy to do it. The harmony described here consists in the harmony of people

labeled as belonging to different religions who interact and use religious symbols to some degree but not specifically mindful or aware of much of its significance theologically.<sup>86</sup> This would be harmony of people of different religions without inter-religious tolerance or to put it more pointedly, inter-religious harmony (sociologically speaking) without inter-religious tolerance (theologically speaking).

#### *4.8.2. Display of a relativistic stance:*

Does the comment of the old man of Malbardh about religions being like political parties fit this condition of tolerance, namely that there are different goals consciously held? The context of this comment being the question “what is religion” should help to see that this comment is an expression of understanding religion as parties of different but irrelevant ideas. This explanation fits better with the well-meaning request of the Muslim for the Catholic church to build the mosque, reflecting a relativizing of contradictory religious beliefs. As previously stated, this relativizing stance inherently undermines the ground for true religious tolerance.

#### *4.8.3. Display of low level of commitment:*

From my interaction in the village, ending the day in conversation with an almost 90-year-old man, I had the clear impression that the vast majority of the villagers would not be able to identify any more important belief differentiating Christians from Muslims than whether one should eat pork or not. This is at least one belief that is identified as differentiating, and some sacrificing is required for the sake of this belief, indicating some level of conviction. Somebody may point to some cases of fasting during Ramadan; but as my friend from the village told me, the same person while

fasting goes and lights candles at the church indicating a freely personalized way of dealing with contradictory practices without taking them to mean what a religiously educated person might understand their meaning to be (Conversation with M.R. spring 2015). In light of the comment about the price of pork rising due to Muslim's consumption, we should infer that the level of commitment is low to non-existent. Neither Muslims nor Catholics are stigmatized with regard to eating pork or not, and religious others are accommodated relatively easily, more easily than in the past generation before communism when the mother of the Catholic villager kept separate utensils for Muslim visitors.

The crux of the matter is the understanding of tolerance as an intentional posture related to others with ideas contrary to one's own. This is not in any way to assume that others have no awareness of the Christian cross or particular saints, Christ and Muhammad, or particulars of different religious festivals. Rather it is to emphasize what amounts to a clearly perceived issue, something related to a religious teaching where they can show specific adherence demonstrating a level of commitment and readiness to sacrifice for and be identified with in a clear way.

I would put the level of such endurance almost at the level of accommodating a family member who does not eat a specific food, which actually can provide an opportunity to show love by caring for him in a special way. This seems to have been the way Albanians have treated each other, as family members who contracted some allergy by accepting, for whatever good reasons, a certain religious virus but not really making them strangers to each other.

As we said earlier, in order to ascertain the proximity to tolerance with regard to the environment in question we need to evaluate (1) the relativistic vs. the absolutist stance,

(2) the level of awareness of religious teachings, and (3) the level of allowed freedoms. We find that with a low level of conviction, we have a low level of effort to endure or show tolerance.

As I stated earlier, *some real life context* where two people or groups in interaction can exert some level of restraint or accommodation toward the other holding the opposing view or idea exists in the reality of living in close proximity in Malbardh, but religious convictions have not come up as something to be endured yet. One could say there is no serious occasion for tolerance religiously. Villagers were all around the church precincts grilling hot dogs and meat, enjoying fellowship in groups and families, old and young, presumably majority Muslims, at the occasion of the Catholic holiday, the Shen Mehil day celebration. There was no awareness of any inherent contradiction here, only apology for the meager size of the festivities compared to the previous year.

So there is a good relationship among Albanians of different religious labels around the table; but in the absence of real convictions associated with those labels, either in the form of relativistic understanding of religion or lack of awareness of specific religious teaching with their significance, this conviviality is not an expression of tolerance but simple familial harmony.

#### *4.8.4. What do the cases of conversion in Malbardh mean?*

The last aspect to look at for signs of tolerance is as we defined earlier "... the measuring of 'freedoms,' endurance of the other in (1) refraining from hindering the other unjustly to *declare* freely whatever view one chooses to hold, (2) to *propagate* his idea for the consideration of others and (3) refraining from hindering unjustly the free *conversion* of anyone to the other's idea." The fact that I met with at least three

Malbardhians, all around 30 years old, who are converts to Christianity from Islam, without any signs of ostracism is very significant.

Conversion is absolutely a litmus test of the existence and the level of tolerance in any inter-religious community because, at least on the part of the converted, we can assume some level of commitment to specific religious ideas at variance with those of one's family of origin. These bring up in the closest circle of the family the issue of belonging. But what I have heard in Malbardh in this regard has more to do with "how it will be perceived by others" outside of the family and how it would affect the continuation of the family's desired and foreseen material flourishing, rather than a strictly religious objection and enduring or objecting for religious reasons. This is the interpretation I received from the conversation with M.R., one of the converted villagers I extensively interviewed. I saw him interacting with his immediate and extended family as well as the broader community without any sign of avoidance or displeasure. I learned that his family was more concerned that he was losing time to religion, which is perceived as a worthless pursuit, more than anything else.

We will pick up the issue of conversion in Malbardh in greater detail in the last part of this study, but it should suffice to conclude here for now that in the case of conversions in Malbardh there is toleration in a small scale at the level of family. It is difficult, however, to consider this an example of inter-religious tolerance as would be the case if different 'teams' of religious believers in the village were enduring each other while they propagated their views openly yet respectfully. This just is not yet the reality in Malbardh.



#### **4.9. Conclusion on tolerance in Malbardh is harmony:**

It should be clear now that Malbardh is a wonderful case of harmony between compatriots of different religious traditions. The villagers of Malbardh manifest admirable harmony and inclusion of those with other religious labels. *Kumbarite* and different forms of respect shown to religious others on occasions of celebrations, including religious celebrations that are all-inclusive, marriages or funerals, are indicators of a closely knit community that practically functions as one community with religious demarcations of no public importance. The relativizing of the main symbol of demarcation, eating pork, shows the ease with which the villagers accept others of the different religious label.

While this reality is peaceful and harmonious, by indicating a low level of commitment to specific religious ideas and a low level of endurance for purely religious reasons, Malbardh does not fit a strict case of inter-religious tolerance but of inter-religious harmony as explained earlier, sociologically. For all practical reasons, it is better to have inter-religious harmony even without inter-religious tolerance; but the developing of religious convictions will bring the need for tolerance because intolerance is the most natural result of such developments, and this engenders the loss of whatever harmony now exists.

The hope is for developing convictions to grow in step with the posture of harmony that Malbardhian people already exemplify. The ideal development would appear in the form of Malbardhians doing the same kind of actions they are now displaying except that at that point of development those actions would be flowing from the developed religious convictions or consciously in spite of them. This integrating of their religious

reasoning in the traditions of harmonious interaction with their neighbors will make for robust inter-religious tolerance in a harmonious social context, but this process is to be learned because it is not natural. Tolerance is not a given. On the contrary, with the growth of the awareness of the different beliefs held by religious others, intolerance is naturally more likely. In other words, we need to be fostering a culture of tolerance as Furedi also implies: “tolerance is also a social/cultural accomplishment. A tolerant society is one where tolerance as a cultural orientation discourages and restrains social intolerance”(Furedi 2012, 31).

This Malbardhian harmony of good heartedness will be tested now that the realities of religious pluralism with church and mosque present locally are asserted more prominently than ever before. The dynamics of religious developments will include not only indigenous cultivation of different religious ideas but also the opportunity of transplanting easily, and without much warning, a wide variety of foreign ideas from distant lands. The ease of dissemination of intolerance today through the Internet is available everywhere including Malbardh, and this is disconcerting because: “... one of the principal ways in which evidence of religious intolerant behavior gets distributed around the globe is that of video material”(Broer et al. 2014, 78).

Therefore, there needs to be concerted effort that pluralistic wisdom, with its established criteria for a well-informed tolerance, will be added to ensure that the existing harmony of Malbardh will transition into no less than true inter-religious tolerance. Inter-religious tolerance in a harmonious social context would be the desired ideal of “teams” of religious believers of different faiths interacting respectfully in a social environment where the goals of peaceful living together, “fair play,” debate and agreement to disagree, freedom of conversion and respect for human rights are part of

the democratic culture fostered in the public square politically. Here is where the Albanian traditions of harmony between religious compatriots are helpful tools in preserving the Albanian contribution. In the last chapter, we will include more of the suggestions about utilizing such traditions on the road toward true inter-religious tolerance.

#### **4.10. Significance of Malbardhian harmony for inter-religious tolerance.**

The basis of Malbardhian harmony seems to be their common heritage. This suggests that a good, though insufficient, base of true Albanian inter-religious tolerance can be found in our unified and unique Albanian identity, based on the unique Albanian language we find connecting us that easily convinces us of a common family origin regardless of its factuality. This should make it easier to entertain the truth that all of us are family, which at another level is true for all people of all languages and races everywhere, thereby establishing the foundation of all being equal and free to live according to one's own conscience. It is in this sense that "Albanianism" is put forth as the religion of the Albanians, to set love for the fellow Albanian as prior to love for a particular religion.

My suggestion is to learn from Malbardhian harmony about how to build on our common heritage, ancestry and history, keeping the traditions of involving religious others in our lives and embracing celebrations as co-journeers through life on this earth. We need to appreciate anew the wisdom and contribution of the patriots of the Albanian renaissance with their warning against any religion assuming upon the Albanian society

a prior claim; their dictum can be rephrased as viewing religion through the lens of the nation rather than the nation through the lens of religion.

It is healthy for us to start with the common Albanian skepticism about religion and generously discuss the truth values of the different religious truth claims. Anticipating that some of us will find religious truth claims compelling to devote our whole lives to that lofty ideal, let us still in good Malbardhian fashion help everyone build a safe space to cultivate their views and to bring them in the field of public exchange for discussion in free competition with other ideas similar to political parties vying for adherents without fear of persecution.

Based on the study of the Malbardh case, I envision a few tolerance-building steps: (1) Intentionally cultivate the culture of democracy, tolerance being the most important democratic value (Saulius 2013, 49). This culture of democracy needs to be cultivated both politically and socially as a nonnegotiable good for Albanian society because it is important to remember that "... a community suitable for free individuals... is what we call civilization" (Sirico 1997, 9–10).

More specifically, (2) there is a great need for approaching the study of religion by Albanians as world-and-life-views, paying attention to their truth claims and not simply or primarily studying religions as "traditions." This is important for the development of tolerance in Albania, as it has been proven to be for the civilized world. As Paul Johnson is quoted as saying, "the pursuit of truth in freedom is the essence of civilization"(Cleveland 2003, 331).

This brings us at (3) the importance of preserving the freedom of conversion of anyone to anyone's religion or point of view without coercion or manipulation in the context of respect for human rights as enshrined in international law. While it may seem

unnecessary to say, even in talking about the culture wars in such an established democracy as the American democracy, one author writes that “the agreement that contending factions will not kill each other over their differences.... is no small accomplishment...”(Hunter 1991, 319).

## **CHAPTER V: MEASURING TOLERANCE**

**Presenting the research on the nature and meaning of Albanian inter-religious environment 27 years after communism as revealed in the case of Malbardh with help from measuring tolerance among students of education in Shkodra: “The future of tolerance.”**

### **5.1. The broader context of our study:**

Albania, where five differing religious traditions of Muslims (Sunni and Bektashi) and Christians (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) have lived peacefully side by side (Cimbalo 2013), is a refreshing case in the gloomy situation of many parts of the world suffering from inter-religious strife and violence. For a recent example of a catalogue of such widespread religiously motivated violence, one can look at just the title of a well-documented report: “The Discrimination and Persecution of Christians: The 50 Worst Countries. Draft for Comment by Consultation Delegates” (International Institute for Religious Freedom commissioned by Global Christian Forum. October 15, 2015).<sup>87</sup>

### **5.2. The considerations of probes related to the goal of this study:**

The overall goal of this study is to gauge in different ways the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions, focusing on the revealing example of Malbardh, in order to understand the nature and meaning of it. Therefore, we want to answer the main research question of this study: *What is the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as revealed in Malbardh?*

The first part of this three-pronged study is the anthropological study of the village of Malbardh describing phenomenologically, through the ethnography presented here, the dynamics of the environment of inter-religious interactions related to the well-publicized occasion of Muslims building the church in their village. But as we have mentioned already, exploring the broader context of Malbardh helps our understanding of Malbardh itself. The social context in which Malbardh exists is very important because Malbardh is a small village, and its people interact daily with the nearby city of Milot only a short walking distance away. When you realize the high school students of Malbardh walk to school in Milot every day, it makes more sense to think of Malbardh as simply a hilly neighborhood of Milot. It is, therefore, unnecessarily restrictive to neglect exploring the connections with this daily source of input and interaction for Malbardh, especially since we are interested in understanding more fully the nature and meaning of the inter-religious interaction as evidenced in Malbardh but not as truncated from its natural extended environment.<sup>88</sup>

Our study is not exhaustive nor a recording of data for a restricted geographical space as a goal in itself but a more open study of a specific social environment that includes following the influences that make the environment what it is evidenced to be at the time of our study. This is especially important to emphasize in light of our study of Malbardh as a revealing and good example of Albanian inter-religious environment.<sup>89</sup>

Recognizing the importance of the cases of conversion in Malbardh for the surfacing of the attitudes of Malbardh's inhabitants and painting a fuller picture of the inter-religious environment we seek to understand came with realizing the importance of the main city in the region, Shkodra, and its university in particular, where at least

two converts from Malbardh were converted to Christianity. One of these converts who became a teacher came to teach at the Malbardh's village school for 10 years after completing his university studies in Shkodra, thus becoming a significant participant of the inter-religious environment there. In understanding the environment of the village itself through field work (probe 1), and by exploring the environment of conversion for the two Malbardh converts and others at the University of Shkodra with a questionnaire (probe 2), we put ourselves in a better position to hear the perception of these converts about these two environments in the semi-structured interviews later (probe 3), gaining from their comparison in the context of our separate observations and survey of those same two related environments.

#### *5.2.1. Importance of the village school and its teachers:*

The social environment of Malbardh is naturally influenced by the village school where the children, ages 6 to 10, spend the best part of their day learning and socializing. By extension, the village school is also an important hub for the parents and the community in general. Under the influence of the teachers, these young children are shaped in their views of many subjects including the perspective and attitudes toward the religious others. Understanding the role of the values taught and absorbed in school, therefore, is part of the dynamics of understanding the nature of the inter-religious environment of the village. The teachers who are the embodiment of the values are even more important than the lessons they give in shaping the environment. One such teacher in Malbardh is Besnik who, coming from a Muslim family of Malbardh, became an Evangelical Christian during his studies at the University of Shkodra and for 10 years following graduation was the teacher at the Malbardh school.



### *5.2.2. The importance of the environment of teacher formation:*

Due to the importance of the school in the village, it seemed important to explore the influences in the lives of Malbardh's teachers, especially during the time of forming their convictions in the university. Most of Malbardh's young people who go to university will naturally go to Shkodra, which being the regional capital exerts influence in many different ways. While the impact of the University of Shkodra on the environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh is difficult to measure, at least with regard to the impact of the university environment on the young people of Malbardh, it is important to probe because two cases of conversions in Malbardh (the only two cases I could interview out of maybe a total of four or five) were related to studies at the University of Shkodra and one of them graduating as a teacher came back to teach in Malbardh itself.

### *5.2.3. The measuring of tolerance in the environment of the students of education in Shkodra:*

Initially interested primarily on understanding better only the environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh, I later wanted to also compare with another environment related to it, so I concluded that the environment of the university which was forming Malbardh's teachers of the next generation was important in more ways than one. First, I wanted some questions answered with a questionnaire regarding the environment of conversion of the students from Malbardh at the University of Shkodra. Even though some of Malbardh's converts who have graduated from the university are a few years removed from the measurement of tolerance at the University of Shkodra in

2016, I believe the survey of current students of the same region informs us about the role of upbringing in the holding of values that make for tolerance in their formational years at the university. Since the city of Shkodra is influential on Malbardh and especially through its training of its teachers, Besnik being one of them and already teaching in Malbardh, I wanted to answer the question of the distinctions between the environment of tolerance at the University of Shkodra with the environment they were raised in in Malbardh through an independent probe before we engage those Malbardhian students of the University of Shkodra with a semi-structured interview. How different are the students at the University of Shkodra who come from the broader region? What resulting attitudes about tolerance do these future teachers and influencers have to bring to Malbardh and other villages of Albania? Such questions also would be well served by this questionnaire at the University of Shkodra.

About the time I was working in this study, I came across an international study that had developed a questionnaire to do a survey with the students of education on measuring tolerance in their environment.<sup>90</sup> I read their rationale carefully, and to my great satisfaction I found their ideas very close to mine in many respects. Rather than reinventing the wheel, I felt privileged to become part of this international study and use their questionnaire, translated into Albanian, with students of education at the University of Shkodra in June 2016.<sup>91</sup>

If the field work in Malbardh, with interviews and focus groups, constitutes the first probe this study has undertaken in understanding the inter-religious environment in Malbardh as a good example of Albanian inter-religious harmony, the second probe, evaluating the level of tolerance among students of education of the University of Shkodra, holds promise to inform our conclusions on Malbardh itself because of the

noted connections and influences and to provide insights in shaping further needed developments for the broader Albanian inter-religious environment. It is in this later connection that this second research probe in the gauging of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions is subtitled “the future of tolerance.” Before we can appreciate the data and the evaluation of such information in relation to the overall goal of this study, we need to explain the theoretical considerations and the planning of conducting such a survey in Albania.

### **5.3. Theoretical considerations in measuring tolerance:**

The need for tolerance or buttressing existing tolerance is very important for the cohesion of our pluralistic society; hence, the measuring of tolerance is very helpful in considering intelligent ways to foster tolerance in a specific context. Theoretical considerations about the meaning of tolerance and the factors involved in obtaining tolerance are crucial in building a good measuring tool. A sustained good theoretical effort is appraised here in evaluating some aspects of one such good tool, a questionnaire developed to measure the tolerance of last year students of education. But we also can see how a certain understanding of tolerance with regard to relativism can improve this questionnaire to not filter out some tolerant people with exclusive views of truth.

Some key factors related to having a tolerant environment between individuals in a society include awareness of specific beliefs at variance with one’s own and exercise of freedom with respect in interaction. Recognizing the need to define well the important factors making for tolerance in order to look for them in a certain social environment, we need to start with a good understanding of tolerance itself and develop a working

definition that will control the work to clarify the specific components required for acquiring tolerance.

The authors of the questionnaire I evaluated for use were transparent about their goals and theoretical underpinnings of their understanding of tolerance, and it was evident that careful thought had gone into preparing this questionnaire. They start with saying: “Tolerance, therefore, is intimately connected to the affirmation of the most basic dimension of freedom – the freedom of belief and conscience” (Broer et al. 2014, 77).

In the second section of their article, we find outlined the understanding of tolerance that guides the authors in preparing the questionnaire. Starting with what tolerance is not, gleaned from several thinkers such as Furedi (Furedi 2012), Boersma (Boersma 2012), Saulius (Saulius 2013), they believe that:

“Tolerance is not a disinclination to judge or to have strong views;” “...not a superficial signifier of acceptance and affirmation of anyone and everyone;” “...not a form of detached indifference or... automatic acceptance;” “...not ‘a necessary but passive act of putting up with someone else’s view’... deemed wrong or inferior;” “...does not mean that one has to respect those lifestyles, or even regard them as morally equal to one’s own practice” (Broer et al. 2014, 83).

Positively then, the concept of freedom is put forth including “the principle of non-interference towards the way people develop and hold beliefs and opinions” (Broer et al. 2014, 84), basically affirming what I believe to be an important feature of robust tolerance, namely freedom of conversion. I especially appreciate emphasizing the necessary “context of difference(s)” saying: “[T]olerance comes into play when different individuals and groups have conflicting beliefs and/or act in unacceptable ways (morally, politically or in a religious sense)” (Broer et al. 2014, 84). This aspect will come into play in our analysis below when we discuss relativism which here, assuming differences are perceived as real and important, appears to be excluded from serving as the context for tolerance.

Respect is helpfully qualified in different ways including “regard[ing] one another as moral equals... [holding that] tolerance always also calls for judgment, evaluation and discrimination” (Broer et al. 2014, 85). Important as well is the authors’ emphasis of “a person’s values or ethical system” (Broer et al. 2014, 85), which I would broaden to include or at least imply awareness of specific beliefs important in one’s own worldview as well as in the worldview of the others toward whom tolerance is extended.

They end their survey of seven aspects of tolerance with defining tolerance as:

“...that respectful, meaningful and empathetic attitude of people or groups which in a context of differences, acknowledges and defends the right of individuals and groups of people to cherish freely certain beliefs and values while accepting that others possess the freedom and right to evaluate and judge those same beliefs and values in terms of their own value systems” (Broer et al. 2014, 86).

I could not agree more with this conclusion that exploring concepts of freedom, of convictions, of respect for people, of the importance of beliefs and practices and of evaluation of ideas with which one disagrees or finds unacceptable and that providing for a space where everyone can hold his views freely and openly, including also the need for engagement of the other in a free, meaningful and understanding way, are all valuable discussions to inform our pursuit of measuring tolerance. I also agree that tolerance can be seen as a quality of attitudes expressed in interactions between people of different persuasions, allowing for commonalities to enable living together in the same social space so that different parties progressively grow toward ever increasing cooperation for the good of all in that society. The authors of this article say it well: “The future of society and the maintenance of a peaceful *modus vivendi* in a diverse society depend to a significant extent on the tolerance of individuals and groups” (Broer et al. 2014, 86).

Attitudes as internal states of consciousness or dispositions can be described and put in a specific way to be indicated clearly in a questionnaire for outsiders to understand.

Interactions qualifying as tolerant, evidencing respect, freedom or understanding and empathy can also be defined and described in a questionnaire as evidentially recognizable in somebody's life. Differing persuasions are assumed to be inherent in identifying with differing religions or world and life views that can simply be identified as such in a questionnaire. What I found very helpful in the article by Nico Broer and his coauthors who introduced the questionnaire was the presenting of the work done to translate these categories and more into items of a questionnaire explaining their correspondence to such factors as "value of own religion," and "respect" as illustrated in the tables included in Appendix B. Valuable discussions on the inculcation of values and the role of education figure prominently in the framework of the questionnaire through p.87-88, but I am reducing the discussion here to a more general view of tolerance (Broer et al. 2014, 87–88).

In the context of this overwhelming agreement with the work reviewed here, I want to draw attention to two aspects I wish were better reflected in the questionnaire.

#### *5.3.1. Conversion as one explicit aspect missing in the questionnaire:*

Basic categories of tolerance, as we have already said in different ways, include awareness of one's own specific beliefs and bearing with or endurance of another whose beliefs are at variance or contradictory to one's own. But I also believe it should include the freedom of conversion to either of the viewpoints as a right of the individuals in the common social space they live in. My working definition for tolerance as explained earlier in this study is: *Tolerance exists between two people or groups when intentionally or knowingly one respects the other who holds and practices opposing views to the point of having both parties endure, without unjust*

*hindrance, even the free conversion of anyone to the other's point of view.* I believe similarly to the authors of this questionnaire that for tolerance to appear there needs to be some level of personal conviction, interpersonal interaction, and respected personal freedoms.<sup>92</sup> But I would like to emphasize that a robust tolerance includes refraining from hindering unjustly the free conversion of anyone to the other's idea implying positively also freedom for conversion.<sup>93</sup>

This is in agreement with the often quoted Furedi, who writes: "...tolerance can be measured in relation to the extent to which people's belief and behavior is not subject to institutional and political interference and restraint" (Furedi 2012, 35). But, this aspect of tolerance, namely the freedom for conversion, does not seem to feature clearly in the questionnaire, and I wonder if it would have helped to include some item in this regard. Not making explicit some aspect is not necessarily a problem. Positively filtering out as intolerant a tolerant person's answer, however, may be a problem; and this is the second more serious issue to discuss.

### *5.3.2. Tolerance and relativism in the questionnaire:*

I will take issue here with only one of the questionnaire items that seems to contradict one aspect of my view of tolerance, namely the incompatibility of relativism and tolerance. Analyzing the relationship of relativism and tolerance, I have come to the conclusion that we need to detect and expose the relativistic stance because it actually removes the conditions for tolerance to exist.

It bears repeating again what philosopher Jay Newman writes:

"[T]olerance, after all, does not demand that one believe that every other person's metaphysical views are as true or as reasonable or as profound as his own. Indeed ... *tolerance is possible only because we are capable of putting up with things that we do not like ... or agree with*" (Newman 1982, 61).

Again, we need to bring here the discussion we settled earlier with regard to the relativists who adjust the meaning of tolerance to make it more of a propositional attitude, which considers respecting another's religious beliefs as being of equal truthfulness to the truth claims of one's own convictions. We agreed that this would be nonsensical saying that this is so because a person could end up holding as equally true both propositions, his own and at the same time and in the same respect that of the another, even if they are obviously contradictory. We again conclude that it should be clear that a tolerant person, meaning a respectful person toward others who hold contradictory views to one's own, does not need to hold that all religions lead to one and the same truth.

Considering this understanding then, item 33 in the questionnaire indicating as respectful "I believe that all religions of life and world views in the end lead to one and the same truth" could filter as intolerant by lacking in respectfulness some tolerant but non-relativistic people (See Appendix B).<sup>94</sup>Item 33 seems to assume that following any of the religions leads to the same ultimate truth and that believing this reflects respect for the religious other. I recognize that this item could be simply one way to identify those who would not fit the intolerant category even for the wrong philosophical reasons, namely relativistic people who nevertheless are tolerant, but I would disagree that it necessarily reflects respect because it may also reflect considering tolerant those patronizing some people with irrelevant ideas and wrongly excluding from considering tolerant some people with absolutist ideas.

I would have modified this question into something like: "Even if my neighbor's religion would lead to a different ultimate truth than mine, I would respect him and his right to believe differently." I believe it is more helpful to correct question 33 to



fit better with the view of tolerance as defined by rejecting relativism, thus removing the small but still incorrect measuring with item 33 of the attitude of some tolerant people as intolerant because of their rejection of relativism. It is not a major measuring problem for the questionnaire as a whole but being one of seven items measuring respect, it is not irrelevant.

In spite of my one serious reservation explained above, for all practical purposes, the questionnaire is well suited to measure tolerance. I conducted this questionnaire with students of education in their final year of undergraduate studies at the University of Shkodra, Albania, in June 2016.

#### **5.4. Lessons from the questionnaire on tolerance in Shkodra**

Defining tolerance and measuring the different aspects contributing to it are important steps in order to help protect and strengthen tolerance in a religiously pluralistic society. My use of a thoughtfully developed questionnaire to measure the level of tolerance among students of education reveals some issues that are important to understand. We cannot be complacent on the face of the erosion or absence of those values that make for a tolerant society, but complaining is also not a solution. Using this helpful tool, we can make progress toward finding specific ways for developing tolerance in our society. Becoming part of an international study by using this questionnaire, I gathered valuable information that may be helpful in advancing toward the desired goal for tolerance in Albania.

#### *5.4.1. Understanding the tool used to measure tolerance:*

I have written above about the theoretical dimensions explored in the developing of the questionnaire I used, and I have explained there my overwhelming agreement with the philosophical underpinnings of this questionnaire, together with my reservations. Here I want to give some background for evaluating the findings I discuss later.

The questionnaire included 50 questions and was well thought through, reflecting a broad understanding not only of issues related to tolerance but also sociological and psychological issues. In addition it showed expertise in organizing the questions (Broer et al. 2014, 88–89) by building in the system controls that would help in revealing the reliability of answers as well as other valuable contrasts and comparisons. I am very grateful to Nico Broer who made available to me several charts of his analysis and comparisons with the findings reflected here, though of course he is not responsible for my conclusions and interpretations.

The reasons for focusing on students in developing this questionnaire are explained well in the journal article mentioned (Broer et al. 2014, 87). This focus was also welcomed by me since I am concerned about the future of tolerance in Albania being influenced in a significant way by this generation of teachers graduating now from the university. I find it also very insightful what Broer et al. say: “Prospective teachers are not only in the process of developing their own individual value systems, but, in a sense, they also represent the degree to which the respective social groups to which they belong can be considered religiously tolerant or not” (Broer et al. 2014, 87). This means that we learn more from the questionnaire than just what these current students believe; namely, we also learn about the broader culture in which they function. Therefore, it seems justifiable to apply some findings of this questionnaire to the situation in the

general population of Albania and especially the population of Malbardh and its surrounding region that is most representative at the University of Shkodra.

### **5.5. Reflections and observations on the questionnaire results:**

#### *5.5.1. Looking at the whole*

One-hundred-thirty-nine respondents filled the questionnaire fully. Some 30 others did so only partially and are not, therefore, considered in this analysis. The questionnaire had 50 questions or items (Broer et al. 2014, 94–95) to be indicated as correctly reflecting one's stance on a Likert scale from one to five (see Appendix B). The results of this questionnaire, with a total mean of 3.61 out of a maximum of five, reveal a generally good picture about the tolerant attitude of Albanian students who were made up of 46% Christians and 51% Muslims. The middle of a five-point Likert scale being 3.00 means that the Albanian respondents reflect a rather high score in indicating the level of tolerance with a total mean of 3.61.

The validity of these Albanian responses with regard to the internal consistency test of Cronbach's alpha coefficient being 0.8 is very good, considering the questionnaire as a whole (Broer et al. 2014, 90). Methodologists usually consider coefficients lower than 0.5 as unacceptable (Goforth n.d.). Therefore, we can be confident about the findings of the questionnaire as a whole. While the questionnaire is reliable as a whole, we notice the coefficient of internal consistency to be low in three of the six factors analyzed comprising only 11 questions (see table 2 in Appendix B). We will discuss this later on as we look at the specific categories of the questions and maybe learn indirectly about the possible meaning of this low coefficient in a specific 20% of the questionnaire.

Two questions, items 2 and 3 in the questionnaire,<sup>95</sup> indicate, respectively, living strictly according to the rules of one's belief system and being strongly aware of one's beliefs when making important decisions. The mean score for the whole group on these two statements is 3.41. Using this mean as a standard, we divide this group of Albanian students into the subgroups of respondents with a mean score above 3.41 labeled as "strict," and those with a mean score lower than 3.41 labeled as "liberal."

It is very interesting that we had almost an equal number of strict and liberal respondents with almost equal distribution between Christians and Muslims represented in each group. This suggests that there is no noticeable difference in the force of commitment to their respective religions between Christians and Muslims in general. There are as many Christians that are strict as there are Muslims in the same category. This may indicate a natural tendency of people for other reasons than their religion making them stricter or less strict in following their system of belief.

More interesting is the observation that those respondents in the strict category obtain a significantly higher mean score in general compared to the liberal respondents (see table 2 in Appendix B). It could be said then that the strict Albanians raise the level of tolerance for the whole group. Item 10 of the questionnaire: "All people should be able to get along with one another, regardless of which norms and values are important to them" (Broer et al. 2014, 94) received by the whole group the highest mean score of 4.46 from all of the 50 questions of the questionnaire. I consider item 10 as the most important item of the questionnaire in capturing the tolerant attitude. The mean was higher for the strict Albanians with a 4.61 mean score, while those who brought this mean down were the liberal Albanians, with a mean score of 4.31. I think it is appropriate to inject here my view that this score confirms the contention that the

relativists or liberals are not necessarily more tolerant, and those who are strict to their non-relativistic system can be just as or even more tolerant than their liberal counterparts.

#### *5.5.2. looking at the specific categories*

The factor analysis<sup>96</sup> is an important indicator of the specific areas related significantly to measuring tolerance, and there are interesting finds with regard to Albanians here (see table 1 in Appendix B). These categories or factors comprise only 28 questions from the 50 questions in total, but they are grouped to indicate some attitudes with specific important contribution to tolerance. When analyzing the results on just the six factors, the Albanian mean score of 3.53 is still “rather high,” as one analyst of the questionnaire put it to me. Even noticing the two other groups of students from two other countries in Europe comparably having a higher mean score on the same measurements (respectively 3.89 for Netherlands and 3.57 for Estonia and Slovakia) that is still a good result.<sup>97</sup> So, in general, we can say Albanians reflected in this questionnaire indicate by their answers a satisfactory level of tolerance.

But some concerns are raised for me as we look more carefully at the results of the factor analysis (see table 2 in Appendix B). One issue is the reliability of the answers for three of the six subscale areas or factors because in those three factors the Cronbach’s alpha is lower than 0.6 which is below the 0.7 mark “conventionally taken as indicative of internal consistency” say Broer et al.(Broer et al. 2014, 90). Even though only those below 0.5 are “usually” considered unacceptable according to Chelsea Goforth of the University of Virginia (Goforth n.d.), I am not able to comment here on the issue of the dimensionality that would determine the relevance of this particular threshold for our

questionnaire. Nevertheless, this lower threshold would seem to disqualify only one of the three areas with low Cronbach's alpha scores, namely, the "sensibility to differences" factor comprising only four questions; but I still think we can learn something from this as I will elaborate here shortly. While my first thought and determination is to look into improving some of these questions in the low reliability categories to avoid any misunderstanding, I shall now probe the possibility of real confusion and inconsistency in the minds of the respondents regarding the respective factor areas and what it may mean.

The three areas or factors which clearly indicate a coherent response by the Albanian students are on "respect," "empathy," and "sense of freedom," while the "value of own religion," "sensibility to differences," and "origins of own values" are less reliable, thus indicating more confused answers. If this comparison of the different areas or factors indicates that these Albanian students are more intuitively clear in what respecting people involves, whatever ideas and religions they say they belong to, then it also indicates that they are more familiar with practice of respect for religious others and ability to empathize with others, desiring for them the freedoms they want for themselves.

The mean score being lower in the three factors reflecting "value of own religion," "sensibility to differences," and "origins of own values," accompanied by the confusion in their answers on these issues, as implied by the Cronbach alpha numbers, suggests to me that I may be right in some of my own generalization about Albanians, much like some others have said as well (Kulla 2015, 121). Namely, I believe Albanians, being intelligent as anyone else, culturally are generally less motivated by abstract ideas and less conversant with them and are shaped more by the dynamics of living together in a society of mixed religions in close proximity. I would not, therefore, be surprised that even these Albanian students appear generally less theoretical about religion and more

willing to just participate in the social aspects of religion. The “valuing own religion” category then would be one such area where Albanians are not very theoretical about, or learned in, as to be clear in their answering about “worldview,” “adhering to principles,” and “arrive at the truth via worldview.” These considerations would be extrapolations from what the students’ possible confusion in this aspect of the answers might mean. I believe that this possible confusion is not simply removed with improved questions. Therefore, my provisional conclusion is, and it seems to be borne out by the questionnaire as a whole, that Albanians want a peaceful coexistence among people of different religions, even if they may not be very clear about their own religion and the ideas involved.

With regard to understanding the other factor area reflecting confusion in the answers given, namely, “source of values,” I would venture to suggest a few other ideas. A lot more goes into the formational environment of the students than the two sources of values indicated in the questionnaire – designated school curriculum and family values. I presume the writers of the questionnaire must be well aware of this, and I imagine the different considerations for items of a workable questionnaire would have restricted them to just these. Something of the nature of this broader source of influence in forming values is mentioned in the article presenting the original questionnaire where the attitude of the teacher is discussed (Broer et al. 2014, 87). But factoring the media and politics, in addition to the influence of friends, into the matrix of the environment influencing the values of the members of the society is important to keep in view and maybe reflected in a future version of the questionnaire. I would suspect that the influence of these other sources would better explain what might seem contradictory in the responses we have gathered at this point from Albanians. This again could be an

indication of an area of theoretical practice where Albanians are less attentive to reflect upon and be clear about.

The factor of “sensibility to differences” is the area which reflects the lowest Cronbach’s alpha number of 0.38 and the lowest mean score of 2.76. What I believe to be the case in Albania, namely, a relative neglect of knowing the religious ideas of others but not as the result of disengaging from relationships with these same people, can explain somewhat these scores. The questions comprising the area of this factor seem to be only cast negatively with expressions like “I do not care,” seeking reactions to an isolationist posture rather than an engaging posture. Not being interested about religious ideas of the other person, considering them irrelevant, in no way reflects for the Albanian mind not caring about what that person thinks regarding other issues of practical relevance. The casting of the questions seems to imply that what indicates “sensibility to differences” is engaging the ideas of others. But, to the contrary, it is possible to engage people and be sensitive to their differences on issues of practical concerns of living together without suspecting religious ideas to make any difference in this matter. Hence, they would not understand this lack of interest in religious ideas as a function of “I do not care,” but more as irrelevant. So scoring low in reliability here may indicate such confusion as mentioned, and scoring lower in the mean may indicate the relative unimportance of the understanding of ideas for Albanians in their tolerant posture toward religious others.

There should be a positive way to gauge this posture with “sensibility to differences.” I propose “from my personal engagements with religious others in my circle of friends and acquaintances I find the stereotypes of religious people as not helpful,” or “stereotypes of religious people are always challenged by my acquaintances



with individual cases of those religions.” Clarifying some questions related to this factor, namely, “sensibility to differences,” which seems to sound more negative than intended, would also help us understand if this is truly an area of concern for us to address with Albanians.

So I can imagine some tolerant people seeming to be intolerant, or without “sensibility to differences,” in their answering the questions of this category correctly from their perspective; yet by this measure we do capture an issue of concern for robust tolerance in its indication of a deficiency about the awareness of the ideas of others.

#### **5.6. Conclusions on the second probe:**

The nature and meaning of the environment of the inter-religious interactions in the University of Shkodra among the students of education based on the survey we did appears to be one that can be called tolerant. The reasons given include the presence of sufficient level of awareness, knowledge and intention to live with others of different persuasions; but in those areas of the questionnaire where results are most doubtful it is possible that it is reflected also a tendency to not evaluate or analyze the religious ideas or views of others and rather be accepting in principle or assuming a similar view of life. Hence, further research is needed to ascertain this aspect of knowledge of the content of the views of religious others to bring the level of tolerance, otherwise confirmed, to a higher level.

The contribution of this second probe for our study is manifold.(1) It gives us a picture of the reality of tolerance in a related Albanian environment intimately connected to our area of focus in Malbardh; (2) being a more homogeneously educated

environment, we find a higher level of development toward tolerance at the University of Shkodra; (3) it confirms our findings in Malbardh with regard to the hopeful direction of inter-religious harmony toward tolerance and confirms our concerns with lack of understanding of the specifics of religious teachings as motivation; and (4) it provides a systematic way of gauging the level of tolerance in a community and reveals areas of concern for further development.

While the questionnaire focused on educational students, it can be adopted easily for other audiences. Such broader audiences as the community of a village or a neighborhood could be engaged in a similar way. Therefore, adjusting the tool accordingly is a next step.

Once we ascertain the areas of concern for Albanians, one of which seems to be “value of own religion,” we can suggest ways to help improve the situation by paying attention to the curriculum, in the case of the educational institutions, or creating an action plan for foreseeable challenges in our communities. Such plans should envision constructive contexts in which further information and dialogue is facilitated to achieve the desired result of preserving tolerance in the face of the growing awareness of our own religion and the religion of others. We will develop some of these ideas in the last chapter with the suggestions and recommendations. Further measurements can then be conducted to validate further developments.

## **CHAPTER VI: THE BATTLEGROUND OF TOLERANCE**

**Presenting the research on the nature and meaning of Albanian inter-religious environment 27 years after communism as revealed in the case of Malbardh: Exploring the edges of conversion stories as “The battleground of tolerance.”**

### **6.1. The third probe: Interviews with converts**

We have arrived at an exciting point in our study after exploring with two independent probes the environment of the village of Malbardh and the related environment of the University of Shkodra which is the environment that reflects the maturing of the Malbardhian environment and the shaping of the influence coming back to Malbardh in the form of its educated leadership and its teachers of the young generation.

Now, with the advantage of knowing by participant observation and focus group interviewing as well as measuring through a questionnaire these two related environments, we can interview the converts of Malbardh whose lives were formed and transformed in these two environments, and learn from these insiders the perceived nature and meaning of such environment as it relates to the people of these environments interacting with them as religious others to gauge the proximity to harmony and tolerance.

#### *6.1.1. The privilege of exploring conversions*

Religious conversions are an interesting phenomena in the world's literature and especially in the Western world where *The Confessions* of Augustine features

prominently being “probably the greatest of his very numerous writings, and certainly the one best loved and most widely read during the more than sixteen centuries that have passed since that day” (Rotelle 2001, 7). Conversions, therefore, are rich mines of great enlightenment and information as they take us on a privileged journey through personal lives of precious individuals. It is with such gratitude and respect for these individuals who lent me an opening into their lives through these interviews that I start our discussion and dissection of the transcribed interviews of 21 individuals reflected in this writing.

## **6.2. Conversions and the truth of tolerance:**

We are interested in conversion here because of the relationship of conversion and tolerance. This relationship of conversion and tolerance, or the environment of inter-religious interactions, is more complicated than it may seem. There are different ways of thinking about tolerance, and saying that “all religions are equal” meaning they are “all equally true” would be nonsense if we hold to a “correspondence view of truth”<sup>98</sup> when we know religions contradict each other on important matters. Such prior theoretical presuppositions are important to consider for many reasons; and more specifically to our concern with inter-religious tolerance, it is important to recognize the consequences of philosophical presuppositions. We should be able to agree that all religions are to be treated at face value as equals; some would like to say as “equally true” in the sense of having equal right to be expressed freely in the marketplace of ideas, but religions should not be judged as equally true with regard to their content or

truth claims, which is a matter of philosophical and theological discussions to continue until the end of time.

#### *6.2.1. Conversion and the truth of tolerance in Albania; the working definition:*

Exploring the environment of inter-religious interactions in this study, to find its nature and meaning, is done with many presuppositions in mind. Throughout this study, especially in connection with the survey done with the students of the University of Shkodra, but also when we analyzed the environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh related to the building of the Catholic church in this predominantly Muslim village, we have sought to clarify such theoretical perspectives and ideas as influence our research. We have also given reasons why the element of conversion is crucial in defining as tolerant a certain inter-religious environment of interactions. The working definition we have operated with in this study is: *Tolerance exists between two people or groups when intentionally or knowingly one respects the other who holds and practices opposing views to the point of having both parties endure, without unjust hindrance, even the free conversion of anyone to the other's point of view.* It should be clear that not accepting the freedom of the individual to convert to another point of view without hindering or interfering with such free exercise of one's right to believe according to one's choosing cannot be qualified as a tolerant stance.

#### *6.2.2. Importance of conversion cases for positive proof of tolerance:*

The cases of conversion are positive evidence in revealing the attitudes present and thus enabling us to positively identify the quality of the inter-religious environment if it is tolerant or not. There are other indicators of a tolerant environment at the absence of

cases of conversion, but one cannot neglect conversions, if they are present, in the search of understanding the makeup of the inter-religious dynamics of an environment. Therefore, analyzing what the conversions bring in the understanding of the environment of Malbardh and its related centers of interaction and influence like Milot and Shkodra is of great importance to ascertain the nature of such an environment of inter-religious interactions.

Conversion is a complex phenomenon studied in different ways from different disciplines including theology, psychology, sociology and anthropology. A respected expert on the study of conversion, Lewis R. Rambo, writes in the early years of the turn of this century:

“The study of conversion has expanded dramatically in the last two decades [80s and 90s]. Once the almost exclusive preserve of psychologists and evangelicals, conversion is now being examined by anthropologists (Harding 1987; Hefner 1993; Jules-Rosette 1975, 1976), historians (Cusack 1998; Kaplan 1996; MacMullen 1984; Maldoon 1997), literary scholars (Viswanathan 1998), sociologists (Montgomery 1991, 1996, 1999, 2001; Richardson 1978; Robertson 1978; Yang 1999), and theologians from many religious traditions” (Buckser and Glazier 2003, 211).

The two decades since this quick survey have seen even more growth in the literature of conversion and have emphasized its importance for study.

While a study of the phenomenon of conversion *per se* is not the focus of this particular study at hand, we want to explore the different aspects of conversion with an eye to the environment of conversion in Albania as revealed in the case of Malbardh. This is why we consider this more as exploring the edges of the stories of conversion. In order to better understand how we explored the experiences of converts in our study, it is important to look at what informed the shaping of the guide with questions for the interview (See Appendix C).

### **6.3. A theoretical framework for studying conversion: The “stage model”**

In preparing to interview different converts to inform my study on the environment of conversion in Albania as revealed in Malbardh, I read broadly and consulted several diverse studies (Snow and Machalek 1984; Hefner 1993; Buckser and Glazier 2003; Speelman 2006; Kirmizialtin 2007; Rasanayagam 2011; Shanneik 2011; Chua 2012; Skinner 2013; Tramontana 2013; Das 2013). It was rewarding to learn from those who have experience in exploring conversion scientifically. Equally, I am not a stranger to conversion since I have experienced it myself and have been involved with groups and organizations that are also very interested in conversion for theological reasons.

The most helpful from my readings on conversion has been the book *Understanding Religious Conversion* by Lewis R. Rambo because it gave shape to my many questions about the dimensions of conversion (Rambo 1993). His “stage model” provides a very good framework for exploring conversion in a way that gives due consideration to the multiplicity of factors that go into that complex process.<sup>99</sup>

#### *6.3.1. Utilizing the “stage model”:*

I find Rambo’s “stage model” more important for the structuring of our research into conversion experiences (Rambo 1993, 16–18). The seven stages, helpfully seen with flexibility as “a series of elements [or period during that process of change] that are interactive and cumulative over time,” include (1) context, (2) crisis, (3) quest, (4) encounter, (5) interaction, (6) commitment, and (7) consequences. I was most intrigued by exploring the dimensions of context as the organizing factor of the whole framework

but one can detect these helpful words as “pegs” in my framing of the interview guide including question 7.

#### **6.4. Context, type and motifs of conversion:**

The first aspect to keep in mind when approaching the study of conversion is awareness of context; historical, cultural, social and personal. I have sought to include such questions in the first part of my interview guide that would surface such issues related to context in these categories (See Appendix C for questions 1-3 in the “Interview Guide”).

##### *6.4.1. Attention to the type of conversion:*

Another category to consider was the conversion “type” (Rambo 1993, 12–14). There are five types: (1) apostasy, (2) intensification, (3) affiliation, (4) institutional transition, and (5) tradition transition. This is an effort to describe the phenomenon of conversion in relation to the existing institutional structures of religion in the environment.<sup>100</sup>

Another way of describing the conversion type is to say we are discussing here conversion in relation to perceptions of distance from certain reference points that are important primarily in the culture because of the perceived distance from recognized institutionalized religious entities. This does not mean that different groups would accept as conversion what another considers as such, and in this context I agree that “conversion is what a faith group says it is” (Rambo 1993, xiv). But this definition is not satisfactory for all, and we have to agree that it is more along the lines of the last type, tradition transition type, that conversion is the most obviously recognized as such and, therefore,



the more controversial and the best test for the existence of tolerant inter-religious attitudes in the environment where it happens. This is where we will focus shortly.

#### *6.4.2. Considering the “tradition transition” as the ideal type for our interview:*

Considering what kinds of conversion cases to analyze among the different types categorized by Rambo such as “apostasy,” “intensification,” “affiliation,” “institutional transition,” or “tradition transition,” the more relevant is the last (Rambo 1993, 12–16). While technically I would agree with Rambo that “conversion is what a faith group says it is” (Rambo 1993, xiv), the “tradition transition” type is what is normally understood in Albania as constituting conversion; the other types, which would fall generally within the original religious tradition of the convert, may be considered not as relevant to our discussion of tolerance. It seems wrong to assume that any of the types of conversion mentioned above is not cause for expecting strong reactions by those in the circle of the convert, but of all the types we must agree that “tradition transition” is the most radical and affects most areas of life and relationships that would be the most likely to arouse the greatest range and intensity of reactions, and, thereby, provides the best test for the existence of tolerance in the environment where this conversion happens.

While it may be worthwhile to consider different types of conversion cases, in view of our goal to understand the environment of tolerance, we must agree that the best cases to study would be those of the “tradition transition.”<sup>101</sup> For if “tradition transition” is tolerated, the others we can assume will be less controversial.<sup>102</sup>

#### *6.4.3. Awareness of the conversion motifs:*

The other dimension explored by Rambo is the “conversion motifs” (Rambo 1993, 14–16), and I will use those helpful categorizations of the substantial qualities of the

form and structure of conversion in analyzing the experiences of the individuals I interviewed. Here I will only mention that there are six motifs: (1) intellectual, (2) mystical, (3) experimental, (4) affectional, (5) revivalist, and (6) coercive. Since our main interest is not primarily in understanding the nature of religious conversion as such but more what the experience of those converted tells us about the environment of conversion, we will not pay too much attention to this aspect. Nevertheless, in the interview guide I prepared, one can detect such categories behind probing questions I have grouped under question four as well as questions five and six. I wanted the individuals to reflect freely about their conversion experience so we could then indirectly learn of the influences more relevant to our research question.

#### **6.5. The non-probability and chain referral sampling of candidates for interview:**

In selecting the candidates to interview, recognizing that "... cultural data require experts" (Bernard 2006, 146), I was guided by the two previous probes I had already undertaken –exploring the environment of inter-religious interaction in the village of Malbardh and among the students of education in the University of Shkodra nearby. One has to agree with professor H. Russell Bernard of Florida when he writes in his very informative book on methods of research in anthropology: "Really in-depth research requires informed informants, not just responsive respondents – that is, people whom you choose on purpose, not randomly" (Bernard 2006, 187). The best informants for me would be those converts who were from the village of Malbardh and who studied at the University of Shkodra.

By connecting with one convert from the village of Malbardh, Marenglen, I was able to expand the network of the people to four more good candidates (Besnik, Flamur, Rivelino and Nea) for the in-depth interview of converts related more directly to the environment of Malbardh. Through their network at the University of Shkodra, I then connected with the other converts from the area.

## **6.6. General observations about the sample of the conversion stories**

### *6.6.1. Number and makeup of the sample*

Of the 21 individuals interviewed, we have almost equal numbers of males and females, respectively 11 and 10.<sup>103</sup> We also have a similar number of people from the more immediate area of our research, Malbardh/Milot and its Kurbin region where we could include Lac, Mamurras, or even Thumane, and further afield in the Shkodra region, respectively nine and 12. In our chart it is reflected only Malbardh/Milot and the rest are combined as “other” without distinction. With regard to the converts to Evangelical Christianity from either Catholic or Muslim tradition, there was a bit more of a difference, respectively 13 from Catholic tradition and eight from Muslim. With regard to the age of these converts, four individuals are in their early 30s. The remaining 17 are younger with two of the youngest born in 1997. Thus, making the average age to be 24 years old.<sup>104</sup>

Having converts to interview from the immediate area of focus, the small village of Malbardh, proportionally a significant number (two) since this number of conversions is very small (four), would have been sufficient for our study. Our advantage is that by extending our reach to look around at other cases of conversion in this immediate area,

Milot being almost contiguous with Malbardh, we gain a broader picture of the context to compare what we find in Malbardh with what we find more generally in the broader area. There is no appreciable difference between the converts of Malbardh and those from the nearby areas.<sup>105</sup> It became clear early that more cases would not add more insights so we kept the limit of interviews at 21.

*6.6.2. Why the preponderance of conversion cases of one kind is not problematic:*

The reality seems to be that cases of “tradition transition” conversions from the Christian faith to Islamic faith are nonexistent or very rare indeed as my contacts in the region inform me, but this is not a problem to our effort of understanding the reality of inter-religious interaction with regard to conversion in this same environment.<sup>106</sup>

In regard to the reactions among people of different traditions, it does not matter that much what the direction of “tradition transition” is exemplified.<sup>107</sup> Since almost all of the cases involve individuals leaving either Islam or Catholic traditions for another tradition, we should be able to observe the reactions from individuals and groups of each community dealing with the same kind of issue they would have dealt with if the direction of conversion was in any other direction.<sup>108</sup>

I doubt that many Albanians are thinking about calculations of which group is gaining and which group is losing members with concern for a detrimental shift, but theoretically, it seems such social concern should be of a milder intensity when conversions are happening toward Evangelical faith than if it were happening at the same rate toward either of the other two religious traditions in the region.<sup>109</sup>

### **6.7. Theologically informed phenomenology needed:**

Analyzing the type of conversion in these cases, we need to emphasize that it should not be considered as if these people from Muslim background left the religion of Islam for another to constitute “apostasy” or defection, as if it was a repudiation of previous religious belief. Rather, it appears as if they left the religion of their family to embrace a different religion of their own. This would take us into definitions of conversion informed by theological considerations, but it is important to distinguish between “apostasy” and “tradition transition” with respect to belief. To what level does knowledge and belief of religion of origin need to be in order for the transition from it to be considered “defection,” and to what level need the understanding of the new religion be to be considered a “tradition transition?” The issue of awareness of religion of the family is important for other aspects of our study especially when we consider the response of the parents in the context of such awareness. While we need to gather the perceptions of the converts about such reality of awareness and knowledge of their religion of origin, here we simply want to place the focus being on the arriving of the convert and not on the departing side of the conversion when we define the kind of conversion we are looking at. In all of the cases, there was no sense on the part of the converts that they had abandoned something as much as arriving at a better place that they were eager to have their friends and family join.<sup>110</sup>

#### *6.7.1. Theological and phenomenological considerations:*

When we discuss the religious dimension here, I will be careful to distinguish the sociological label of “Muslim” and “Catholic” as an identifier of the religious person as distinct from the theological requirements to properly call someone Muslim or Catholic or Evangelical. We are following the perceptions of those we want to understand so we refer to Muslims and Catholics here from a sociological and phenomenological point of view. Therefore, in this study we mostly are dealing with sociological identifiers and descriptive language of what is perceived. I would have to alert the reader when I would like to point to the theological dimension at some juncture in order to understand some important aspect because as Rambo also writes: “If we are to be phenomenologically true to the experiences and the phenomena of conversion, we must take the religious sphere seriously” (Rambo 1993, 11).

#### *6.7.2. Sticking with descriptive but informed phenomenology:*

From the perspective of these Malbardi people who became Evangelical, they came to faith in God through a personal relationship with Christ for the first time, as they now understand faith from an Evangelical perspective. So why do we then call this a “tradition transition” type of conversion? Are we not adopting a distinct view of the theological level of understanding required for transitioning from one tradition to another? No, we are not trying to reflect here any particular theological judgment because we seek to describe phenomenologically the perceptions of both the converts and those in their environment. “Tradition transition” here means simply personal identification of someone with a recognized religious tradition reflecting, possibly, the understanding of the tradition itself in their form of such identification with it. Thus, we

are simply describing phenomenologically that they have transitioned from a different “tradition” in that their family tradition was different from the one they now claim to belong to.

*6.7.3. Conversion stories will enhance the understanding of the related environments:*

The interviews then are undertaken with primarily converted university students who, through their experience and perspective as insiders of the University of Shkodra environment, will help clarify further the understanding we gained through the survey we took there measuring tolerance. The importance of the University of Shkodra for the whole area where Malbardh is a part cannot be emphasized enough in reflecting and shaping the environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh as well. Such influence is connected with being the main regional city from where others get their cues in almost everything, and with regard to its university, Shkodra’s influence is much more specific in shaping hearts and minds of those who will lead different aspects of life in Malbardh and the region. It is interesting to note the high rate of conversions of people from Malbardh/Milot, four out of five, happening in close relation to the University of Shkodra or its students.<sup>111</sup>

The converted students interviewed are from areas similar to Malbardh in the same general region. Comparing them with the interviews of the converted students of Malbardh and Milot would reveal any noticeable difference or would confirm our view of general similarity of conclusions from interviews with our previous conclusions from both environments, the village and the university. The valuable perspective of converts on the nature of the inter-religious interaction in their immediate environment of

conversion will enrich our understanding of the broader environment we are studying, being related closely in varying ways both in being specifically from the village of Malbardh and being from outside of Malbardh, either highlighting any difference or emphasizing the common features.

## **6.8. Probing through the semi-structured interview format:**

### *6.8.1. The value of the semi-structured interview:*

This kind of interviewing, a semi structured interview, which allows the subject to reminisce freely in a conversational style, is best fit to explore areas and instances that are unique to some people; but because of the preparation to cover the previously mapped territory of conversion experience, we feel confident we have gathered what is needed to have a good view of the environment from their perspective.

### *6.8.2. The ultimate focus of our interviewing:*

Keeping again in mind that our overall goal in this study is understanding the environment of inter-religious interactions, the interviews give us an opportunity to look at this environment through the eyes of the people who are best positioned as they know firsthand how this environment can affect those who cross the border of one religion for another. We have seen the importance of conversion itself as evidence of the obtaining of tolerance in a given environment. Now it is important to see how the converted people see from the inside the reality of tolerance as applied to them personally.<sup>112</sup>



#### 6.8.3. *Building the interview format:*

Formulating questions for the interview, I was influenced by the categories found in Rambo's *Understanding Conversion*. The aspects of conversion analyzed in Rambo's book alerted me to different areas to explore with my questions. In this connection, it was important in the interview to notice the impact of family background in the experience of conversion. Other elements of context such as aspirations or ideas of the good life the converts come with at their encounter with the new faith are also important to note.

The formatting of the interview included three main parts: (1) exploring the family and personal background (questions 1-3), (2) exploring the specifics of the conversion journey (questions 4-6 and the accompanying probing ideas) and (3) gathering information about the aftermath of their conversion, including those with regard to interactions with their original background of family and friends now that they were converted into a new religion usually accompanied with a new community (questions 7-10). I also included direct questions at this point regarding their opinion about inter-religious tolerance in their environment. Yet, though interested in their opinions, the most valuable part remains their personal experience in their particular environment (see interview guide for the details).

#### 6.8.4. *Projecting the methodological path of utilizing the interviews:*

Methodologically, we have set out first to observe as objectively as possible so to allow the perspective of the converts to be clear. *Recording* their words and presenting here that experience was the first part. This was primarily the work done in preparing, conducting and transcribing the surveys (see Appendix C).<sup>113</sup>

With this writing we started the second phase, *description*. We sought to have “thick description” as rich, complex and complete as is possible without becoming redundant and unreadable (Geertz 1973). Using the “stage model” developed by Rambo, we have structured this description here along the lines of the suggested stages with highlighting some contrasts and high points in the stories of conversion observed.<sup>114</sup>

With the next step, *understanding*, which Rambo defines as “grasping the worldview, experience, and cognitive systems of the people we are studying” (Rambo 1993, 19), I was careful to ask follow up questions and further explore certain experiences with them. This is obvious in the transcribed interviews and has continued with other unrecorded conversations as I have been able to engage with different individuals beyond the planned sessions of study.

We eventually come to the step of *interpretation*, and this is the part where I wear the hat of the anthropologist who assumes that the other scholars and outsiders of this environment I am studying need help to see what I have seen and understood. This is why at specific points I interject such questions as “What does Besnik [the convert] mean here by “understood”? Is it religious understanding that he considers missing here? If it is religious understanding that is missing, is it his understanding of his own religion to which he is considered to belong to or is it simply the new faith he does not understand?” These are some of the interpretative questions to answer for understanding the situation in Malbardh through our interviews. What the believer chose to explain in theological terms, it is now imperative to be explained from within the categories of scholarly discourse that is accessible to those in the field of sociological studies.

With our interpretation of the situation we have observed and understood, we still wish to not assume superiority to the interpretation of the insiders of the

environment. We simply want to assume the role of the translator to include a particular audience that we want to be engaged in within this discussion. In the end, we strive to offer an *explanation* of the phenomenon and tentatively suggest further steps foreseen as desirable or needed in the future.

#### **6.9. The structuring of the narrative of the interviews: Presenting the findings.**

The way their stories are told here is covering the basic flow of the interview guide, based on the “stage model” mentioned above, thus starting with their background, noticing the similarities or differences of any relevance; next coming to their actual story of conversion, noting the “motifs” (Lofland and Skonovd 1981) of each conversion and the influences of the environment and people they encountered; and thirdly, concluding with their perceptions of the reactions of the people around them at their conversion to formulate a description of the environment of conversion they experienced which would inform us about the Malbardh environment of inter-religious interactions.

This narrative, seeking to be as complete as possible, will include primarily the converts from Malbardh and Milot, a tight group of five, interrelated as friends who mutually influenced each other in their process of conversion. This constitutes the primary group to understand Malbardh as an exemplary Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions giving us enough insight to the surrounding area to compare and contrast and finally generalize our findings.

The other category of interviews brings together the converts from outside of the Malbardh/Milot area and is brought in only when there is any relevant reason for comparison with that primary environment of our analysis.<sup>115</sup> The insights from this

group of interviews should help shed more light both into the discussion about the environment in Malbardh due to the similarities or differences we observe in the originating background of the converts from the University of Shkodra and into the discussion of the environment of tolerance at the university itself.

In the end, we should be able to integrate our conclusions from the interviews into a coherent picture of the nature and meaning of the environment of conversion in Albania as evidenced in Malbardh and through the lives of converts from Malbardh, including the surrounding area with the University of Shkodra as the influential center.

#### **6.10. The story of Malbardhian conversions described through the stages of conversion:**

In order to organize the experiences of the converts interviewed, I find it helpful to use the categories suggested by Rambo which include (1) personal context, (2) crisis, (3) quest, (4) encounter, (5) interaction, (6) commitment and (7) consequences (Rambo 1993, 16–17). Since these categories also informed my interview guide questions, it is relatively easy to notice the parallels in the stories of the converts I interviewed; and naturally, since the interview was only semi-structured, the way each convert answered my questions and probing took the conversation in different places exploring different issues.<sup>116</sup>

In this section of our study we will focus on delineating the aspects of the conversion of our interviewed converts to identify patterns, processes and elements that were important in the process of the religious change. In seeking to be comprehensive but not exhaustive, we will utilize the “stage model” to organize our data.

## **6.11. The context of conversion:**

### *6.11.1. The macrocontext of the conversions in Malbardh/Milot:*

They are five men, age 23 to 35 years old and one younger female from Milot (see Interview Nr.19), exactly the generation of “democracy” as we have daubed them here. One of them even referred to the year of his birth as the year Sali Berisha, the first non-Communist president, came to Lac, the area close by (Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.1). This was a time of great change in the social environment. Many jobs became obsolete; and many Albanians, leaving families behind, left the country to find jobs in Greece and other European countries, thereby opening up many changes in the personal and societal level with many incommensurate consequences. Some of those consequences for families and children can be seen in the stories of our converts (Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.2,3; Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p.6).

Generally speaking, this was a time of great freedom of religious worship of any kind, a wide openness to the ideas from outside, and an eagerness to engage those ideas. It was the time when the Catholic church and other religious bodies in Albania started restructuring their institutions. This was felt in Malbardh through the greater work in Milot as well. For both of the believers from Malbardh, the showing of the JESUS Film by a group of Evangelicals in their village was important in their journey to faith.<sup>117</sup>

As Rambo aptly put it: “Context, ... is the dynamic force field in which conversion takes place” (Rambo 1993, 165). Questions we asked the converts in this regard were related to their family background, their personal upbringing, and their perceptions of the social environment where they grew up. Noting that the more important immediate context of their conversion was the University of Shkodra, we should keep in mind that

we will find elements of that context as important later on as we move to other stages of their conversion. While we will strive to collect insights relevant to each stage in the order we present the stages here, the reality of conversion is such that the stages are not necessarily in consecutive order, and we will need to go back and forth sometimes repeating information that is important in more than one stage.

#### *6.11.2. The immediate context of the converts of Malbardh and Milot:*

The two converts from Malbardh, Marenglen and Besnik, as well as the three converts from the close by Milot area interviewed (Flamur, Rivelino and Nea), are from the Muslim tradition reflecting the high percentage of the Muslim population of Malbardh.<sup>118</sup> Malbardh is more homogeneously inhabited by Muslims with very few Catholics (about 5%) while Milot is more mixed with a higher ratio of Catholics (40%). The whole area of Kurbin, including Lac and Mamurras reflects a preponderance of Catholics in the population (Intervista Nr.3 - R, p.3).

Marenglen, one of the converts from Malbardh, tells of his father, a former Communist from Muslim background, that when something strange or unacceptable would happen he would exclaim: “Jezus Krisht, c’eshte kjo!” (Jesus Christ, what’s this!). In the same vein, he was relating to me a vow that Çapani, another Muslim from the village, would say: “t’pret’ meshe t’shen Anojt...” (for the sake of St. Anton’s mass...). This is the generation of the parents and grandparents of our converts. They are the generation who lived through communism with the remnant of the memories of the preceding period when religion was a natural part of life and it seems, permeating the Muslim population along the same lines as the Catholic population of the area. The Catholic undertone found in the expressions of these two reported cases of these two

Muslims from Malbardh fits well with the findings from my previous field work in Malbardh regarding the building of the Catholic church in the village where we saw that Muslims had been using the ruins of the church just like their Catholic co-villagers to offer their prayers in times of need. Even today, as Besnik, the other Malbardh convert relates in his interview (Intervista Nr.2 – B), Tuesdays are so busy with people of both Catholic and Muslim background from all over the area and even beyond going to visit the Catholic shrine in Lac.

The Milot school and the Catholic church in Milot seem to have been the hub of social activities for the youth of the area (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p.3; Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.6; Intervista Nr. 5 – N.T., p.4). The descriptions of these representatives with regard to the religious traditions practiced in their Muslim background families shows a relatively low level of engagement with religion (Intervista Nr. 5 – N.T.,p.2; Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p.2,3; Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.2,3). The most one of them recalls regarding some teaching he received sporadically and informally from a neighbor imam in the upper part of Milot was “to do more good than bad” (Intervista Nr. 4 - F,p.5). When their families would celebrate some religious holiday, they did not seem to even know if it was the “big bajram” or “the little bajram” but would ask relatives, and the holiday was signified just with food and socializing rather than any serious religious observations (Intervista Nr. 3 – R, 2). There seems to have been one celebration that entailed sprinkling the blood of a chicken on the door. This was later discontinued as inconvenient because of the hassle of cleaning up afterwards (Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.3,4).

There was also acknowledgment that Catholics were more impressive in celebrating their feasts because they prepared longer beforehand and continued longer after the day of celebration while Muslims would simply do a one-day thing in a much simpler way

(Intervista Nr. 5 – N.T., p.2,3). It also seems to be perceived as if Muslims were relatively less well to do economically because they simply used the money from emigration while the Catholics were more prone to continue to find work at the same time (Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.5,6). The relationships between Catholics and Muslims seem to have been good. Children were not aware of differences (Besnik's experience in Malbardh's school) and played together freely, especially in school (Intervista Nr. 5 – N.T.,p.2; Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.5). Even intermarriage seems to have been happening as Besnik indicated referring to several Catholic women married in the village, (Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.7; Intervista Nr. 5 – N.T., p.5). But as I discussed this further with Marenglen, he seems to believe that Catholics would be much more hesitant to give their daughters in marriage to a Muslim than the other way around, at least in this particular region.

All of these factors paint a picture of a community in relatively peaceful inter-religious interactions without much emphasis on religion. But it is evident in contrast to the experience of those who grew up before the changes of the 1990s, and even comparing the experience of Marenglen and Besnik born in 1983 with Flamur born almost 10 years later that there is a stronger influence of the Catholic religiosity seen in the celebrations and the involvement of the church with social activities for the children.

Besnik who went to high school in Milot remembers when they were required to go to the Shen Mehilli's celebration at the ruins of Malbardh's Catholic church. This intensified, Besnik says, when he later became a teacher in the Malbardh's village school, and the school was expected to help bring benches and stools to facilitate the celebration at the ruins of the church close by. This increase in the religious influence in the society would be the experience of the "converted generation." The understanding of the Catholic faith among Catholic children seems to be growing as more are taken to



catechism classes by their parents; Muslim children are still not as involved in their faith, although even this is changing with the new mosque in Malbardh built in 2015 (Intervista Nr. 4 – F, p.6). It is not unlikely then that there is some unspoken respect for the Catholic side even though there also are expressed dislikes as Rivelino made reference to how the nun was harsh to him and “breaking him inside” (Intervista Nr. 3 – R, p.3) or with the negative reaction of Nea’s cousin toward him at his conversion when presuming Nea had become a Catholic (Intervista Nr. 5 – N.T.,p.6).

The mosque in Malbardh seems also to be growing the influence of Islam as we can see with at least one former pupil of Malbardh whom Besnik, our convert from Malbardh, knew when he was teaching in Malbardh a few years back. This particular pupil seems much more serious about Islam, now showing signs of committed involvement. These signs of growing awareness and influence of religion among the people such as this young Muslim man from Malbardh or the young Catholics of Milot are to be expected now more than 25 years after the free exercise of religion in Albania. But with regard to the general population still dominated by the generation coming out of communism, those born around 1970, religion may still be seen as a nebulous and relatively irrelevant idea. For the generation we are interviewing, the “converted generation,” the situation is definitely changing. A study of conversions of the “intensification” type would reveal a lively picture. This group has more opportunities to be informed about religions than ever before, and some are taking religion increasingly more seriously even as the stories of these converts display.

The socio-economic level of their families of origin seems comparable with others in the area, and at first sight does not seem to have been of much consequence with regard to their conversion. When you look deeper though, most of our converts were deeply

influenced by the mobility of emigration either having their father(Intervista Nr. 4 - F, p.2,8,9)or older siblings(Intervista Nr. 3- R, p.6) away for long periods of time. These pressures on the family must have created challenges and crisis that are relevant to a convert's seeking for a better situation internally, which religious faith claims to offer.

Family social standings varied a bit more. During the Communist regime, the father of Marenglen, the first convert, was a Communist leader in the village of Malbardh as well as the grandfather of Flamur from Fushe-Milot. Religiosity in their family seems not to have been important and not noticeably different from others. While these families would have had an advantage in the social circles of power earlier on, with the breakdown of communism after 1991,this diminished. Still none of the families were disadvantaged intentionally by some group in power.

The religious background of all of their families was of nominal Islamic faithwith some extended families more religiously involved even if expressed simply in going through the ritual of circumcision yet without deep significance (Intervista Nr. 3 – R, p. 3). All of the converts except one either studied at the University of Shkodra or, in the case of Flamur, went to high school in Shkodra and associated with the students of the university there because of Marenglen, his uncle. The environment at the University of Shkodra was instrumental in the life of four of the five converts. In the case of Rivelino, who studied at another university, Marenglen's influence in his life was important when he came to faithafter his graduation.

### *6.11.3. The context of encountering the new faith: "the ecology of conversion"*

In further describing the context of religious conversion, we can include many things: "Reading a book, talking with a friend, attending a lecture, or participating in a

... church, mosque, ... puts us all within the contextual sphere that is the ecology of conversion” (Rambo 1993, 166).

With both of the Malbardh converts, Marenglen and Besnik, being the same age and born in 1983, the story of their conversion starts in their village with the showing of the JESUS Film by an Evangelical group when they were still young adolescents in 1998. Besnik remembers that there were several other people, naming also two females, Blerta and Fatbardha, who gathered after the showing of the JESUS Film in their village to indicate their decision to believe in Jesus; but I was not able to establish contact with these women who are now married and living in other parts of the country.

The “advocate,” as Rambo would like to call the individual or representative of the new faith who interacted with the potential convert, is a representative of an Evangelistic organization in Shkodra called “New Life Institute.”<sup>119</sup>

#### **6.12. The Crisis:**

Beside simply acknowledging at this point the importance of the crisis at the macro-level, the national level, where joblessness and emigration with their challenges deeply impacted the Albanian families and the individuals we are studying, we will look at the more personal aspects of the crisis the individuals felt in their lives. Elements of crisis in the lives of our converts could surface at different times in the process of their conversion as it is with Marenglen and Besnik who may have experienced a crisis of identity when in Shkodra. They were impressed by the Christians of the Evangelical tradition they met on campus and were drawn to reflect on the religion of their original background. But the death of Marenglen’s father shortly after Marenglen came to an

initial commitment to Christian faith was very traumatic. As he said, now that he believed that only those who believed in Christ would go to heaven, it made the reality of his father's death all the more difficult since his father had not professed such faith in Christ. The crisis, if anything, proved to deepen Marenglen's faith with asking more difficult questions and arriving at a more nuanced understanding. But one of the more important helps Marenglen mentioned at this juncture was the friendship of Holger, the Christian friend who had helped him come to faith.

From the lives of the other converts from Milot, belonging in the close circle of those from Malbardh, we notice similar challenges related to their background that have constituted in some crisis in their lives naturally propelling them to ask for satisfying answers. Nea's desire to find out more from reading the Bible in order to oppose the Christian explanation of Marenglen is similar to the earlier efforts of Marenglen and Besnik who wanted to explore their Muslim background through engaging a Muslim imam before they eventually converted to Christianity.

Rivelino's story includes his father's sickness as very prominent in the push toward faith. His father was diagnosed with cancer; and during the first terrible six months that he took care of his father in the hospital, Rivelino said he had prayed desperately to every possible god. "I prayed to God, please just let my father stand up just for a week so I can go out one more time with him for a coffee at the neighborhood café" (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p.6). Flamur and Nea's stories are examples of the challenges of life in a society in transition both because of the immigration where Flamur's father was away during the growing years of his only son or the early death of Nea's father creating hardship in Nea's life emotionally. It is important to notice that almost all of our converts from Malbardh had some kind of crisis in their life that would have been

resolved in a way by the conversion to Christianity, but apparently only Rivelino and Marenglen could point to that crisis as important with regard to their faith. The others may not be as conscious of the influence of their background situation in opening them to the new faith nor can we presume of a more important role of their crisis at this point.

### **6.13. The quest:**

Even though neither Marenglen or Besnik had any previous involvement with religion, their families being relatively unreligious from Muslim background, both of these converts from Malbardh showed the tendency to revert back to their perceived religious roots of their families in similar ways. Marenglen sought out a Muslim leader to help him be more informed about the message he was hearing from a young proponent of the Evangelical faith on the campus of the University of Shkodra where he was studying. Besnik showed a similar tendency while at the same university by befriending a young Muslim student whose Catholic roommates were not accommodating as he was trying to fast in the Muslim way, which required he rise before dawn to eat in the room. Besnik invited the Muslim student to stay in his room and broke the fast with him to show his support. Marenglen and Besnik eventually embraced the Christian faith shortly after these experiences with exploring Islam. But it is important to note here that this interest to explore or seek to understand the religion of their family's background, Islam, was prompted or at least associated closely with encountering again in Shkodra the representatives of the Evangelical faith.

Marenglen describes how he had encountered some Evangelical believers in Shkodra. One of them was a shoemaker who had impressed him in such a way with their

message that feeling challenged, Marenglen was apprehensive that they may be right and uncomfortable in his ignorance of Islam. He wanted to find out first what Islam could offer in terms of some perspective to address the questions he now had. It is in this connection that Marenglen sought out a Muslim imam and started hanging out with him for about six months while at the same time continuing the conversations with the Evangelicals. Beside the content of the faith that Marenglen was chewing on in trying to understand the specific message of Christianity and Islam, what impressed him at this time was also the way the representatives of each faith approached the other. The Christian representative seemed more respectful and not threatened while the Muslim imam introduced Marenglen to the term “qafir” and let him see a much harsher tone toward the representative of the other religion. This perceived difference seems to have impacted Marenglen who chose the side of the friendlier representative, the Evangelical.

Besnik seems to have been associated with the same people around the same time, including the Muslim imam. His Muslim friend, whom he befriended to help him practice Ramadan fasting in his room, continued to be part of his life as roommate for another year after both Marenglen and Besnik had confirmed their belief in Christ as Evangelical converts. They speak of times when this Muslim friend would play Muslim preaching on the stereo as if to compete with the Christian songs Marenglen and Besnik would play on the same stereo now that they had become believers. Eventually, their Muslim friend found another house, and their meetings became very rare.

Rivelino’s quest seems to have intensified dramatically from his father’s sickness. He is the only one of the Malbardh/Milot group who studied in Tirana as a university student; and although he was introduced to Christianity there, one of his close friends having become a Christian and changing for good in front of his eyes, Rivelino showed

no interest toward faith. Nevertheless, while the others spoke ill of Rivelino's converted friend, he says, he stayed close to him (Intervista Nr. 3- R, p.5). After finishing university, Rivelino entered a difficult period in his life exacerbated by joblessness and then his father's illness. It was in the throes of these challenging crises that he was opened to God's intervention in his life and turned to pleading desperately to any god who could help. In a series of events including trips to Italy and researching for a special medicine made in Albania, he saw his father get better. This was a new beginning for Rivelino. He found himself more ready to volunteer in different causes. That is how he joined World Vision, a humanitarian organization inspired by Christian values. In the course of activities there, he met Evangelical Christians who as a way of life shared the message of the gospel with him (Intervista Nr. 3 – R, p.7).

The quest of the younger converts from Milot, Flamur and Nea, was related to their association with Marenglen and his friends at the University of Shkodra. As Marenglen's nephew, Flamur naturally came under his uncle's influence in terms of ideas and beliefs especially as he saw and liked the friendship of the Evangelical group his uncle was part of at the University. Nea's search was more intellectual and was related to reading more from the Bible initially to find some arguments to oppose Marenglen's ideas. Eventually he came to personal faith as he continued to associate with Kujtim, a friend of Marenglen, who was part of the Evangelical group at the University of Shkodra.

#### **6.14. Encountering the new faith:**

Both of the Malbardh converts mentioned encountering the Evangelical witness in their college campus in Shkodra as crucially important in their process. This process had started earlier in the village with Marenglen's and Besnik's initial positive responses to

the Christian message after the JESUS Film showing in 1998. There had been a few years of noninvolvement in any significant religious activities between the film showing in the village and when they met Evangelical Christians again at the Univeristy of Shkodra.

While at university, introduction to ideas and practice of Evangelical beliefs took the form of conversations with individuals who were approachable and available to explain in simplified terms the fundamentals of the message of Christianity through the use of a booklet titled “Four Spiritual Laws.” Marenglen and Besnik heard different presentations of the message of the gospel which the “Four Spiritual Laws” encapsulated in a simple format of four main points: (1) God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life. (2) Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life. (3) Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for man’s sin. Through Him you can know and experience God’s love and plan for your life. (4) We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Then we can know and experience God’s love and plan for our lives (Bright 1965).

This message was presented in different ways and with different emphases in their conversations and meetings as they had ample opportunity to associate with the Evangelical representatives who worked among students throughout the year. One such representative, Holger, seems to have made a particularly positive impression on them. He was able to answer their questions, and Marenglen relates that during the time of his comparison of the message of the imam and this evangelical he was impressed by Holger’s attitude. The way Holger addressed the issue of responding to others of other religions who spoke harshly against him and his ideas was important in Marenglen’s decision to stop associating any longer with the imam who had exhibited a different, more



disparaging and antagonistic attitude. Marenglen says the imam spoke of the Evangelical representatives as “qafir,” which was the first time Marenglen had heard the word. Marenglen and eventually Besnik, who were the first from this group of the converts from Malbardh/Milot to convert to the new Evangelical faith, found this community of students following Christ at the University of Shkodra as more desirable to belong to because of a positive message, an intellectually honest and engaging atmosphere, and encouraging wholesome values and love for all people independent of religion.

From the other converts of this group, only Rivelino was not involved in this particular environment at the University of Shkodra. He encountered Christianity first as a student in Tirana and was familiar with the same kind of Evangelical message among students in Tirana, but he came to faith in Christ while back in Milot and through the influence of Christians in the area while he was working for World Vision. Flamur and Nea, the last two young men of this group of converts from Milot, are cousins and were both influenced deeply by Marenglen and his friends with the Christian ministry at the University of Shkodra when both of them went to Shkodra for studies.

#### **6.15. Interaction: The environment of the new group**

The evangelistic efforts of the Christian ministry at the University of Shkodra, New Life Institute (NLI), were consistent and were happening in the context of the life of a small group on campus that according to one of the converts, Besnik, “was a group of some of the best kind of students in campus,” an attractive group of young people providing a good environment for socializing. One of the other converts from the University of Shkodra, a young woman, referred to this environment as “...loving, welcoming... more

safe” (Intervista Nr. 6 – T. V., p.2). Marenglen and Besnik were roommates during this time, and both become involved in the life of the group of the Evangelical Christians at the university. Every week they had a campus-wide event where somebody again shared the main message of the Bible, the gospel or the good news of Christ dying for the sins of everybody and raising bodily again from the dead; and they saw many students become believers during that time. They were involved naturally in helping others understand this message including Flamur and Nea who came to Shkodra and were under the influence of Marenglen, Besnik and their NLI friends.

Flamur was studying in high school in Shkodra. He was staying with Marenglen at his rented home and became a believer as he hung out with Marenglen and his friends. But when he went back home to Milot two years later, stopping short of finishing his studies, he started a very difficult period of his life. Besnik, who had finished university and was teaching at Malbardh school nearby where Flamur lived, became a constant encourager in Flamur’s life. Rivelino, who became a believer in Christ around this time, became another good friend for Flamur.

Knowing each other in the network of friendships in Milot, Nea also came to faith while associating with Rivelino in Milot. In one of these occasions as Rivelino, a new believer, was discussing faith with Marenglen, Nea, not suspecting Marenglen to be a believer, found out he was a formidable conversationalist. Marenglen had some challenging thoughts for Nea to chew on. It was clear Marenglen had a strong Christian faith, and Nea started reading the Bible in order to challenge Marenglen’s ideas. A few weeks later Nea went to the University of Shkodra to study and came to embrace the faith that says Jesus is Lord. This happened in his first year of university in Shkodra, and he ended up being roommates with another Evangelical believer, Kujtim. Kujtim

was a friend of Marenglen, and due to some circumstances, Nea needed help with accommodation so he ended up staying with Kujtim.

It was these dynamics of relationships that explain the motivations and the encouragement of these young men to explore and embrace the faith. So the network of friendships they naturally had developed, coming from the same village, was one dynamic that kept them in close association with each other while each individually engaged the environment of NLI Christian fellowship and teaching at the University of Shkodra. This Evangelical group at the University of Shkodra was the source of the content and inspiration of the Christian faith they adopted. The dynamics of being involved in this environment in different ways, both in large groups and in one-on-one relationships, was then reinforced by the previous and continuous relationship with each other as compatriots coming from the same village where they found validation and mutual encouragement. First with Marenglen and shortly afterwards with Besnik joining in the activities of the NLI fellowship at the University of Shkodra, it seems that a relational vortex was created to include Flamur and Nea later naturally.

#### **6.16. Commitment: The turning point**

It is in this connection that we asked the converts interviewed how their conversion happened; and we can see how for all of them, typical of those coming to Evangelical faith, there is an idea of coming to personal faith, either emphasizing the moment when they prayed in a specific way or experiencing a change sometimes visible in their behavior for others also or referring to their baptism as a public declaration of their personal decision.

Besnik remembers walking with friends after a certain weekly meeting with the NLI student group. One of the people with him asked, “So when are you going to accept Christ, Besnik?” To which Besnik answered, “I have known Christ for a long time now” referring in his mind to the time in his village as a 14-year-old praying after the showing of the JESUS Film in 1998. But instead of considering that teenage prayer as the turning point or as the moment of decision, Besnik now prefers to remember that evening in his second year at the university as the turning point and the day of decision (Intervista Nr.2 - B, p. 4).

Marenglen also described his time of decision as the culmination of reading and discussions with Holger before going home for the summer after his first year at the university. But then, when his father died shortly after that and when deeper questions and the comforting presence of his Evangelical friend intertwined resulting in helping him see how God is good nevertheless, he was fully set on his new direction.

Rivelino referred to his baptism, months after he had already become part of a local Evangelical body of believers, seeing the truths he had understood confirmed in different ways by the preaching of the pastor and the discussions with Marenglen as the definite time of his commitment. The time of change in his thinking about God started by his father’s bedside at the hospital when he in desperation prayed to any god who would listen to help after weeks of fruitless efforts to find solutions and comfort because his dad was diagnosed with lung cancer.

Rivelino’s desperate trip to his brother in Italy and coming back to Albania to find this “miracle drug” he heard about, with the eventual good change in his father’s health, contributed to bring him out of this deep crisis at a place where he could now look at life with gratitude. He started serving in some capacity as a volunteer with World

Vision. There he met Edi, a Christian, who gently introduced him to Christianity. Even though this was not the first time to encounter the Christian message, now it was the time when Rivelino seemed more prepared to hear. While reading the Bible, the only book he managed to grab before going into a particular week long World Vision youth camp as a youth coordinator, Rivelino says was another formatting influence in his heart. "Working with kids softens your heart," said Rivelino (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p. 7). After coming back from that particular camp where he read the Bible regularly, his friends noticed the change.

Rivelino gravitated more and more toward friendships with Edi, and Edi invited him to join the fellowship of his Christian friends where Rivelino found a home for his growing affinity with the new view on life without the pursuits of older pleasures of the rough and fouled mouthed crowd he had been friends with. This change, he says, happened naturally, indicating a cumulative effect of different influences where intellectual understanding seems prominent beside experiential factors without singling out any specific moment as a turning point of not believing and then believing in Christ. "It came naturally" was his answer to my question, "When did you make a decision?" pointing to the changes in his behavior noticed by his former friend, Krenar, and breaking up with other close friends over his new-found direction in life (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p.7). But to illustrate to me the definite turn or the indication of his commitment, he told me about his baptism as a significant declaration of his Christian faith. His story includes a difficult confrontation with his mother after baptism and another trip to Italy followed by continuous strife with his brothers and extended family and friends, but there was no turning back from that point in his process.

Flamur and Nea are younger than these three others in the group of the Malbardh/Milot converts, and they have grown in the shadow of such good friends who have gone before them in facing the challenges of embracing a new faith. Nea said that he had great respect for Rivelino who has faced many oppositions from his friends and family. “I knew I could draw strength from him... and I had him as an example because he was slandered for his faith” (Intervista Nr. 5 – N.T., p.6).

#### **6.17. Consequences:**

This last area in the stages of conversion is probably the most informative with regard to our interest in the environment of conversion. As it is to be expected, none of the converts had an enthusiastic reception from either their families or friends; Rivelino noted that clashes with his non-Christian friends and family began as a result of the changes they saw in him after his conversion. This in itself should accentuate the credibility of the testimony of these converts about the authenticity of their conversion and the reliability of their testimony to the reality of the environment of conversion.

While not always a welcoming environment of conversion, the environment of conversion is not an intolerant one in Albania. From my observations of the stories of conversion in the area of Malbardh, no significant level of persecution exists toward the converts because of their faith. Being a “tradition transition” type of conversion, this would be the best opportunity to surface the harshest response if there were such antagonistic attitudes to conversion in that village; but we do not find that to be the case.

*6.17.1. Besnik's case as the best testing case in Malbardh:*

Of the converts of Malbardh who could provide the most extended report of experiences of ongoing interaction with the members of the village, Besnik is the best candidate because he lived there consistently for 10 years as the teacher in the village school after graduating from the University of Shkodra where he became an Evangelical Christian. Besnik would not confirm a consistently opposing attitude toward him as an Evangelical in spite of whatever negative reactions he might have experienced occasionally.

*6.17.2. Besnik's wedding ceremony as a curious case of Malbardh's openness:*

The most interesting thing to me is the response the village had at the occasion of the marriage of Besnik, not only a Christian marriage but also a very public Christian marriage celebrated at the center of the public life of the village in the presence of almost all the villagers. They were overwhelmingly positive about the celebration of the Christian marriage of Besnik even though as Besnik admits it could not be more “on your face Christian” than that.

Besnik's wedding ceremony was not a typical traditional Albanian wedding with a little Christian twist. It was primarily a religiously shaped Christian marriage with a full evangelistic message. Besnik was raised in a Muslim family, converted to an Evangelical faith, married a woman from a Catholic background, presented to the whole village an evangelistically shaped marriage ceremony in the middle of a predominantly Muslim village, and everybody was happy.

#### *6.17.3. The interactions in the family:*

It does not mean that everything has been smooth for Besnik or that the response of his family at his conversion was positive. Besnik admitted that he was probably too forceful in the beginning when he came with his message of salvation to his family after he converted. His father thought that this was just a phase in Besnik's life, and he would soon turn back to the normal traditions of life.

#### *6.17.4. The interactions in the circle of friends and coworkers:*

Besnik is known for his integrity in the village and that came up in one discussion about the school where he worked. He had noticed some irregularities with some use of funds. Everybody knew he would not agree to use designated funds for a different purpose. Thus, he told his fellow teachers not to invite him to the meeting when they would decide such things if they did not want him faithful to his values to overturn their decision and confront them in front of everybody about it. They responded by not inviting him but respecting him nonetheless.<sup>120</sup>

### **6.18. Exploring interpretatively the responses to Malbardh converts:**

Marenglen has shown tremendous commitment to his faith, but what his fellow villagers see are other more practically readable aspects of his life. They respect him for who they know him to be both personally, as an honest young man and as part of a family well known in the village as one of their own. More specifically, as I learned indirectly through interviewing Marenglen, they think highly of him because they know that when he was a student and could have acquired student funds from the government,



like many others, just by getting some signatures from the village representatives fudging some facts about how much land his family owned, Marenglen did not do it and did not allow his mother to do it even though they were poor. The people in the village would know this for a fact, some of them being those his mother approached for help. The villagers were impressed with this as out of the ordinary because his mother, with the understanding of the village representatives, was pushing him to accept such an arrangement. Yet he refused expressly because it would be fraudulent, and as a Christian, he could not do such a thing.

Marenglen is well respected by his immediate family and his extended family also; and although they were not happy about his faith, for mostly unreligious reasons, they came to accept it as his choice, growing in appreciation of his faith more as something not harmful. As he tells me, they also started liking his friends. Holger was probably the best introduction to Marenglen's good Christian friends especially when he came to Marenglen's father's funeral at the beginning of Marenglen's conversion. From then on, they have come to expect and find his friends to be good. They did not object in the least to him marrying in a Christian ceremony another Christian convert from a Muslim family. Again, although not as dramatic as Besnik's wedding, the acceptance of the Malbardh villagers of such bold manifestations of new religious faith in their members, without negative reactions, is proof of attitudes of good will and openness and conducive to tolerance.

When asked directly "What is the attitude of your fellow villagers and fellow teachers toward you as you now have become a 'believer?'" Besnik replied, "It depends how much they understood what I had done. Those who understood showed tolerance" (Interview Nr.2 - B, p. 6). Is Besnik here saying what the theoretical grid of this study implies that

tolerance is dependent on understanding or the awareness of conflicting viewpoints with one's own, or is he simply and descriptively talking about something else? What does Besnik mean here by "understood"? Is religious understanding what he considers missing here? If it is religious understanding that is missing, is it their understanding of their own religion to which they are considered to belong to or is it Besnik's new faith they do not understand? These are some of the interpretative questions we needed to answer for understanding the situation in Malbardh through our interviews.

In talking with Besnik further, we learned that what Besnik meant here is that some who did not care about religion would consider such conversion as unbecoming of an educated person as Besnik was, so they would be dismissive and sarcastic. Others, who like one of his professors at the university wanted Muslim sensibilities unchallenged (Intervista Nr. 2 - B, p.5), would probably consider him a betrayer of his family's religion. The bottom line here is that Malbardh, in general, was a context without categories to put Besnik into quickly, reflecting a lack of awareness of the religious teachings just as we have observed repeatedly with regard to the situation in Malbardh. This relative lack of awareness of religious teachings, which would have anticipated the detractors and would have a ready response to nonbelievers, was lacking. Thus, the Malbardh responses Besnik and Marenglen experienced, however friendly, were not informed by religious teachings to amount to religious tolerance but conform more to simple healthy interaction of well-disposed people to engage others without apprehension of problems, especially since they were fellow villagers in a closely knit group of families in a small village.

When Besnik says "it depends how much they understood," it refers more to this understanding of the reasonability and desirability or goodness and wholesomeness of

his faith that seeks the good of all and is not a stuffy kind of religious stuff as to make one be self-important and judgmental of others or simple minded and off-putting in its pontifications or humorless and boring. Because people did not have the understanding, specifically the religious understanding either of their own or of Besnik's new faith, they were not specifically showing religious tolerance in their attitudes that would require enduring a case of believing known to be different and in contradiction with one's own. We do not seem to have here either understanding of one's own religion or knowledge of the other's view with which to disagree thus resulting in not having the attitude of engaging in tolerance with another person of a different religion.

#### *6.18.1. Interpreting the responses in Malbardh*

The interpretation of the phenomenological reality of the responses toward Besnik can differ. The sociologist might like to challenge this anthropological insistence on analyzing the significance of internal states of understanding among the respondents, borrowing from psychology and philosophy or even from theology, by suggesting that we should simplify our take based only on appearances and generalized perceptions as conventionally labeled. From such a different perspective, it is possible to interpret the Malbardh situation here as inter-religious tolerance because Besnik's counterparts are Muslims who perceive Besnik to have another faith. They, without judging what or how much they understand of their Muslim faith, encounter Besnik as holding another faith and are courteous to hear him. Some are friendly, presumably to understand his point of view, and continue to basically respect him in spite of his view when they find out it contradicts theirs. Others may even express more friendliness as they may consider it compatible with their view. Why not interpret it as inter-religious tolerance?

My whole argument for categorizing the nature of Malbardh's environment of inter-religious interactions as "not yet tolerant" in this study hinges on what constitutes inter-religious tolerance with regard to intentionality. People can be nice to people for different reasons, but religious reasons are what make for considering a case of toleration related to inter-religious tolerance. Because every convert in our interviews considers the responses as lacking specific religious understanding or rationale and rather include extra religious considerations, we conclude that the situation in Malbardh, good and tolerant as it is in its resulting appearance, it is not intentionally inter-religious tolerance. In our immediate context here with Besnik's response, we can see how this factor, religious understanding, is what makes him consider the environment as changing with the religious buildings symbolizing more specific religious awareness and adherence and becoming more difficult for the "tradition transition" type of the convert.

#### *6.18.2. Interpreting the experience of the converts from nearby Milot:*

It does seem that the converts from nearby Milot had a few more problems. Flamur, following in the footsteps of Marenglen, his uncle, did not receive much flack from his family because they respected Marenglen. He was, however, on the receiving end of much opposition from his friends at work. They accused him of betraying his family and his religion. Eventually their friendship dried up to the point that they rarely meet anymore, and Flamur now concentrates friendship with his fellow Christians like Rivelino.

Nea, enthusiastic when he came back from university in that first year of his studies to tell his family about his faith, was taken aback from their unwelcome response and in particular has problems with the attitude of his cousins from his father's side.

The worst case seems to be the consequences Rivelino experienced upon his conversion. He was not as forthcoming with complaining about opposition to him; but his friend, Nea, who respects him for having endured opposition, alerted me to this. From what Rivelino shared in his interview it is clear he went through some difficult times after his conversion with regard to the responses of others, some members of family and most of his friends, as the result of his conversion (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p. 7-10). His family, especially his mother, was not approving. Therefore, he did not tell her when he decided to be baptized even though he took his sister with him to the event. His older brothers live and work in Italy. When he talked about their response to his conversion, he mentioned that his older brother is more tolerant while the second brother is much more antagonistic. His second brother sent him a message: "Do whatever you please to yourself [in a way of saying 'harm yourself if you want'] but do not talk about your God with people [indicating anger at being shamed as a family by the slandering expected by people in the community of Milot]" (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p. 8). Typical of the shame culture Albania represents, the angry response of Rivelino's brother was not religiously motivated but expressed concern for the social standing of the family and perceptions of weakness because of a religious fanatic brother most likely to be ridiculed.

It was interesting to note that Rivelino told his older brother first of his faith, left home after some harsh words were said against him after his baptism, and waited a few weeks until things calmed down before returning home. His older friends retreated from

him. Krenar was one such friend who did not like Rivelino because he did not allow him to curse or speak dirty in his presence and had complained to another friend berating Rivelino. He did not tell me all that he has gone through in enduring opposition, but his words when I asked him about responses toward his conversion were: “opposition without exception.” I asked him if he had expected this, and he said, “I did not know what would happen to me and that everyone would turn against me” (me Rivelino, p.10). When asked to describe the general Albanian environment of conversion though, Rivelino said “tolerant, but not tolerant because ‘I understand you’... it is because of not knowing” (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p. 10). I followed up with asking whether such an environment would turn out to be in the future even more antagonistic to such conversions as his, but his response was, “No, I do not imagine it getting more difficult because we have added now to our group. It is I, Flamuri, Marengleni, Besniku, etc. We have become a group, and it is easier to put down one person but not five, seven, or 10 that we are now” (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p. 10). This is interesting in itself because it points out that both push back and resilience are expected. It is “not more difficult” in the sense of surviving it rather than not facing opposition.

From an interview with a 22-year-old Muslim from Malbardh, who has become serious about Islam and thus not included in the interviews of “tradition transition” type analyzed here, I heard a similar answer to the question of the future of tolerance in Malbardh implying a combative mentality: “Catholics are very few in Malbardh, only 5%” (Interview with Altin).

This difference of the perception of responses from people in Malbardh and the people in Milot, just a few hundred meters away from each other, is not great but needs to be explained. The direction of that explanation is related to the relatively more

dynamic environment of Milot where there is a strong presence and work of the Catholic church, in teaching and providing social activities in conjunction with the school as a gathering point. The direction seems to be that a greater awareness of religion precipitates stronger or harsher response to converts. Milot is also a bigger city where there is more of everything compared with Malbardh so naturally whatever is felt in a small scale in Malbardh is accentuated in Milot, the social hub for Malbardh. The social environment to observe now should be broadened because Malbardh is being absorbed more and more into the vortex created by the influences of the bigger areas around—Milot on the northern side, the new mosque functioning since 2015 and the direct influence of Gjorm from the south side with one imam who directs Malbardh mosque's activities.

#### **6.19. Relevant findings including the third category of interviews:**

Among the experiences of the other group of the converts who are outside of the Malbardh/Milot area, there was more experience with religion since there were more Catholics among them. Among the several factors seen to contribute to religious awareness or understanding are religious and other kinds of celebrations, frequency and importance in the life of the population and more significantly the existence of a church or a mosque in the village.

The presence of religious buildings with their influence of heightening the religiosity of the people by raising the level of awareness and understanding of specific religious traditions is an important variable in the resulting climate of inter-religious interactions of the society it influences. Thus, because of the more prevalent existence

of Catholic churches with their accompanying influence on awareness, we see it is sometimes more difficult for the Catholic families than for the Muslim families to accept their converts to Evangelical Christian faith. The direction we noticed moving from Malbardh to Milot is even more evident when we move further in the areas with more religious awareness, namely, the direction of stronger resistance to the convert the greater the awareness of one's own religion is perceived to be.

#### **6.20. Operational categories to gauge the different elements in the interactions**

In order to ascertain the level of awareness and understanding of religious teaching in their environment of conversion, we asked different questions and grouped the responses in one of three categories created for this variable: “insufficient,” “moderate” or “sufficient” understanding (see the table of responses in Appendix C). This is a very rough approximation because in our research we did not undertake specific probing of these categories in a formalized fashion. We considered the responses of the converts based on their perceptions with regard to the understanding of religion in their environment. The advantage we had here is that the convert is an expert of the significant level of religious understanding by virtue of the decision to convert for religious reasons, and so he or she would be the best judge of the level of understanding of those in his or her immediate circle.

We also took note of the relative importance of the presence of the religious buildings and religious activities in their surroundings. Based on this indirect probing, we could not find enough evidence of any case to be considered with sufficient



understanding to count for full-orbed tolerance of others in the sense of knowingly tolerating others with an understanding of opposing views.

Again, my estimation is based primarily on the perceptions of the converts who are best positioned to know the level of understanding in their immediate environment, especially since they have acquired for themselves a level of understanding to distinguish between their religion of origin and another they embraced. The general picture we acquire from these informants of their environment of conversion (thinking of the people they interacted with as converts with religious others) is one of mostly insufficient to moderate level of understanding of specific teachings of religions relevant to one's worldview.<sup>121</sup>

#### *6.20.1. Correlation of religious awareness and response:*

From some interviews, it appears that the converts believe that eventually the Catholic families realize that the convert to Evangelicalism is actually a good Christ follower and seems to be a good Christian and, thus, should come to consider the jump from Catholicism to Evangelicalism not as big as imagined. This factor, the perceived lower threshold of Catholic converts compared to those from Muslim background, does not reflect a corresponding lower level of resistance toward converted individuals in the Catholic circle because this is not the perception of the broader Catholic population. "The lower threshold" perception is a post-conversion one that should not be projected as held by the broader population. On the contrary, we see more opposition toward the Catholic converts than toward the Muslim converts from their circle of family and friends, which highlights our most important variable, the greater impact of awareness of their own religion or importance of religion in general for that population.

It has become apparent that the Catholic population of northern Albania has been more systematically cultivating its religiosity through the presence of churches, priests and nuns as more active in the area through providing religious teaching for the children. This is clearly the perception of our Muslim converts from the Malbardh/Milot area in particular as shown in their interviews when they speak about Catholics compared to the Muslims in their area.

The Muslim population does not seem to have the same level of religious awareness and understanding of their own religion in Malbardh, but this reality is changing quickly with the building of the mosque in Malbardh in 2015. I interviewed Altin, a 22-year-old young man from Malbardh whom Besnik mentioned as having become a serious Muslim follower, and it was evident from our conversation that his high school years in Milot where he was exposed to the activities of Catholics played a significant role in him deciding to pay attention to what his background religion of Islam has to offer. With the building of the mosque, he was the first person at the inauguration in 2015. From my interview with Alketa, a 21-year-old student convert from Milot, I noticed the reference to the new mosque when he answered the question about religious awareness while growing up: "... we didn't practice our religion, we just celebrated some feast, but we didn't go to mosque or some such Islamic religious building... the same like others in our community because we didn't have a mosque in Milot. It is only one in Malbardh but not in Milot, even that one there was built recently" (Intervista Nr. 19 – A.T., p. 1).

From a phenomenological point of view, because of the reality on the ground as we have observed, it is relatively in the context of much less awareness of religious teaching among Muslims in the area, compared to the more extensive spread of Catholic practice in the same space, that the responses toward converts should be understood.

This would then logically entail that as more awareness of the Muslim religion is fostered in Malbardh and other areas through the presence of the mosques, it will be more difficult for the converts to make the jump into the other tradition with more apprehension being engendered about the responses of the people around them. This is exactly relevant to our study of the environment of conversion and more broadly of the inter-religious interactions in Albania more generally.

#### **6.21. Evaluating through operational categories of perceptions about tolerance:**

In a similar way as with the categories for awareness, we had to present a rough spectrum of moving toward tolerance as one would evaluate one's perceptions of the responses in one's environment. We suggested to the converts to choose between three words from least to greatest in a spectrum of tolerant responses: "excluding," "indifferent" or "tolerant" (see the table at Appendix C). We were using the word "tolerant" here only as a referent to those perceptions the convert would have without informing them of our definition of tolerance as including intentionality, but almost everyone of the converts offered some qualification after choosing either of the words they deemed appropriate at the moment. Those qualifications were almost as important or more important in shedding light on the nature of the responses they were describing. Therefore, we do not do justice to such nuances by simply designating the responses simply with one word which we do here with a chart for the sake of simplicity.

The words for describing this environment of conversion as either excluding, indifferent or tolerant, were included in a question during the interview for all of the

converts. Understanding that the words may be understood relatively differently, and even in our definition we include more into what makes for using the word “tolerance” correctly, we nevertheless entertain the choices between these words by our converts as we could best understand what they more specifically mean as we look at the immediate context of their transcribed interview.

*6.21.1. Analyzing perceptions of Catholic converts of the environment of conversion:*

In our chart with the responses to this category, we have indicated only the first word the converts mentioned as most characteristic of their environment; but they offered qualifications of that word sometimes giving the opposite word when distinguishing the environment in the family from that in the university or from that in the broader society of Albania. From the 13 responses of the Catholic converts, it is interesting to note that the word most used to describe the environment of their conversion and the perception of the environment in general in Albania is the word “excluded.” Used eight times, it was used in conjunction with the word “indifferent” two times, “indifferent” being the first choice and “excluded” being the second choice. And it was used two times with the word “tolerance,” “tolerance” being the second word choice. Only four times was “excluded” the first word to describe the environment.

Thus, only one third of the Catholic converts perceive exclusion or being unaccepted or marginalized because of conversion as the dominant feature. The two other words, “indifference” and “tolerance,” are used in conjunction with another word to qualify it, both six times each but “indifference” is the first word in five cases while

“tolerance” is the first word in four cases. So if “tolerance” and “excluded” are each the first word chosen by four individuals, it makes more than half of the group seem divided in their perception of the level of tolerance in the general environment of conversion. Because more of them have said indifferent as their first word rather than any other and the other first words are divided equally in the group, we can conclude that the word “indifferent” is the best word to choose if we had to choose only one word.

If the second word, which is more prevalent, is taken as a qualifier, we would have to include “exclusion,” meaning a feeling of being rejected and marginalized and dropped or parted ways with upon religious disagreement. But two of the uses of this qualifier are in conjunction with “tolerance” to indicate the difference in their family from the broader perceived environment so we probably should hold this lightly and more hopefully because it implies that the more restricted environment is at home which, as some of the converts also indicate, has the best chance of being resolved well. If we are to be strict to the words these respondents used, we could be justified to consider the perception of the Catholic converts about the environment of conversion as broadly indifferent with a tinge of exclusion.

*6.21.2. Analyzing perceptions of Muslim background converts about the environment of conversion:*

With regard to the Muslim converts, the picture is interestingly clearer than in the Catholic group because the first word that all have chosen between the three (“tolerance,” “indifference,” “exclusion”), with the exception of one individual, is “tolerance.” The next word, mentioned a total of four times, is “excluded,” but three of these uses are as qualifiers of the word “tolerance,” meaning they see some disturbing signs of opposition

and exclusion in some dimension of this otherwise “tolerant” environment. One case expressly says that the environment is more tolerant in the family and more excluding or marginalizing in society. Even the other convert who said that the word to characterize the environment is opposing or excluding does not have opposition in his immediate family but is referring more to the experience with his coworkers.

It would be incomplete if we thought of just this one word “tolerance” as the conclusion for the perception of the Muslim background converts regarding their environment of conversion. In the transcribed interviews, it is clear that the qualification of the word “tolerance” by the Muslim converts is done more with regard to the lack of awareness or understanding of those in their environment. In the Catholic group, the converts were more frequently mentioning reactions of exclusion, seemingly related to the stronger religious awareness of the families; but this is not exactly like the situation in the families of the Muslim converts where religion did not figure as important.

In conclusion, Muslims converts chose to say the environment is tolerant, but they emphasize lack of awareness of religion as the reason. Catholic converts describe the environment more tentatively as less than tolerant because of experiencing more hardship in the family reflecting also a higher level of awareness of religion in their environment. This is important to note especially since it correlates with the observation mentioned earlier with regard to Catholics being more religiously aware as a result of the more extensive and intensive work done by the local churches as is evident in Milot. The unambiguous declaration of Muslims converted to Christianity is that in Albania, or more correctly in their experience in their environment of origin and in the university of Shkodra as representative of the broader societal values, there is tolerance even though it is in the context of little religious understanding, which in our interpretation is

demoted to “toleration” as describing the response and “harmony” as designation of the nature of the environment of inter-religious interactions.

#### **6.22. Conclusion combining the perceptions of all converts:**

Combining the perceptions of Catholics and Muslims who are converted, we can safely conclude that the situation in Albania is generally accepting of conversion and would present a strong case to consider it tolerant. I would agree that sociologically, if we were simply interested to report statistically the appearance of such phenomena, that tolerance is a defensible characterization; but since our study seeks to reflect the perceptions of those inside the environment, we would not do justice to almost all of the converts in this study who are apprehensive of the attitudes of exclusion they have experienced and the level of indifference or lack of awareness that is even more generally observed and experienced in the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions we have studied here focusing on the village of Malbardh primarily. This is where I see the specific value of an anthropological study which pays attention to the nuances of understanding the situation. Such perspective could be lost in the restrictive terminology of the survey, however valuable that may be, and keeping all of these observations in mind, we now seek to approach a relevant interpretation.

#### **6.23. Interpreting and explaining the import of the interviews:**

Now we are ready to start interpreting and explaining the findings in the interviews, but we want to ensure we are interpreting what we have observed by considering the

broader context of these conversions and also heeding some other methodological requirements. We need to ensure we translate correctly in our own words what we have captured phenomenologically through the converts in their own words. And we need to conclude with our explanation without invalidating the experience of our informants.

*6.23.1. Interpreting what we have observed:*

The reality of the dynamics of conversion is multilayered and very flexible. The proximity of the reality of different dynamics in the nearby village of Gjorm<sup>122</sup> is reason to pause and realize that this is a fragile situation where one cannot be dogmatic about characterizing an environment in any region as a whole. The situation with regard to tolerance can be very different in different nearby communities.

With this sobering reminder that we need to hold tentatively any generalization or absolute conclusion on the issue of the reality of inter-religious environment in general, we can seek to define what we have seen and understood in the experience of the converts from Malbardh and Milot compared and contrasted with those from the broader region as the important cultural context against which Malbardh is better understood.

The conversion of Marenglen and Besnik, villagers of Malbardh, is a genuine “tradition transition” type of conversion in the sense that phenomenologically they are to be considered of Muslim background, can be referred to as from Muslim families, and are recognized by their fellow villagers as from Muslim religious background. But not neglecting the complicated theological considerations of what is properly considered faith from the Islamic perspective and what is considered conversion from a Christian



point of view, considering these two instances as “genuine tradition transition conversion” is more justifiably correct.<sup>123</sup>

We will not push any further the difficult estimation of the depth of the conversion in theological and psychological terms for the other converts studied here from Milot and the broader region because it is almost superfluous to our main concern of gauging the responses in the environment of conversion. With this understanding, we would say that all of the converts from Malbardh are cases of “tradition transition” type of conversion, defined as converting from Muslim faith into a Christian faith of specifically Evangelical kind as distinct from the Catholic religion.

This conversion for these converts is not simply a matter of personal conviction or inner change but of outward and visible consequences since they have made it known to the people around them without hesitancy.<sup>124</sup> It is in this connection that one should understand Besnik’s decision to have a very Christian public wedding in the middle of the village. It is as an expression of this strongly held conviction that Marenglen did not let his mother manipulate the papers for securing government funds for his education or why Besnik was known by his fellow teachers in the village to not compromise his values in the decisions to change the purpose of designated funds for the school.

Our converts in the village of Malbardh give signs of not just being some nominal converts to Evangelical Christianity but very serious and conscientious believers. The fact that they are not persecuted in this village, especially in the case of Besnik who lived there for a 10-year period as a school teacher immediately upon graduation from the University of Shkodra where he was converted, screams to be interpreted as tolerance. Furthermore, (and this, paradoxically, makes one more suspicious of the potential designation of the environment as tolerant) the response to Besnik is not

simply that he was not persecuted but that he was respected and especially with regard to his Evangelistic Christian wedding was almost admired.

Besnik's case is the most promising of yielding the most nuanced picture of the nature of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh. Therefore, the clarification of the responses to Besnik is most important in order to characterize the environment correctly. If, as we have reasoned earlier, tolerance implies understanding of the other's view and one's own to be not in agreement, to tolerate another requires respecting the other at the face of such understanding not in ignorance of such understanding. It is in the absence of such understanding that I conclude the Malbardh villagers were respecting Besnik and Marenglen. More specifically, as almost every convert has expressly said when asked about the perceived reason of the responses toward them, they say that the respondents do not do it because of religious understanding.

But how can it be that the villagers present at the wedding did not understand that Besnik believed in Jesus and they do not? Surely they understood Besnik is a Christian and they are not. Surely they understood that Besnik was a Muslim by virtue of his family's background and is now presenting himself as a Christian. And how can it be said that "it is in the absence of this understanding" that they respect Besnik and said approving words to him about the wedding? What understanding did they have and what understanding did they not have in the face of such clear presentation of conversion? Is it possible from what we know about Malbardh (reviewing the previous probe about analyzing the building of the church in the village) that these villagers again saw Besnik's Jesus as they had seen the Jesus they hung on a cross at the altar of the church they built in their village as simply a way one prefers to be associated with for whatever reason without much significance for any other person or interfering with how

life is done in relation to others in that community? We have indicated the answers to these questions before, and it should be clear why the conclusion is that the Malbardh environment does not amount to inter-religious tolerance.

It is toleration in the absence of religious understanding, as one of the converts said: "...[yes] tolerant, but not tolerant because 'I understand you, know who or what you are.' It is not tolerance because of being informed but rather because of the informing of not knowing" (Intervista Nr. 3 - R, p.10). "...informing of not knowing" are the direct rendering in English of Rivelino's Albanian words, and that is why they do not make sense in English. He means to emphasize that it is absence of knowing or understanding that informs their attitude that he acknowledges as generally tolerant in its expressions. When our converts use the word "tolerant" to describe generally the responses in their environment, they are not saying something different from what I am saying in my translation of their word "tolerant" as "harmony," seeking to explicate the nature of the inter-religious interaction in Malbardh in the absence of specifically significant religious reasons for their interactions. When they say "tolerant," they simply mean that the response was "tolerating" and the difference is in understanding that "tolerance" is more like a virtue that is based on deep seated understanding of values including religious specifics but "tolerating" can be the result of different causes which even an intolerant person can sometimes display. The "fear" that Besnik talked about in his experience more recently when he was talking about his working in Gjorm is related to this unsettling situation with the nature of toleration in Malbardh and more generally in the area; it is not tolerance based on understanding of the significance of religious belonging.<sup>125</sup>

The respect, acceptance and even admiration accorded to Besnik and Marenglen, these two men born and raised in their village, is related to their faith only to the point

that the villagers know they have become Christians of some sort, but they do not see that as a case to be endured for that particular reason. If they were aware of the specifics of their Muslim faith with their due significance, or if they considered their religious view as important for them to the point of recognizing the contradictory view of reality that this new faith of Besnik and Marenglen represent, they would have engaged in reflecting their religious view specifically, but they have not even mentioned any such dissonance. They do not reflect such relevant understanding of their background religion of Islam.

The fact, as Besnik tells us in his interview, that on Tuesdays many Muslim parents of the village take their children from school, to the point that it is a problem for the process of education of these children, in order to visit the Catholic shrine of Sh'n'An'oit reflects lack of understanding of typical Muslim thinking or a confusion of their Muslim understanding with Catholic spirituality. That such proper Muslim thinking is generally absent in Malbardh can be gauged also by the parallel experience of Besnik now that he is teaching only fivekilometers away at the village school of Gjorm. Gjorm is a Muslim village where Tuesdays are not different from any day of the week in school because the Muslim parents of Gjorm do not go to the Catholic shrine due to their understanding of Islam.

While it is easier to define the environment of inter-religious interaction in Malbardh as harmonious but not tolerant with all the clarification of these terms, the situation in Milot may be more challenging since the opposition towards our converts from Milot(Rivelino, Flamur and Nea) are more pronounced there. But even there the situation is not fundamentally different, at least not yet. We can still consider the inter-religious

interactions in Milot as peaceful and generally reflective of a harmonious relationship, but there are more underground trends at work there than in the village of Malbardh.

There are significantly more Catholics in Milot (40%) than in Malbardh (5%), and there is a greater awareness of religion in Milot than in Malbardh. This is true especially with regard to Catholics since its young people are expected to go to catechism classes, and there is also more awareness among Muslims as a result of the religiosity of the Catholics as our converts testify. Catholics constitute a more distinct group and are sometimes perceived as more cohesive than the Muslims in the city as reflected in how they are employed or how the political parties are organized to produce representatives. Even though Catholics may be more aware of their religion, we learn from the experience of our converts that the distinctions are more related to belonging traditionally to a label rather than serious understanding of religious faith. The Catholic friends of our converts do not seem to understand the nature of personal faith in Christ as explained by Flamur and Rivelino. “They don’t consider it important... express surprise [that a Christian can talk about Christ relationally as Evangelicals do] ... they do not consider it important to understand the truth as it is in the Bible,” says Rivelino about his Catholic friends (Intervista Nr. 3 – R, p. 10).

The same definition of the inter-religious interactions in Malbardh broadly fits Milot as well, namely it is a harmonious inter-religious environment but not to be designated as tolerant as our working definition of tolerance provides. This interpretation of the environment of Malbardh and Milot as broadly representative of the region where Shkodra is the most influential city still fits; and as revealed in the interviews from the students of its university, the inter-religious environment of this

area is better defined as harmonious socially but without theological depth needed to be characterized as tolerant.

*6.23.2. An explanation of designating the environment as harmonious without tolerance:*

Moving toward the phase of explanation for our findings, we can say that harmony is used here in the sense of generally peaceful and friendly interaction between people of different religious traditions who are not primarily influenced by religion, and thus the attitudes of the people making that environment harmonious are not so because of being informed by religious sentiment even when deep convictions may exist about religion. Convictions about religion are not the same as religious convictions so the reasons at work in the environment of inter-religious interactions in Albania as revealed in Malbardh are to be seen as extra religious reasons. One such reason can be the sense of belonging to the same Albanian nation as an interconnected big family reflected in mixed marriages, inter-religious visitations and *kumbari*, beside other things. At least this is the primary or distinctive explanation we gather from the situation in Malbardh.<sup>126</sup>

While I arrived at this conclusion of harmony rather than tolerance very early in my analysis of the situation in Malbardh and I believe it is not difficult to see that this is the case with very little effort, the value of all these hours of research and analysis is in having ample evidence that this is the case in order to establish the need to pay attention to a precarious situation regarding the future of inter-religious tolerance in Albania taking the cue from Malbardh.

#### **6.24. Summary on the third probe of conversion stories:**

In seeking to answer our main research question: *What is the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in Malbardh?* we had to deal with the fact of religious conversions evident in Malbardh. Whenever conversions happen, there is a chance for positive evidence of the existence of tolerance because conversion surfaces what otherwise could be latent in the environment of inter-religious interactions. Even though our converts from Malbardh did encounter their new faith in their village initially with the showing of the JESUS Film during their teenage years in 1998, it was when they went to study at the University of Shkodra that their religious involvement determined their path of religious commitment.

Our advantage in interviewing the Malbardh converts was also that we connected and interviewed more converts from the general area around Malbardh connected with the University of Shkodra as the main hub of this influence and learned more about the nature of the environment we are studying by having the converts see their perception of the environment of Malbardh in comparison with the environment at the University of Shkodra which we measured through the survey independently, thus giving us two angles on the same environment. This broadening of the sample to include other converts from outside of Malbardh helped us tremendously because it included the converts from the Catholic background that were not part of the sample from Malbardh, and this increased our understanding of the importance of religious buildings and religious celebrations in heightening the religious awareness of the population with important influence on the environment of inter-religious interactions.<sup>127</sup>

The nature and meaning of the environment of conversion as revealed by the focus groups and the first interviews of the people from Malbardh is not appreciably different from what surfaced during the survey and interviews with converts from the broader Shkodra area.<sup>128</sup>

With regard to the nature of the environment revealed from the interviews, it is clear the conversions were more or less accommodated and no major persecution occurred. But, by interpreting the word “tolerant” more along the word “toleration” to signify not a stable character trait of the environment based on deep seated convictions and knowledge of religious teachings but more expressions of well-meaning familial harmony without theological depth, our conclusion is that the term “harmony” is more appropriate to describe the character of the inter-religious environment in the sense of an organic and social kind of harmony between people of the same group that may bear the designation of belonging to different religions without any appreciable difference in their outlook and way of life.

We also offered an explanation for this reality of the Albanian environment of the inter-religious interactions connected to the sense of belonging to the same closely knit group, more like a family emphasizing the common origin and belonging together to the area they live, as more important in determining the nature of their interactions than any religious teaching.

In these interviews, it was also more prominent the concern that the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as revealed in Malbardh is in a state of change with different currents present in it which should motivate more attention to the common space in which we live to preserve what is good while moving toward better understanding of important aspects of life.



These cases of conversion reveal that the individuals that were converted would stand in stark contrast with their acute awareness of the importance of their faith to what I presume by taking the revealing case of Malbardh as of the average Albanian to be like with regard to religion, namely as indifferent. That is why establishing the understanding of tolerance and preserving the public space for open exchange of ideas, without protecting religion but protecting people with the right of people to convert to whatever view is convincing to them in a healthy climate of responsible exchange is crucial to achieve true tolerance.<sup>129</sup>

## **CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Presenting the conclusions and recommendations of the research on the nature and meaning of Albanian inter-religious environment 27 years after communism (the case of Malbardh): How do we go from harmony to tolerance?**

### **7.1. Explaining the interpretation of harmony and the way forward to tolerance:**

In this last chapter of our study on the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as revealed in the case of Malbardh, we gather the different streams of our findings through the three probes we conducted in the village of Malbardh, the University of Shkodra and the stories of conversion from Malbardh and areas around Shkodra that we analyzed and presented in the previous chapters. After putting our study in the historical context and explaining the abiding theoretical approach, we engaged with the three research probes through a phenomenological description of the firsthand observations, where we are confident the voice of the actors in the environment we studied is preserved well. At the end of each section the summaries took the form of the interpretation of those observations, and in this last chapter we seek to come up with the integrated conclusion of the whole study in the form of explanations of those interpretations and some recommendations with the confidence that the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as revealed in Malbardh is explicated sufficiently.

### *7.1.1. A word about culture and pluralism:*

It should not be surprising to hold that religious pluralism is not the ideal state of society because to have religious pluralism means to have differing and conflicting views of the world in the same social space.<sup>130</sup> As one philosopher and author of several scholarly books put it to me recently quoting from a book review: “[P]luralism, in its most basic expression, is nothing more than the simultaneous presence of multiple cultures and those that inhabit those cultures. For most of human history, communities and societies existed in relative isolation and thus were insulated from exogenous social and cultural influences. However today, pluralism has emerged as one of the defining features of the contemporary world order.... Pluralism has increased massively which means the average person experiences it more frequently and more intensely than ever before in human history.”<sup>131</sup> But while I do hold that religious pluralism is not the ideal state because it is at best a transitional phase toward a more homogeneous environment achieved through persuasion and thus arriving at a unified but rich and nuanced culture, I do hope that we develop a truly pluralistic religious environment in Albania because social harmony without inter-religious tolerance due to insufficient religious convictions is not a safe place to be.

### *7.1.2. We need to develop the religious pluralism of Albania:*

Revealing through this study that Albania (at least as exemplified in the revealing case of Malbardh) lacks true inter-religious tolerance is not in contradiction to affirming that Albania until now reflects an admirable inter-religious harmony. But with the growing influence of specific religious currents, it is easy to see how inter-religious conflict can plague Albania similarly to other countries.<sup>132</sup>

It is hard for me to forget what one of the elders of the village of Malbardh said in answer to why he thought that the situation in Malbardh will not change when I asked regarding the future of their inter-religious harmony after the construction of both church and mosque in the village. He simply referred to their customs and culture and said “It will be like this until we die.” I do not take his word lightly. Customs and culture are deeply rooted phenomena in society. I think he is mostly right, and I do have hope for the Albanian culture of harmonious inter-religious interactions to continue, but there are signs in the Albanian environment which taken in the context of broader international currents should be cause for concern and, therefore, thoughtful action now.<sup>133</sup>

The conclusion of this study holds that the kind of pluralism Albania reflects in Malbardh as one of its revealing cases of inter-religious harmony is not sufficient to bear the weight of the religious developments which go beyond any previous level of religiosity and connectivity with the respective world movements that are much more immediately present with their influence in our global village.<sup>134</sup>

## **7.2. Integrated Conclusions:**

The environment of (1) the village of Malbardh studied as a revealing case of the environment of the inter-religious interactions in Albania, of (2) the University of Shkodra as the influencing environment for the Malbardhian students returning as its teachers, and of (3) the conversions of the interviewed individuals from both of these two environments including more than just Malbardh converts displays generally similar characteristics of harmony between people of different religions. The differences we notice are primarily due to the specifics of the environments being a village, a university

and a specific family but no differences at the level of worldview. The factor with the greatest difference noted in the three contexts would include the level of awareness of the religious ideas which was, as expected, higher among the students of education at the University of Shkodra according to the survey we conducted with 139 students there. In our conclusion, we conceded the designation of “tolerance” with some caveats as a good description of the university environment, but the same weakness related to the lack of awareness of the significance of specific religious teaching is also part of the university environment as it appears from the discussion of the more confused answers from the questionnaire.

Since the conclusion of the first probe, the field study of Malbardh shows that Malbardh’s is clearly an environment characterized by harmony but not yet including inter-religious tolerance as defined here. The University of Shkodra environment could be called tolerant but qualified by the same tendency of negligence of religious ideas as such.

The third probe, the interviews of 21 converts, which should help us be more specific in gauging the truth of the perceptions of the people both in the village and at the university who are most knowledgeable about the nature of the environment of inter-religious interactions that we are studying, also confirms that the best characterization of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions, especially as revealed in Malbardh, is not yet tolerance.<sup>135</sup>

### **7.3. Answering the main research question and the hypothesis of this study:**

Now we are able to answer the main research question: *What is the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in*

*Malbardh*? Confirming with the weight of hundreds of hours of research as presented here, the best characterization of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in *Malbardh* is “harmony”.

We cannot bypass the content of this study in order to understand this harmony as related to the social aspects of life in a small interconnected community of a village and, as evidenced in this analysis, very thin on theological or religious grounds. Harmony here, therefore, means social harmony between people of different religious backgrounds, without any significant relation to religious teaching.

Lack of “significant relation to religion” is related to their view of life that includes their view of self, family and society to which they belong as not being significantly influenced by religion. They feel part of the same space socially and culturally in their village as Muslims and Catholics together, considering each other insiders and belonging to each other at a higher level than any other circle of belonging socially due to religion. Because of this relegation of religion outside of the circle of factors motivating such sense of belonging together, we do not prefer to call this kind of harmony as “inter-religious harmony” except as describing sociologically the reality of this social harmony being between people perceived to belong to different religions such as Islam and Christianity. Their interactions and admirable respect for each other is not influenced in any noticeable or significant way by their belonging to a specific religion even when the occasion of interaction may be of some religious connection such as the building of the church in their village or attending the ostentatiously Christian wedding of a Muslim convert from their village.

After distinguishing the sense of harmony and tolerance with relation to inter-religious interactions, we defined theoretically what tolerance means *Tolerance exists*

*between two people or groups when intentionally or knowingly one respects the other who holds and practices opposing views to the point of having both parties endure, without unjust hindrance, even the free conversion of anyone to the other's point of view. We found such conditions for tolerance not met especially in the village. Hence, we could not designate the nature of the harmonious environment of Malbardh as "tolerant," and this brings us to confirm the main part of the hypothesis of this study: The Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions (as evidenced in Malbardh) is characterized by social harmony of people belonging traditionally to different religions with potential to include inter-religious tolerance of religiously informed people.*

There is reason to believe that the situation of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as evidenced in Malbardh is in a spectrum of movement because we have noticed developments related to the building of religious buildings which we saw in the other cases of conversions from the surrounding broader area of Malbardh to be correlated with greater awareness of religion and religious motivations. This awareness has also shown its influence in the inter-religious interactions evidenced in the lives of the converts we interviewed. The probing of the influential environment of the University of Shkodra producing a higher level of confidence that tolerance obtains in that educational environment gives us hope for the move toward inter-religious tolerance in the environments of villages like Malbardh where these students go as teachers of the younger generations, but it is not the only influence and maybe not the strongest either. Therefore, we remain ambivalent of the future of tolerance in Albania even though we have reason for optimism.

*7.3.1. Correlation of such factors as religious buildings and religious teaching to toleration:*

We have noted that the responses of the Catholic families toward the converts appears to be more antagonistic at least initially; and from our comparison with the Muslim families in the same general area around Malbardh, the difference is related to the level of awareness of religion dependent to some degree on the existence of religious buildings and religious activities in the close proximity of the people. Because there are more churches in this part of the country as evidenced in the experience of the interviewed converts (see chart in Appendix C), we concluded that there is more resistance toward converts in the Catholic families because of greater awareness of and participation in their faith among Catholics. While we may not want to assign a causal relationship between awareness of one's religion and a more antagonistic response toward converts leaving that religion, it does seem substantiated to say that there is a strong correlation. This is borne also by the time order of the intensification of the Muslim faith of our young man from Malbardh who has been more seriously practicing his Muslim faith and disassociating from former relationships including Besnik, his teacher, since the time of the building of the mosque. We have shown reasons for believing that the building of the mosque was precipitated as the raising of awareness about the building of the church.<sup>136</sup> The correlation between the presence of the building and a stronger awareness of one's religion, which we have noted from the interviews with Catholic converts in general, is revealed in the interview with the convert from Milot as well who indicated that the mosque was built too recently to have functioned in the life of her family as a factor in their religiosity.



### 7.3.2. Arriving at the thesis supported by the evidence of this study:

There are both positive and negative signs at this juncture with regard to the developments toward the opportunity for inter-religious tolerance with the rise of the religious awareness in the population. The direction is definitely toward growing religious awareness and religious convictions, but the opportunity to develop tolerance is also an opportunity to precipitate intolerance. The environment of the University of Shkodra remains a positive example of the direction toward achieving inter-religious tolerance, but even there some of our converts reflected with concern over some experience with a certain professor who labeled a convert as a traitor or the more impersonal and superficial treatment of issues without much commitment or attention to tolerance. The thesis that has precipitated as a result of this study should not modify the hypothesis as it stands. I believe the study bears the burden of evidence for the thesis that: *The nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions (as evidenced in the revealing case of Malbardh) is social harmony between people of different religions in the flux of developing greater religious awareness to result in the greater potential of achieving inter-religious tolerance preserving the social harmony present.* I now offer an explanation and some recommendations based on the research in Malbardh to actually see the positive move from harmony to tolerance as defined here.<sup>137</sup>

#### **7.4. Explanation of the harmony: Albanian Epistemological Principle of Closeness (AEPC)**

We have indicated earlier in the interpretations of the findings in Malbardh that the explanation for the apparent harmony among people of different religions seems to be located in the mentality of the villagers who consider each other as belonging to the same community in a way no other developments can change, presumably including even religious conversions. The religious divide for them is irrelevant to considering each other of the same community because they are not “foreigners” but descendants of the same families that came together in this area.

Based on this Malbardhian reality, but noticed in different ways from the interviews with converts further afield in the area around Shkodra as well, it is obvious that the Albanian mentality as evidenced here includes a way of evaluating people and their ideas and behavior starting from a basis of closeness to them that implies knowing through interpersonal experience rooted in familial proximity over long periods rather than through simply evaluating ideas. Trust was developed through living together, belonging together and knowing each other in the flow of life, so ideas and new religious ideas coming into the community are to be embodied for some time to enter the discussion in the community with any seriousness. In the case of Besnik who comes with a new religion and shows through his wedding ceremony the seriousness of his conversion, the reception is still based on knowing Besnik as belonging to the village whatever his strange new ideas may be or may beget. What is most wise here is the epistemological care needed in evaluating a new religion or ideology and Albanians, as

revealed in Malbardh, seem rooted in their knowing through seeing with eyes of awareness of belonging to the families they represent.

Here we are trying to explain the interpretations of the data we have collected in this study, namely that Albanians as revealed in Malbardh have shown wisdom in sticking with what they know by close association even when pushed by strong historical forces to embrace the new ideology of the powerful as the Ottoman conqueror may have been at one time, communism at another or Turkey and America today.

The village of Malbardh with their strong emphasis of considering their fellow villagers of any religion as of belonging together almost as blood relatives (“no foreigners”) impressed on me the priorities through which they view living together with religious others in their village. Epistemologically speaking, Malbardhians specifically and, extending this insight more generally, the Albanians intuitively could see that embracing a new religion (as in the case of accepting Islam which came to Albanians after they were established as Christians) should not the value of their fellow Albanians independent of religion. Albanians as revealed in Malbardh did not relinquish the prior knowledge of belonging to the other in the experienced familial, linguistic and cultural proximity.

This is akin to thinking imaginatively, as the Albanian renaissance patriots asked Albanians to think, of all Albanian speaking persons as literal brothers and sisters who the next day, for whatever reasons, donned the religion of Islam much like some may think of Besnik donning Evangelicalism. This may have been the tragic situation of having to put on a foreign religious appearance for survival purposes, but in spite of it they all seemed intent on preserving community and continuity with the family of origin. At least this is what we gather in the case of Malbardh, namely that a co-

religionist of non-Albanian belonging is a foreigner while an Albanian of a different religion is family.

Who can blame Malbardhian Albanians for not being consistent philosophically and theologically? They presumably did not understand fully the significance of the contradiction Islam represents for Christianity, and even today few educated people would fully know how far is the divide, philosophically and theologically, between the two religions. Albanians who took on Islam did not intend to break away from their extended family of origin, and this is what visitations and greetings of good will, in whatever religious celebrations of each other, reflect.

This epistemological principle I discern in Malbardh of not forgetting what you know and who you belong to when faced with a new knowledge tradition or when taken in by this new knowledge tradition, seems to serve well as the linchpin of engaging all the new currents in the globalization environment Albanians have now entered.

This principle then deserves a name: *Albanian Epistemological Principle of Closeness* (AEPC) is the name describing what suggests itself as the explanation for the reality of the Malbardhian environment of Albanian inter-religious interactions. It can also be translated for Albanians as the principle of looking at religion through the lens of the nation rather than the other way around just as their Albanian renaissance fathers taught. This could be translated then for Albanians to mean that they are first Albanian and then whatever religion they choose.<sup>138</sup> This would mean for Albanians that if their religion at any time tells them they should kill their fellow Albanian because of religious reasons, they would be justified to put that religion aside.

Why not embrace then the Albanian solution as prefigured in Malbardh— the principle of the Albanian Epistemological Principle of Closeness, of enduring in love

what the mind rejects with the token of visitation and blessing of the religious other as representing the memory when we were one in the undivided family and thus simultaneously expressing also the hope of the future harmony while we live in this transition land of pluralistic perspectives, the land in between called “religious pluralism”, with inter-religious tolerance? This is the direction of the suggestions and recommendations that flow as the upshot of this study.

### **7.5. Suggestions toward an Albanian environment of inter-religious tolerance:**

As a student of culture observes,

“Public culture... consists of the symbols and meanings that order the life of the community... or nation as a whole. ... public culture consists of the shared notions of civic virtue and the common ideals of the public good. Beyond this, public culture is reflected in the shared standards by which the actions of individuals or communities as well as the actions of other nations ... are evaluated and judged as either good or evil, right or wrong, just or unjust. Finally, a nation’s public culture embraces the collective myths surrounding its history and future promise” (Hunter 1991, 55).

Who is forming the notions of civic virtue and common ideals today in Albania?

Who are the most consistent and established institutions that are teaching values to the people now? It would be very hard to disagree that the most consistent influence in terms of ideals and standards now comes from the religious quarters. Therefore, the importance of religion will continue to be on the rise in Albania like never before.<sup>139</sup>

This heightened awareness of the specific religions brings with it the heightened risk of clashes between people of different religions. These influences create cultural currents that gain strength as they are formed and cultivated by different visions and facilitated by the different forms of public discourse where the social media and other technologies turn them into powerful forces of public life. In such a precarious environment, it

becomes even more imperative to foster a democratic culture that helps in how we should contend over different views without resorting to violence.<sup>140</sup>

In this study, we have analyzed such aspects of the public culture in the village of Malbardh that are related to inter-religious interactions. Based on those findings on the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as revealed in Malbardh, namely an environment of harmony needing to move toward tolerance, there are a few considerations and recommendations: (1) maintaining a public culture that fosters civic virtues and common ideals and standards where religions are collaborating and contributing to religious freedom, especially protecting freedom of conversion which is directly related to tolerance; (2) fostering the Albanian traditions that are helpful in this progress toward tolerance; and (3) building carefully toward an effective public education about religion.

#### *7.5.1. Context for community building, intentionally, inter-religiously:*

The public culture in Albania, Malbardh being a revealing case, is suffering from many challenges and many transitions. These 27 years after the fall of communism have also been the period of the greatest internal migration movements from the periphery to the cities and primarily to Tirana, where almost one third of the Albanian population now resides. The pushing into anonymity, which comes with life in the big city, may be good for tempering our egos; but if it crushes individuals completely, we all lose. There is need, therefore, to conduct more studies that research and design different models of helping develop healthy communities in our big cities, especially in Tirana where villagers like Marenglen of Malbardh have come to live.<sup>141</sup>

This might mean engaging neighbors naturally in neighborhood parks and social gathering places; having opportunities to take part in common projects of community service or sports activities, music or arts events; or encouraging community celebrations fostering common civic values. It is in such contexts then that religious leaders can show the specifics of their faiths and put people at ease about choosing or following their specific religious way without fear of ostracizing or prejudice, grouping with those who best foster their personal development. It is in such social context that the dialogues and debates about different aspects of life as seen through different religious perspectives are best utilized to foster understanding and tolerance.

#### *7.5.2. Protecting the freedom of conversion:*

We noticed that in the families where the awareness of religion was higher the responses to the converts was harsher. There was no difference with regard to Malbardh, Milot or other villages from where the converts interviewed came from. Thus, it is to be expected that as the Albanian environment becomes more informed by religion, it will also be more difficult for those who choose to believe in a different religion. We have established in this study that an important test of a tolerant environment is in how people respond to conversion. Chawkat Moucarry says it compellingly:

“Christians and Muslims will be genuinely tolerant only when they have accepted the idea that debate, or dialogue, may lead to conversions either to Christianity or to Islam. True tolerance is to accept the other, not by ignoring the distance between us, but by measuring that distance accurately and by recognizing that whoever wants to cross over has the right and freedom to do so” (Moucarry 2001, 20).

I believe that we need to be careful in Albania to protect in an intentional way this important right of the individual to convert. It is not possible for true tolerance to obtain

when a relativistic view of the truth value of religious claims is cultivated, which would be expressed either in precluding the need for any conversion or in neglecting the environment of conversion. What we need is a balanced stance where the rights of individuals are protected but also the importance of parents and vulnerability of children are considered in defining what should be avoided in propagating one's faith so that wrong proselytizing that is manipulative and harmful is not unchecked while appropriate exposure to the options of living the life desirable according to different traditions is protected and facilitated.<sup>142</sup> Malbardhian confidence as expressed by its elders that the traditions of the village simply will not change are not very comforting; yet at the same time, the Albanian culture of harmony between people of different religions, as evidenced in Malbardh, offers different helps toward a better future. From the very beginning of the idea of Albanian national life, we have patriots like Jani Vreto who said:

“The connection through language for a nation is natural and eternal, while the connection of people through religion and a teaching is invented and transitory, because history tells us and we see it with our eyes today, that there are different faiths and religious teachings that come and go one after another” (Jani Vreto, 1973, p.229-230 as quoted in Sulstarova 2015, 32).

This sounds very much like what we came up with as the explanation of the Malbardhian harmony: Albanian Epistemological Principle of Closeness! Fostering such harmony intentionally then among members of a community as belonging together first, we can develop higher levels of inter-religious tolerance by paying attention to the opportunities we have at this time in Albania with a perception as a generally homogeneous population.



## **7.6. Helpful Albanian traditions in the progress toward tolerance:**

From what we have observed in the environment of Malbardh, there seems to be a few important values of the tradition of harmony that may be important to highlight in order to utilize them on our way toward tolerance.

### *7.6.1. Kumbaria and inter-religious tolerance:*

*Kumbaria*, the tradition of connecting two families through the social ritual of the formal first haircut of a child by a chosen sponsor of the family designated as *kumbar* of that child and, therefore, a specially honored person almost as acquiring a brother and a family member to the point that marriages were not allowed as within family members with this person's family, seems a tradition worth cultivating among Albanians. The other custom of becoming blood brothers by taking a drop of each other's blood as with a small cut of the finger and taking it by dropping it on a sugar cube or something in order to drink it achieves the similar closeness between two individuals otherwise not related.

These traditions would foster ties of friendship across religious lines and would maintain trust in the face of growing awareness of the religious divide between the two religions. While the traditions of religions should continue with designated religious sponsors in baptisms and other rituals of passage, I believe it is important to continue forging stronger friendships across religious lines through the Albanian tradition of *kumbarior* through other similar means which are not religiously loaded.<sup>143</sup>

### 7.6.2. *Inter-religious marriage and religious tolerance after communism:*

Communism, the Albanian regime of 40 years until 1990, was intent on using marriage between people of different religious backgrounds to dilute the influence of religion through disrupting the natural cultural enforcement of life's rhythms, and we must admit that it was relatively successful. Communists intentionally encouraged inter-religious marriages and were disappointed that in 1980 only 3% of villagers and only 5% of townspeople "had contracted marriages with people of different religious backgrounds. Since more people lived in the countryside than in the towns, this meant that the nationwide average of mixed marriages was less than 4 percent" (Jacques 1995, 570). I assume that the following decade, 1980-1990, has seen a dramatic increase of such marriages because the trend continued during that last period of the communist regime even after the political changes in 1991. We saw several cases of intermarriage in Malbardh which still continues.

But with the resurgence of religion since 1991, we should not be surprised that marriage between people of different religious backgrounds has become again an issue for those young people today who have become serious about religion. While the state must protect the rights of the individuals to marry across religious traditions, each religion correctly emphasizes the importance of the religiously minded person to conform to the rhythms of one common religion in married life.<sup>144</sup>

Thus, to mediate between these conflicting views on intermarriage, I again would bring here the Albanian tradition of *kumbari* where strong family ties can be established across religious divides that leave more room for not marrying across religious traditions.<sup>145</sup>

### *7.6.3. Cultural tradition of visitation, participation and greeting inter-religiously:*

Based on the Albanian traditions of inter-religious harmony that we have been analyzing such as inter-religious visitations and greetings and the participation in each other's family events such as weddings and burials, these are cultural traits to be preserved. I know firsthand how difficult it is in some fundamentalist quarters of the different religious communities to accept the relaxed Albanian traditions of greeting and visiting religious others on their celebrations of religious feasts. For the conscientious religious believer being happy for the religious other, who is a nonbeliever from one's religious point of view, to be affirmed in a celebration that reflects a wrong understanding of the truth of faith seems unacceptable.

Based on the analysis in this study, we need to keep in mind what the reality of greeting and celebrating with religious others means for the Albanians as evidenced in Malbardh and why (even though I believe it is complicated and sometimes wrong) it should be generally accepted as a cultural cliché and utilized in fostering good will toward future tolerance.

Before I continue with my controversial suggestions, let me say from the start that people should be free to follow their conscience when they perceive it to be wrong and not participate in such celebrations or greetings in the most gracious way they can. I am not suggesting that there should be a law for Albanians to continue to practice such controversial traditions we are discussing. As we noted in this study, even though based on a relativizing and eclectic view of religion and even though it reflects a low level of understanding of one's own religion, Albanians are not surrendering one's own religion when they come to greet you as a religious other and wish wellbeing in celebrating your special religiously informed holiday.

There is something needed which comes with this tradition of Albanian inter-religious harmony as we saw in Malbardh that should be preserved for the future of the Albanian inter-religious tolerance in Malbardh and possibly further afield. It is probably a relic of ages gone by when Albanians, going to each other in celebrations, reflected belonging to the same tradition of the past and could be seen as an expression of longing to belong to each other even after having been carved into different religious traditions. Albanians reflect wisdom in this tradition of harmony as we saw Malbardh preserves in different ways the wisdom of putting people before religion. It shows that they recognized that the family ties, the affinity of language and the common heritage and history were stronger than the ties with a new religion or a new ideological framework, embraced at some level, but not so as to break away from the original community.

#### *7.6.4. Clearing the charge of relativism and self-contradiction:*

We have discussed why it is not helpful to foster a relativistic view of truth that would regard irrelevant all such truth values as associated with religious symbols and rituals. It is not what religions themselves foster, and it is detrimental to tolerance itself. Albanians unreflectively may be going through the motions of this tradition assuming a relativistic stance, as is the case I have observed in Malbardh, but the tradition itself need not be doomed by the correct assumption of a correspondence view of truth and assertion of the logic of non-contradiction to these celebrations finding them reflections of contradictory views of reality.

I would preserve such a practice as a transparently formal, rather than substantial, recognition of the other's ritual. I believe there is a way to understand such traditions of expressing good will toward a neighbor of a different religion as formally representing

and not an approval of the worldview represented by that celebration: a neighborly good will for the person of that contradictory worldview both in memory of (1) coming from the same root and (2) in hope of future full agreement in all things desired. Maybe some imaginative scenario of the potential roots of such practice will help.<sup>146</sup>

We have also noticed how Catholics, in particular, have the ingrained traditions of celebrating with their extended family not only the common Christian celebrations of Easter and Christmas but also their own specific Catholic celebrations of their specific “tribe” even with uncommon names such as “Marsjani” (Intervista Nr. 18 - Al. Gj., p.1). It seems justifiable, then, to imagine that the tradition of Albanians to participate in each other’s celebrations could go back or at least looks back to this cherished time of belonging to the same “tribe.” In the course of the difficulties after the conquest of the Ottoman Empire, some Catholic families had to even designate one of their brothers to become Muslim so as to deal with the outside powers and somehow offer protection for the rest. One can imagine why such a branch that was only formally considered to now belong to that foreign religion could still be seen as in many ways also belonging to their “root” family. Participating in some fashion to the celebrations could reflect that memory of belonging to the same family even if religiously they now fell in two different camps.<sup>147</sup>

#### *7.6.5. Clearing some theological scruples:*

Thinking theologically about this, I do recognize the challenge for the conscience of believers. I do anticipate the arguments of theology with formidable examples from Moses, Jesus or Muhammad. Therefore, I urge for this tradition to be kept in a formal way, not demanded to be practiced by everybody but expected as a

formal gesture of good will by the head of the home or the head of the religion as representative. It should be kept with the understanding of formality and as a remnant of our harmonious past in the hope of a harmonious future while we live in the present in tolerance with acknowledgment of diverging views to be discussed openly and freely accepting magnanimously the freedom of anybody converting to the other's point of view. This is the Albanian way! This does justice also to the Albanian Epistemological Principle of Closeness.<sup>148</sup>

Holding a correspondence view of truth and acknowledging with each of the religions in Albania that religious truths seek to embody an account of reality believed to be true, much like a scientific view of reality is deemed true, the conclusion of this study is that the Albanian traditions of *kumbari* and greetings and participation in each other's religious celebrations would be helpful to cultivate with care in the transition toward robust Albanian tolerance.

### **7.7. Public education and inter-religious tolerance:**

We have come to a very important issue now and publically revealed to be a dividing one, teaching about religion in public education. The discussions in the media have been heated due to the haphazard reactions of individuals and not through a systematic approach of the subject, which is an imperative for the government to consult before moving on with their applications. We will not discuss here in much detail the current philosophy of education that is informing the choices of our governmental institutions with regard to the teaching of religion in the public schools, but it is disturbing to witness the lack of consultation with the religious communities in Albania

in the process of developing a program about teaching the religious “fact” in the public schools. We can only hope the damage will not be greater to Malbardh and similar Albanian environments until the proper institutions are engaged in consultation about this important matter.<sup>149</sup>

The work done by Albanian patriots of all of the religious traditions (Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox, Bektashi and Evangelical) gave fruit in the form of the first schools in the Albanian language and the first books to cultivate learning in Albanian. This was the time of the Albanian national renaissance; and although most of those patriots were religious, they recognized the need for an education of Albanians that would not emphasize religion as the ideology of Albanian identity. One of these Albanian pioneer educators, an Evangelical who started the first Albanian school for girls, wrote, “Our school became a national school from the very beginning, representing all districts, all classes, and all religious beliefs”(Kyrias Dako 2016, 237).<sup>150</sup>

*7.7.1. We need a coherent national vision for relating religion to national education:*

As we have already seen, an urgent area to be synchronized with a national vision for inter-religious tolerance is our national system of education which, again fortunately up until now, has been generally a positive factor in socializing the Albanian children coming from different religious backgrounds as we witnessed in interviewing Malbardhians and converts from other areas around, but it is still lacking in sophistication at addressing the religious dimension.<sup>151</sup> It is not coherent to declare that we have an exemplary inter-religious harmony in Albania as many Albanian politicians and government representatives love to do holding up our case as an

example for other countries and at the same time simply copy a foreign educational system to teach about religion in our country. The urgent and knee jerk political reactions to fears of radicalization do not produce good educational paradigms for addressing needs in the educational system.<sup>152</sup> Malbardhian harmony with its traditions is instructive even if not sufficient in building a coherent educational paradigm for teaching about the religious fact.

#### *7.7.2. Paradigm on Religious education:*

There are several perspectives on how to address the teaching of religion in public schools, and they are informed by different goals and contexts so we cannot simply copy foreign practices while neglecting our specific situation. The important factor to consider in Albania, keeping in mind its impact on “Malbardhian” environments, is the context of the specific nature of its inter-religious environment and the makeup of the population considering different factors besides inherited religious affiliation. This aspect is borne by this study in its entirety, especially through clarifying the nature and meaning of the Albanian inter-religious harmony.<sup>153</sup>

The Albanian paradigm on religions in education should enshrine the good traditions already existing in Albania, which this study has highlighted, with regard to keeping the common public space free of dominance of any religion by emphasizing our belonging together as one nation through formal acknowledgment for all religions equally but as secondary distinctions of equally valued people. The Albanian experience explored in this study reveals that if you look at religion through the prism of the nation, which is captured in what we coined here as AEPC, you end up with harmonious relationships between people of different religious traditions and you have a chance to



develop inter-religious tolerance. But if religion becomes the prism through which one looks at the nation or anything else, we cannot be so sure of the outcome for the common public space; and this study shows that this perspective is not what is practiced by Albanians in general until now. If we like what we have with regard to the social harmony, we need not change the old perspective explained as AEPC.<sup>154</sup>

The goal of public education with regard to religion should be to enable critical thinking of the students, equipping them to ask relevant questions and to form informed concepts of the basic teachings of the different religions that are live options in our society with principles to engage critically with other religious views in the future as well. It is not enough to just teach about the historical dates and events or figures of one religion. The basic form of the specific worldview of a specific religion needs to be captured so that the students can evaluate relevantly the truth claims of any religion or at least know how to conceptualize the different claims along the relevant categories in their own language not simply parroting religious language that is not understood in its significance.

We need to avoid teaching of religion as a collection of different fairy tales because adherents do not believe their teachings as elements of fairy tales but rather as signposts of reality in this world. The students at least need to understand what each religion says is true and be enabled to envision a process by themselves with the help of whatever mentors they choose among parents, books, friends or educators in order to form their own convictions about this complex reality in which we live.<sup>155</sup>

Such an educational paradigm should keep clear the intent to seek understanding of truth of reality and should, therefore, primarily focus on the specific traditions that are the primary spokespersons of the truth claims of their religious tradition. In order to

understand better such truth claims of different traditions, we need to study them in the context of the lives of the followers of a specific tradition. Only after such a specific case of believing about the world is explicated is it helpful to consider the sociological or philosophical accounts of religion as generalizations or universal accounts of religion. A good education about religions considers them respectfully as competing worldviews in trying to answer the questions humans have about the world we live in, and this means that they are also contrasted with secular worldviews as well and not simply relegated to an inferior category.<sup>156</sup>

It is in this context of understanding these religions that are live options in Albania as evidenced in Malbardh, that it is appropriate for public education to include under its goal as expressed above, the observation of the examples in the form of the people of the specific community of those religions that are discussed in class, enabling students to envision how they can respectfully further their research or frame their friendly relationship with people of different religions. As another writer on the issues of religious education writes:

“Genuine tolerance demands forbearance: the humble and honest determination to live alongside those whose beliefs are incompatible with our own. When we gaze into the face of the ‘Other’, we have a mutual duty to maintain eye contact and acknowledge the differences between us, rather than look away and hide behind the pretense of similarity” (Wright 2007, 121).

### *7.7.3. Maintaining the Albanian public square toward tolerance:*

One of the welcome features of the Albanian inter-religious environment is the friendly atmosphere perceived between the representatives of the religious communities at the national level. We can truly say that at this level we have social harmony with inter-religious tolerance since I am one of the five representatives and know personally each of the heads of the Albanian religions.

What is more important is that the general population is also very relaxed about the different religions in their midst. Looking at appearances, no one would suspect that any trouble could be brewing in any of the corners of religious communities, but the main thrust of this study is to point out the care we need to apply in addressing the needs for achieving true tolerance among Albanians. It is our advantage that we are focusing on this important issue before it becomes a problem because by the time lack of tolerance becomes a problem, there is not much one can do to reverse the situation but to get used to the new fragmented reality intolerance brings.

#### **7.4. Recapitulating for the last time:**

We conclude here our study on the nature and meaning of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions with these conclusions and recommendations: The nature of the Albanian environment of inter-religious interactions as revealed in Malbardh is best designated as “harmony,” understood as distinct from the meaning of inter-religious tolerance. The meaning of this harmony, explained in this study as harmonious interactions without regard for religion, is related to what is coined here as the Albanian Principle of Epistemological Closeness which is revealed in how Albanians as revealed in Malbardh hold religious tradition, namely as secondary to the respect for the person as known directly in close proximity.<sup>157</sup>

Things are bound to change now with the new reality of heightened awareness of religion and weakening influence of the common Albanian experience influenced by immigration and dislocation, together with the other influences of the Internet age. Therefore, committing to the wisdom of the democratic system and its civic values

living with pluralism, we should uphold the freedom of conversion as a basic human right. The second major element of the environment to preserve are the Albanian cultural traditions of inter-religious harmony reflected in Malbardh, expressing such familial inclusion in the formal participations and greetings in each other's religious celebrations which can be expressed as formal participatory presence. And lastly, but more importantly for the preparation of the younger generations, we need to design and implement some form of "critical religious education," that would help students in critical thinking while knowing and evaluating religious traditions as worldviews in pursuit of truth.

Attending a conference on religious tolerance recently (Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, Community of Sant'Egidio and Episcopal Conference of Albania 2015), I put the question of conversion to two panels made of representatives of different religions –an international panel including high Muslim representatives from Iran and Egypt and the other an Albanian panel. The Albanian panel made of the high representatives of the different religions in Albania including Islam unanimously affirmed the freedom of conversion while the international one did not. I am very optimistic that Albania will successfully move from the current stage of simple social harmony into the more religiously mature one of inter-religious tolerance. How this can be accomplished is beyond the scope of this writing, but I suspect that the basis will be a deep awareness of belonging first and foremost to a common family and being committed to the values of freedom, democracy and respect for international law as exemplified by the European civilization that Albanians overwhelmingly consider as their chosen destiny.

Mother Teresa spoke in a Bektashi event in March 1991 in the hearing of all of the Albanian representatives of different religions saying: “I will pray for you, for unity and that we live together in peace and joy”(Trix 1994, 540). I hope the prayer of our Albanian saint will bear fruit as long as there are Albanians on Earth.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>This religious growth naturally is primarily nominal and along the lines of the religious background inherited, but if we talk about conversion then it is mostly the form of conversion referred as “intensification... the revitalized commitment” (Rambo 1993, 13), and much less in terms of “tradition transition” type of conversions (Rambo 1993, 13), meaning conversions toward a religious tradition other than the one of origin. The greatest increase in this second type of conversion, compared to their presence before communism took over, must be in the growth of the Evangelical branch of Christianity, still just under 1% of the population. Evangelicals, although present in Albania since the foundation of Evangelical Brotherhood by Gjerasim Qiriazhi in 1892 (Quanrud 2016), were relatively confined to the southern area of the country around Korca, numbering a few hundred until 1940 (Jacques 1995, 559), and almost extinct in 1991 but now are spread in many thousands (based on the records from the Evangelical Alliance of Albania, there are more than 20 000 believers in churches) across the whole country primarily through tradition transition conversions. According to the contested census conducted in Albania in 2011 there are in %: 57,12 Myslymane, 10,11 Katolike, 6,8 Ortodokse, 2,11 Bektashiane, 0,11 Evangjeliste.

<sup>2</sup>One famous example is captured by the work of Max Weber in his book *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, originally published in 1905 as *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*.

<sup>3</sup>The greatest shift to be expected in our time is the rise of a new generation of trend setters, with a radically different and a more involved perspective on religion, very different from the religiously indifferent generation who is now in power. How will they assert their religious views? What can we expect from them in our common social space? How will our pluralistic environment be affected? As we have witnessed in the last 10 years, neither European leaders nor USA politicians seem to have a coherent, convincing or comprehensive view on maintaining a religiously pluralistic environment. To this end I would expect more university department directed studies of religion will explore responsibly the understanding of religion and its varieties and this study should serve as a precursor for such efforts.

<sup>4</sup>This study is anthropological but it needs to be seen in the context of a multidisciplinary approach especially since it deals with religious issues in a specific context. “... for practical purposes Smart argued that it is best to limit the study of religion, at least in its initial stages, using three main academic traditions: philosophy, logic and the social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology. Thus, anyone who wishes to understand a religious movement needs to approach it both anthropologically/sociologically and historically. Then they need to analyze their findings using logic and the tools of philosophy.” (Irving Hexham, *Understanding World Religions. An interdisciplinary Approach*, Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2011, p.28-9).

<sup>5</sup>As it will become clear in discussing Malbardh later, it was the news media focusing on the story of building of the Catholic church in the place where the ruins of an older church existed in the village that made this case of a majority Muslim population building a Catholic church in their village very famous in Albania. There was recognition from different quarters of society of this case as an exemplary case of Albanian inter-religious harmonious coexistence as reflected also by the ceremonious giving of an honoring award by the U.S. Embassy in Albania to the village. On September 29, 2014, a representative of the U.S. Embassy in Tirana, Henry Jardine gave to the representatives of the village the award “Act Now” for “their inter-religious cooperation and voluntary initiative to build an inclusive place of worship” (Kastriot Marku, 2014). The February news documentary about Malbardh was followed by the event in September with great fanfare and the award from the U.S. Embassy, and in December the journalist of the year in Albania was the one who put forth this case on the national scene.

<sup>6</sup>An article from AFP on September 20, 2014 writes: “...Malbardh’s Muslims took ecclesiastical authorities by surprise by asking together with their Catholic ‘brothers’ for permission to rebuild the church” adding the words of Hajdar Lika, a sprightly 77-year-old Muslim: They did not take us seriously. They thought we were trying to get notice, but we wanted at all costs to rebuild this church.” The title of the article “Albania’s lesson in Muslim-Christian tolerance” implies what is said in the subtitle about this

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case of the church built by Muslims of Malbardh: “a symbol of the religious tolerance Pope Francis will be celebrating here on Sunday.” <https://reviewonline.co.za/afp/18850/albanias-lesson-in-muslim-christian-tolerance>

<sup>7</sup>There is some discrepancy with the number of villages in the municipality of Milot between the information I received from the office in Milot (12) and what is found on the internet (14), but it is due to rearranging the districts administratively and thus irrelevant to the positioning of Malbardh in its context. The administrative changes in grouping together Kurbin with Lezha district and reducing Milot to a smaller administrative unit within Kurbin (in 2015) does not seem to have changed anything in terms of the role of Milot with regard to Malbardh.

<sup>8</sup>There is more to be said later in the discussing of the nature of the anthropological angle of this study about the focus on a fragment of social life anthropologically producing a profile with value for reference in further broader research.

<sup>9</sup>This is again the occasion to reiterate that in studying religion I do not agree with Mircea Eliade and others who are “... influenced by the idea that there is something peculiar to religion that demands a unique method if it is to be studied meaningfully,” but rather agree with “Ninian Smart, Fred Welbourn, Rodney Stark, and many other students of religion [who] argue that religious studies is a field and not a discipline. ... They argue that, as with other forms of area studies, religion can and must be studied using a multiplicity of methods” (Irving Hexham, *Understanding World Religions. An interdisciplinary Approach*, Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2011, p.28).

<sup>10</sup>The importance of studying conversion is underlined by Austin-Broos in the context of the flux of the modern world today with the uncertainties of globalism or secular structures. “Studies of conversion, therefore, go to the heart of cultural passage in the world today” (Buckser and Glazier 2003, 9). When we think of culture in Albania, we do not connect it with religion mostly because of the influence of communism in the life of the generation of those who set the stage for the development of culture in dance and song, literature and the arts for the last two generations since after World War II. Yet, in the last two decades it has been the life of the different religious groups that have provided more of the cultural rhythms of the life of the people evident in the greater importance of the religious celebrations and holidays in our society today. This study may be just the beginning of the fruitful exploration of the phenomena of religious conversion in Albania.

<sup>11</sup>Altin M. is one example of a young man from Malbardh who in the days when the church was being built in the village sensed there the reflection of the intensification of the religious life he experienced in Milot where he was going to school. Being from a Muslim family, he was glad to hear of the developments with the building of the mosque more recently in his village and was present there on the day of the inauguration of the mosque, starting a serious religious journey in Islam with apparent consequences and changes in his behavior and interaction with his former teacher of grade school, a convert to Christianity whom I also interview in this study.

<sup>12</sup>I am reminded at this juncture of a possible red herring that would like to peel Evangelical Christianity away from the traditional religions in Albania making it suspect of hurting Albanian national identity, but Protestantism is also an Albanian traditional religion that has helped in the foundation of Albanian patriotic education (Cimbalo 2013, 244). I am in agreement with those who hold that Christianity (in all its variants) and Islam (in all its variants) have not threatened the Albanian identity after several centuries, but I am not sure that the reason is because no such religion can do to Albanian identity what it has done to other nations, since almost all of the nations in our region define themselves not based on their ethnicity or language but rather on a specific version of such a religion.

<sup>13</sup>In several studies I consulted in my research, I noticed the similarity of focus on understanding the dynamic in the inter-religious environment and the idea of the culture being threatened. In the Indian nationalist movement of *Hindutva*’s criticism: “Conversion to Christianity is portrayed as an act that threatens the integrity, security, and cultural essence of the nation. ... Conversion is not seen as simply an individual expression of faith but rather as a political choice that necessarily implicates questions of

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national allegiance, patriotism, and cultural determination. Conversion to Christianity threatens the very *raison d'être* of Hindu nationalism: that India is, and has always been, a Hindu nation in which Hindu values, culture and beliefs must be privileged" (Menon, p.51).

These concerns and discussions that may be relevant in India, seem not so in Albania because of the established religions of Christianity and Islam each including different traditions. Giovanni Cimbalo's study is very helpful in understanding the relatively happy situation of Albania with its different religions (Cimbalo 2013, 244). So, even though any change of Albanian identity may be neither possible nor preventable, it remains valuable to understand what is happening to the identity of the converted Albanians.

<sup>14</sup>The Evangelical church is less known as a traditional religion in Albania because it was barely established with only a few hundred converted believers primarily in the church of Korca in the 1930s and communism fought all religions ruthlessly erasing any religious indications from explaining the contribution of such Evangelicals as Qiriaz family, but their contribution was important in the history of the Albanian language and education. Giovanni Cimbalo, professor of Bologna University in Italy concludes after the scientific evaluations in his study of religions in Albania considering Evangelicalism as "traditional." Let me translate here a long passage that captures this important conclusion: "It remains a debated issue whether this religious community represents a 'new faith' in Albania or whether it lines up with the traditional faiths. We have now seen that the history of [this religious community] is deeply intertwined with the efforts for the emancipation of the Albanian people; with reviving and broad dissemination of [written] Albanian language; with raising the literacy of the country and with fighting for the independence of the country. The broad presence of the Evangelical groups in the different cultural activities; engagement of the representatives of these groups in studying and integrating the Albanian language [in education] and efforts for consolidating the Albanian culture, all of these have given an important contribution toward forming of that elite that impacted indelibly the history of Albania. This makes us affirm that if we consider the last two centuries, VUSH [Albanian Evangelical Alliance], or more correctly the religious organizations included in it, are part of the Albanian tradition, which means that they fulfill that criteria that measures the level of embedding of the religious faith in a country, which serves as a condition for the state to undertake the signing of the cooperation agreement, as it is sanctioned in the Constitution" (Cimbalo 2013, 244).

<sup>15</sup>This is an important collection of the law with specific regulations observed faithfully by the Albanians of the northern regions where Malbardh also falls, compiled by the Catholic priest Shtjefen Gjecovi (Gjecovi, Shjefen. 1972. *Kanuni i Leke Dukagjinit*. Prishtine: Rilindja).

<sup>16</sup>Tonin Gjuraj in his study about religious dynamics in the area around Shkodra in the north of Albania writes in this connection: "... conversion en masse. Masses of people accepted this conversion (Islamization) in order to survive and to gain something materially, while the leaders wanted to advance in their career or to protect their existing privileges. ... It is difficult to say that many people embraced Islam by their free will. Conversion was more a forced process than a voluntary acceptance by the common people" (Gjuraj 2013, 53).

<sup>17</sup>Citing from another student of religion in Albania, Roberto Morozzo della Rocca (1994), profesor Gjuraj writes about "occasions when many families practiced different religions, even individuals who practiced two religions simultaneously. Conversion in Islam of the head of the family happened often because of avoiding financial obligations" or quoting another (Stavro Skendi 1967) he continues: "In the beginning of our century (20<sup>th</sup> century) there were examples in the south when one of the brothers was a Muslim and the other was a Christian and they would celebrate together the big celebrations of their respective religions (Easter or Bajram)." The conclusion of professor Gjuraj is: "... clearly Albanian Muslims were very conscious of their origin. The Muslim brother or relative would not harbor hatred against any Christian because the blood relations in Albania were considered then and now as sacred" (Gjuraj 2013, 24, 25).

<sup>18</sup>See the above note about the celebrations of brothers of different religions.



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<sup>19</sup>There are many different sources to learn about the Bektashi religion which has its beginning as an Islamic sect closely related to the Janissaries and Hadji Bektash in 1328. Their coming in Albania is considered to have started as early as the 1300s with the work of Sari Salltek who is said to have “dressed in the robe of a Christian monk so as not to endanger his life and quietly planted the Bektashi faith in the Balkans. ... His motto was... ‘let the people be trained in the principles of Hadji Bektash but only in the name of the prophet Christ, without mentioning Hadji Bektash and his ancestor Muhammad with Ali’ ... Not until 1378 did the first missionaries dressed as Bektashi dervishes openly appear in Albania. ... The historical record is scanty. But certainly Bektashi presence in Albania goes back to the early 1700s” (Jacques 1995, 224).

<sup>20</sup>The dynamics of Albanian nationalism and religion are very important to understand at some level, therefore, a short description of the historical period when the national aspirations appeared is in order. We have seen until now how the first three of the religious communities of Albanians, Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims, started their influence among Albanians but by the time of the Albanian renaissance in the late 1890s we see all five of the current religious communities (including the Bektashi Muslim sect and the Evangelical Christian tradition) striving arm in arm naturally with their official and unofficial representatives to achieve the Albanian independence as one nation. I am intent here to emphasize the presence of Evangelicals in particular simply because it is common to overlook them at the early stage of the development of their religious identity. The other entity considered as part of the “historical dynamics” involved in the social context influencing religiosity, is the nation-state or some form of ethno-nationalism “often mainly based on language,” which is very relevant to the situation of Albania. “The dynamic of world religions also intersects with that of nation states... Nation-states are another form of modern imagined community, one in which the struggle to establish shared symbols and institutions can become intense...” (Buckser and Glazier 2003, 5). Imagining the Albanian nation and Albanian nation state is what started with the Albanian renaissance from the middle of the 1800s but found its culmination between 1878 and 1912.

<sup>21</sup>As professor Gjuraj writes: “All of the Balkan nationalities, except Albanians, enjoyed a distinct religious homogeneity” (Gjuraj 2013, 26).

<sup>22</sup>We cannot agree that “Albanianism” is a religion because that would make ridiculous any definition of religion either giving the wrong impression that Albanians are not normally religious as other people or that they are more nationalistic than other people when neither is the case; Albanians are normal in both respects. “Albanianism” is a metaphor for social cohesion prior to or independent of religious considerations because of the particular situation where Albanians find themselves at the time of defining their nationhood in modern terms in order to form their independent national state.

<sup>23</sup>Sulstarova never again mentions the Protestants in his short book except in that quoted passage, but when he writes that the renaissance patriots “laid the foundation of the national Albanian culture and created the national myths, seeking to integrate all Albanians under the national identity” (Sulstarova 2015, 120), the informed reader should be mindful also of the Qiriazi family who started the first Albanian school for girls in 1891, which was considered by the patriot Mihal Grameno as “national nest” (Kuanrud 1998, 166). Evangelicals in Albania, therefore, are an integral part of the Albanian culture, having entered the Albanian heart with their love and contribution for the Albanian language doing foundational work in the formation of the Albanian literary language but also being in the forefront of the Albanian education with the Albanian schools, especially with the education of girls since 1891 (Cimbalo 2013). In November 2017, Evangelicals celebrated 125 years of the founding formally of the Evangelical Brotherhood which now serves as the umbrella organization for the whole community of Evangelicals in Albania. Giovanni Cimbalo, a scholar who studied the reality of religious communities in Albania wrote about the deserved status as an “Albanian traditional religion” for Evangelicals (Cimbalo 2013, 244). The reason I emphasize here the presence of Evangelicals and their status in the cultural formation of the nation while lacking in being acknowledged for such contribution as broadly is due to the fact of their influence in the lives of the few converts from the village of Malbardh with whom we will meet in the course of this study, hence the need to have some idea of the history of this tradition in Albania.

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<sup>24</sup>See the note above for the indication of the study which puts Albanian Protestants (Evangelicals) also within the bounds of an “Albanian traditional religion” and not simply an “official religion” based on the government signing of an official “agreement” in 2011. As a matter of fact, Judaism is another “official” religion in Albania so there is a distinction to be made between “traditional,” “official,” and other present religious groups. As for the word “complete,” the intent is not to suggest that the religious scene is limited to these “traditional” religions because in Albania there are many other religious groups that are thriving beside the traditional ones, but the embedding of such new religions in the life of the Albanians to the point that they are considered of such significant influence in the life of the nation as to merit the designation as “traditional” takes time and remains to be a consideration of the next generation at the earliest. Again Cimbalò is helpful in distinguishing and measuring the progression of a religion toward being rooted in a society (Cimbalò 2013, 255).

<sup>25</sup>The Bektashi dimension of Islam is very prominent during this period through the contribution of some of the most influential leaders of the Albanian renaissance movement, the three Frashëri brothers: Naim (our national poet), Abdyl (the premier leader of the League of Prizren) and Sami (one of the main ideologues of Albanian nationalism). But it should not be gathered from this quick presentation of history that this is whole story. By far the more numerous and influential members of the broad Albanian movement toward national independence and formation of the Albanian national awareness include the representatives and the intensive work of Catholics in the north and many Muslim Albanians who loved the country well. As one of my readers of this study pointed out “If you would do a religious reading of the situation no one would compete with the contribution of the Franciscans. The Franciscan communities are the cradle of ethno-cultural values in many ways, including even archeological research. The string of pearls in the names of the star contributors would include Muslim clerics as well as Catholics such as Kacorri, Dibra, Fishta, Bumci, Serreqi etc.” (personal written communications).

<sup>26</sup>Protestant Evangelicalism in Albania is commonly perceived to be a phenomenon of the last 27 years since the fall of communism because of the obvious momentum this movement definitely experienced in this period. But the Protestant or rather the Evangelical dimension of Christianity made its entrance into the Albanian scene with the aforementioned great contribution in the formation of the modern Albanian nation through the first publication of the Albanian Bible in 1827 (Lloshi 2012), which became a significant source for the development of “Western Albanology” as mentioned earlier and accounts in part for at least two of the four “phenomena that gave birth” to Albanian nationalism; Albanology and the Albanian book publishing and broad dissemination.

Before the formal start of the period in view here (1878-1912) there was also another version of the Bible that Protestants put out in Albanian (with another creative alphabet) in 1866 (*Kater ungjillat e Zotit dhe shëlbisit tone Iesu Krishitit edhe Punete Apostuivët* gegerisht). Xhevat Lloshi writes that beside the Bible, translated by Kostandin Kristoforidhi and widely disseminated since 1872, it was also published and disseminated broadly an Albanian primer, a Protestant catechism and a book with stories of the Bible by a Protestant author (Kristoforidhi 2017, Volumi 9:9). These publications in Albanian by Protestants, when the alphabet was not finalized yet, and contributing in the formation of the alphabet of the Albanian language in 1908, was so significant that based on the writings published by them over many years, Komisia Letrare (Literature Commission) working during 1916-1918 decided to use the dialect of the language of the Bible put out by the Protestants to serve as the basis of the Albanian literary language, thus recognized the importance of the work done through Evangelicals (Kristoforidhi 2017, Volumi 9:49). The contribution of the Protestant Evangelical tradition is captured well also in a recent publication by Biblioteka Kombëtare e Shqipërisë dhe Institute for Albanian and Protestant Studies, 2017: *The Albanian Book and Protestant Enterprise: a 200-year Cultural Journey*. Tirane: Vernon Publishing.

<sup>27</sup>The other neighboring nations had it easier by consolidating along one religion but Albanians in having it more difficult in the beginning started earlier their more enlightened experiment of religious pluralism. The lessons to learn from the Albanian experiment are primarily in regard to the importance of recognizing the value of the others as people belonging to the same family equally in spite of their differing inherited religion.

<sup>28</sup>The national school system was started in the late 1890s. Isa Blumi writes: “Until the 1880s there did not exist a single officially recognized Albanian-language school in all of the Albanian-populated

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territories. ... After years of negotiation, the first secular school for boys (it was initially mixed) opened in Korca on March 7, 1887, and four years later, the first school for girls opened in the same town” (Blumi 2002, 51). Beside more established communities in the north of Albania with Catholics publishing and teaching in the Albanian language, it was the Evangelicals in Korca with establishing this first school of girls mentioned by Blumi above that were integral and important in the development of Albanian national education. Beside this first school in Korca, the Evangelicals with Qiriazi and Dako continuing in Tirana, the capital, with establishing the Qiriazi Institute and followed by Telford Erickson founding the Kavaja School of Agriculture followed by another American, Harry Fultz, who started the technical school, formed part of those few important institutions that created the first bulk of technical skills in the nation during the reign of King Zog upon which more would be built by the Communist state that took over in 1944.

<sup>29</sup>So, let us not miss the terribly important fact that this most charismatic leader and his most ruthlessly controlling government was ruling unchallenged for three decades in a relatively small country sealed from outside influence, over a population that had not known any other government and where all of the information was filtered effectively to bring only credibility to this ruling ideology. It is not a far-fetched analogy to consider Albania until the end of this era, between 1985-1990, as a big family under the strong hand of a grandfather with its subservient sons who competed with each other to please him by being even more harsh than needed. There was order and no dissent allowed so life was predictable and very uniform around the country to a very large degree.

<sup>30</sup>Hulusi Hako, the mouthpiece of this staunchest antireligious communist stance said in 1986: “Religion and backward customs still have roots and have not been decisively destroyed. ... Religion was interwoven with the happenings, customs and thoughts of Albanian society, and injected its poison in the joys and sorrows of life, from birth all the way to death. ... Schools must explain to students the import and harm of religious rites, dogmas, practices, superstitions and backward customs, lest they view as acceptable the religious influence at home” (Jacques 1995, 571). Someone may want to take this as a sign of desperation, but I believe this was a clear sign of their success and the incredible ambition to truly eradicate not only any practice of religion but also any vestige of the credibility of the idea of religion in the Albanian life.

<sup>31</sup>Communism as an ideology is not nationalistic in character and was used to actually antagonize Albanian nationals against each other in the name of its internationalist ideology, so it can be labeled as antinationalist in its working. Therefore, it bears mentioning again, amazingly and ironically, the result in Albania was that this most antinationalist spirit created a stronger national identity for Albanians as a whole. What I mean by this is that Albanian cultural features and language remained the main ingredients to work with in creating a civic culture for the relatively ethnically homogenous state through mass education and thorough penetration of the country’s population with widely disseminated patterns of life mobilizing everyone.

It is important to understand the argument of the book by Anscombe (Anscombe 2014) about ‘faith’ as an ingredient of the independent movements in the Ottoman Empire, especially for the other nations around Albania. But, for Albania, the arrival and establishment of communism started the most important phase of development in the recently unified nation. During this period, the nation was made to go through a generally effective conversion to atheism, eroding even more the relevance of religions in the daily life of the people and eventually creating a more broadly accepted ideological universe empty of references to the otherworldly, reinforcing the attention to the modalities of living together, engineering a new and more thorough mixing that was ever possible before among Albanians.

<sup>32</sup>The ethnic dimension of the Albanian nationalism during the communist period was in direct continuation with the renaissance but there was another element that was added which was ideologically motivated by communism, namely the class struggle. Quoting Enver Hoxha, “the creation of the new man with a Marxist-Leninist worldview, proud nationalist spirit, proletarian internationalism and socialist collectivism” (E. Hoxha, 1985a:835-836), we can see that in spite of negative consequences in the Albanian society, Enverism intensified the national awareness of all Albanians in very effective ways that were not possible before or after due to the effective control of Communists over all of Albania. The territory of this thoroughgoing nationalism was that of Albania proper and did not include other territories

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of Albanians outside of the state. I agree that “considering the almost total isolation from every kind of influence beside the official propaganda, it is understandable why this perception [of the nation] had a deep impact in the masses of people, especially in the young generation who had not experienced any other regime different from the socialist one” (Sulstarova 2015, 63). This young generation would be definitely those born in the 1960s which would make almost half of the population in the 1980s.

<sup>33</sup>The lack of a national education in the early stages of the Albanian national movement which would have fostered an “imagined” Albanian identity is another stronger indication that whatever national identity Albanians developed was less imagined than felt to be true in a direct way by simply belonging together to one ethnic entity easily recognized through the spoken Albanian language. I agree with Isa Blumi that education has not been a significant factor in creating the “myth” or whatever is the content believed to constitute the Albanian identity in the minds of Albanians in the early stages of the Albanian national movement for independence (Blumi 2002). Blumi writes: “... that nationalists’ articulations of a sophisticated and geographically broad claim to a singular identity took place outside the context of an educational system that reinforced Albanian identities. The first generation of Albanian patriots in the age of the modern nation-state materialized from an educational environment specifically hostile to their Albanian identity” (Blumi 2002, 54).

<sup>34</sup>So, whatever communism added to the national identity with regard to the ideological emphasis of Marxist view of life, creating myths of the heroes of the World War II or even the myth of Enver Hoxha as the ultimate leader, as far as the foundational elements of that identity they remained important and were popularized and used to give credibility to whatever was added.

<sup>35</sup>When communism fell, there were many different expressions of this distorted view Albanians had cultivated about their national identity as married to the communist ideology and realizing its bankruptcy Albanians emigrated to the west declaring a break with the lies they were fed, but I do not agree that they could “deny their national identity” even though it may be true that the “national identity of Albanians experienced serious shaking” (Sulstarova 2015, 68, 84).

<sup>36</sup>A good analysis of different issues involved in the transition from communism would include the paradigm behind the mentality that Albanian communism fostered both with regard to science and materialism and with regard to identity. The Albanian identity during communism was to include the upper layers of a materialistic worldview commitment as belonging to the indoctrinated generation with a scientific worldview and such an ideological perspective on history which was broadly and primarily evolutionistic. But the Albanian identity, as belonging to “the only truly socialistic society” was easily shed at the fall of communism. It became obvious that what was dropped quickly by Albanians at the disillusionment with communism did not include all of the layers of what Albanians considered to be weaved in their identity, such as belonging to the Albanian speaking people group, tracing their origin deep in history, identifying with the flag of Scanderbeg and belonging to the territory in which they live as their rightful ancestral home. They could drop the communist star from the flag, but it did not cause Albanians to feel their identity was altered because of that.

<sup>37</sup>The reaction from the educated elite of today’s Albania regarding the initiative to introduce some teaching about religion in public schools was very telling about the predominant view of religion among these important representatives of the nation.

<sup>38</sup>(Rambo 1993) When Rambo discusses the types of conversion he considers some variant that would allow for this conclusion that Albanians in general can be loosely considered a converted people. This means that those born after 1960 grew up and came of age in a thoroughly atheistic society. This generation is the dominant generation in the politics and culture of post-communist Albania until now. This generation of current Albanian leadership carried the characteristics of that mentality regarding religion with which they grew up during communism into the first decades of the 1990s, but they had to open the door to religions through passing liberal laws and welcoming all forms of religion. In some sense then even this most entrenched non-religious generation had some sort of conversion at least as

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made evident by making room for religion in their theoretical conceptualization of the social life. Some of them, maybe not a large percentage, discovered religion and sincerely delved into the varied forms of religion made available in Albania since the 1990s so the conversion of Albanians may go even deeper in certain parts of this population; but most importantly, this is the parent generation of the “millennials,” including those born since 1980 in Albania, and they have been very open to let religion get to their children who now are starting to set the tone of the Albanian society.

<sup>39</sup>In one sense, almost all of the Albanians are a converted people. In another sense, one can say that mostly among the young generation of Albanians are there the “true” converts. By “true” in this context we simply mean there is some personal knowledge and commitment to a specific religion rather than merely identifying with the religion of their parents or just being willing to accept religion as a credible social force. It is significant to note that the majority of the Albanian primary leaders in the different religious communities come from this younger generation.

<sup>40</sup>Only with regard to the desire of Albanians in general to join the European Union was it discussed, sometimes heatedly, whether leaving behind Islam is more appropriate to assert Albanian Europeanism. But even this discussion is more of a discussion of the older generation and less interesting to the 20 or 30 year olds.

<sup>41</sup>Many people are not aware of how religious perspectives are related to political actions of adherents, but every religion seeks to and actually influences in definite ways how their adherents live. If for no other reason, simply because the actions of our neighbors have an influence on our lives, we should try to understand their religious perspectives and ideas and engage responsively in better understanding where we all come from ideologically to negotiate a common social space for the good of all.

Gorsuch is in agreement when he advises about future approaches in the study of religion, saying: “To predict an individual behavior in a particular situation, one needs scales as specific as the behavior to be predicted. ... it is apparent that this principle must always be taken into account when designing any contemporary study involving a religious attitude or value and behavior”(Gorsuch 1988, 7).

<sup>42</sup>Although I have sought from the beginning to not present here a version that is controversial, let me emphasize again that even if this way of thinking of Albanian history is deemed unbalanced in any way, the rest of the study is not invalidated any more than the apple is deemed inedible because it is put on a wooden platter instead of the gold one that was expected.

<sup>43</sup>The most relevant part of history for our purposes is the recent communist past, and there is no shortage of information about this period agreeing on the fact that the religious dimension of life was thoroughly eviscerated from the social realm. By and large the religious intentionality was missing even in the confines of the family while it is hard to be dogmatic about the personal dimension of religiosity in scattered individuals throughout the nation where examples like At Zef Pllumi shine their light in a dismal reality (Pllumi 1995).

<sup>44</sup>Marilyn Strathern, professor of Anthropology of Girton College, Cambridge, wrote: “If at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century one were inventing a method of enquiry by which to grasp the complexity of social life, one might wish to invent something like the social anthropologist’s ethnographic practice” (Strathern 1998, 1). Strathern, Marilyn. 1998. *Property, substance and effect*. London: Athlone.

<sup>45</sup>Wilhelm Dilthey came up with idea and made popular the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* in the late 1800s but another Wilhelm, Wilhelm Windelband, a philosopher of science, in 1894 came up with two other distinctions such as the idiographic and nomothetic regarding scientific theories or “search for reliable knowledge... ‘the study of what always is [nomothetic] and the study of what once was [idiographic]’” (Bernard 2006, 81).

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<sup>46</sup>In explaining the goal of the idiographic sciences Windelband wrote that it is the effort to produce “portraits of humans and human life with all the richness of their unique forms (Windelband 1998 [1894], p. 16) Windelband, W. 1988 [1894]. History and Natural science. *Theory and Psychology* 8:5-22.

<sup>47</sup> Emphasis is mine.

<sup>48</sup>There is some good description of the different research models and research strategies that are considered as special variations of these models in Bob Mathews and Liz Ross, *Research Methods. A practical guide for social and human sciences*. England:Pearson Education Limited 2010, pp115-136.

<sup>49</sup> *Sociology and Anthropology illustrated:*

Good descriptions vary dependent on the kind of tool one uses. Here I want to highlight the important difference between sociological and anthropological descriptions. Both perspectives are valuable and can combine easily because it is like the relationship of mathematics and esthetic or educational aspects of a tourist trip. When you plan to go to visit some tourist site somewhere you would like a presentation that tells you what you can expect to see and what it will cost. You may have a preference for one or the other description, but both descriptions are needed for a successful trip. In keeping with this illustration, sociological descriptions, because of the predominance of quantitative methods it usually employs, would involve more discussions of the mathematical kind, full of evaluation of the ratio of depended, independent and correlated variables, and Likert scales and Chronbach alphas, which function importantly to measure the value of a study. But then, there is the anthropological description which, because of its predominantly qualitative methodology, is more like accentuating the aesthetic and educational value of the tourist trip with those “thick descriptions” alla Geertz. This study is not without the analysis of the sociological kind, but it is primarily a description of a trip into the environment of inter-religious interactions among Albanians of different religious traditions, highlighting the contours of the harmonious relationship sometime spoken of as tolerance, which are important to understand in their significance.

<sup>50</sup>*Ethnography* combines two words, *ethno* which means “people” and *graphy* which means “writing” to refer to the most distinctive way anthropologists do their work, namely studying different aspect of life in a particular group of people and writing up the findings describing and analyzing their research and engagement with the subject matter (Howell and Paris 2011, 10).

<sup>51</sup>Postmodern theory is a broad term that includes different vies basically declaring that positivist or objective knowledge of human phenomena is inherently limited thus presuming everyone is biased in approaching any object of knowledge. Such insight is valid and I believe the perspectivalism as an anthropological theory that highlights the positionality of knowledge is well suited for guiding the anthropological research and the writing of ethnography.

<sup>52</sup>Albeit “much of anthropological data analysis is done in the interpretivist tradition, and some empirical anthropologists reject the positivist epistemological tradition, while other empirical anthropologists identify with that tradition” (Bernard 2006, 24).

<sup>53</sup>I find it unnecessary to rephrase what is easily found on the web describing very well Giddens’ structuration theory: “The theory of structuration is a [social theory](#) of the creation and reproduction of social systems that is based in the analysis of both [structure](#) and [agents](#), without giving primacy to either. Further, in structuration theory, neither [micro-](#) nor [macro-focused](#) analysis alone is sufficient. The theory was proposed by [sociologist Anthony Giddens](#), most significantly in *The Constitution of Society*, which examines [phenomenology](#), [hermeneutics](#), and social practices at the inseparable intersection of structures and agents. Its proponents have adopted and expanded this balanced position. Though the theory has received much criticism, it remains a pillar of contemporary [sociological theory](#).”

<sup>54</sup>(Appadurai 1996) While Appadurai could stand for a representative view of the journal *Public Culture*, for different views on culture consider the ethnographic work Willis 1997 and in media studies Hall et al.

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1980 who would represent the Birmingham School of “cultural studies” but for a more media studies emphasis on culture as “a set of public texts” see Ginsburg et al. 2002.

<sup>55</sup>One way of thinking about this with regard to anthropological research is related to the work of James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

<sup>56</sup>A recent study about religion in Eastern Europe by Pew Research Center used three words they take as ways to understand how people engage with religion: believing, behaving and belonging. They take as behaving the weekly worship attendance and thus Eastern Europeans primarily of the Orthodox Christian tradition show up as “believing and belonging without behaving” (Cooperman and Sahgal 2017, 8). It should be obvious that there is a lot of qualitative description effort that has to go on before we can boil down behaving religiously to worship attendance and again after you gather the quantitative information you need to walk back through the qualifying steps to get to what that data means regarding the religiosity of those people.

<sup>57</sup>Here we are following the perspective we mentioned earlier with regard to studying the religious field which includes different disciplines bearing on the issues such as “philosophy and logic, history, and the social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology” (Hexham, 2011, p.29).

<sup>58</sup>There is some danger that this important point will be missed: we tolerate people not ideas. Ideas are important in the existence of tolerance because if people do not have different or opposing ideas then we have nothing to tolerate somebody about. But ideas are not tolerated in the sense that we accept them as equal in truth to our own ideas we consider true. Ideas are to be debated and discussed and proven wrong or proven right, ideas are not persecuted when we disagree with them or prove them to be wrong. It is what we do to the people who hold those ideas that may be tolerant or not. This is an important point which is usually not understood in the debates about religion today and it is very problematic as I try to point out in this study as well.

<sup>59</sup>We will not be able to do justice here to the issue of pluralism, religious pluralism, but it is important to underline that truth and distinctiveness of specific religions needs not be sacrificed on the altar of pluralism, hence the challenge of living with religious others and the importance of understanding this better in Albania now that religions are doing a good job pronouncing their distinctives. Pluralism as a social reality is different from pluralism as a blending of different religious ideas blurring their distinctions and the later is more like a new religion than valid pluralism.

<sup>60</sup>The efforts of producing syncretistic religions such as Baha’i or other similar views of religion may be interesting, but they are not relevant for our discussion here because they are not what the adherents of the specific religions in Malbardh believe. For our purposes such syncretistic views are unacceptable as paradigmatic ways to analyze our situation in Albania. We are committed to a phenomenological analysis and are simply trying here to clarify logically the meaning of the terms we will use considering the way the specific religions in Malbardh, and in Albania generally, are normally understood.

<sup>61</sup>I hesitate to put here a long explanation of why I believe this to be true because it can be misunderstood since it can not be an exhaustive explanation including the many important things that can be said about both religions. But simply to show that there is a legitimate discussion about the issue and it is worth evaluating in a different setting and work I present here my preliminary thoughts and questions:

There are many things that can be said about the two major religions of the world, Christianity and Islam but now that they are coming to live in the same social spaces more and more there is a great need to understand their visions and how they motivate their adherents to do life on earth. There are many similarities but it is also the differences that we need to understand in order to imagine the interaction between the two religions.

The simple reason of the existence of different religions is evidence of the different views on reality including the ultimate reality and to assume these differences are not important does not do justice to how

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people of those religions view them. Therefore, we need to take the differences seriously and with regard to Christianity and Islam there are opposed doctrines which are important. As William A. Christian writes: “two doctrines are opposed if they can not be jointly accepted without absurdity”(Christian 1972, 2) and it is impossible to deny that some of the central affirmations of Christianity and Islam are opposed. As Harold Netland observes: “... opposition takes place not only on the level of doctrine but also with respect to courses of action advocated by various religious communities. Fundamental beliefs about the nature of the religious ultimate and the human predicament call for certain appropriate patterns of behavior”(Netland 1991, 111).

The deity of Jesus Christ (John 20:28-29), the foundational claim of Christianity (1 Corinthians 15:3, 13-14), is denied expressly by Islam (Sura 9:30). Even the death of Christ on the cross (Mark 15:37; 1 Thessalonians 4:14), an historical issue and not as a theological significance, is believed to be denied in the Qur'an (Sura 4:158), thus the concept of salvation is also completely different in each of the religions (Romans 3:21-26 vs. Sura 47:17).

The view of God as Trinity is opposed to the view of God in Islam and the way Christians refer to God as “father” is inappropriate for Muslims but there are other important views on the role of faith in life and living in society that are also at odds such as how to live in a society with religious others. For the Christian, Jesus clarified that the government is separate from the community of believers when he said “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (Matthew 22:17) while it is evident that Islam does not recognize such a separation of State from the religious institution of the leader of the Muslim community (Sura 4:83).

We are not considering here all the different ways Muslims may choose to live in any given society but what Islam as their religion demands from them just as what Christianity demands from its followers. Philosopher and phenomenologist of religion Ninian Smart (Smart 1983, chaps. 3-8) enumerates the different aspects of religion such as: (1) ritual dimension, (2) mythological dimension, (3) doctrinal dimension, (4) ethical dimension, (5) social dimension, (6) experiential dimension. This means we cannot do justice here to the distinctions of Christianity and Islam but just to point out there is reason to expect differences in what each religion teaches its members regarding life from a certain perspective.

With regard to relating to religious others in the same environment we could look at the example and teaching of Jesus who taught his followers to love their enemy and in no instance did Jesus use the sword even when they were coming to arrest and kill him unjustly. On the contrary, Jesus taught his disciples who had brought swords to defend themselves “put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). Furthermore, Jesus indicated that his kingdom was not of this world as to fight with flesh and blood to establish his kingdom “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53). Jesus said expressly: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36). This meant for his disciples that while Jesus was king and had all of the authority they were not to use force in serving him as soldiers for his Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus said to them right at the end when he left the earth and gave the order to his followers to go into all the world with God's message: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the world” (Matthew 18-20). The followers of Jesus understood this command to go into all the world and spread the gospel, good news, of God's love in Jesus, as a command to fight the “good fight” (2 Timothy 4:7) and it is explained that this fight is not against flesh and blood, namely it is not with swords killing any enemies but it is a spiritual battle: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

This is one very important responsibility that all of Jesus' followers have, namely to spread the message of God to all people in all of the world and this has bearing on how they should treat the people around them who do not believe. But it is not only Christianity that has this call for including the whole world in its plan, Islam has a similar call for its followers, yet it appears that the “kingdom” of Islam is an earthly



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kingdom and Muhammad was an earthly king who used the sword himself and called his followers to follow him according to his example until Islam is supreme in all the earth “It is He who has sent His messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth to make it triumphant above all religion though the idolaters may dislike it” (Sura 9:33). Here is one place we see what the call for Muslims here on earth includes: “O you who believe! Take your precautions, then go forth in parties (to jihad), or go forth all together. ... Let those fight for the cause of Allah who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter. Whoever fights for the cause of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, on him We shall bestow a great reward. And why should you not fight for the cause of Allah and of the weak among men and of the women and the children... Those who believe fight for the cause of Allah; and those who disbelieve fight for the cause of taghut. So fight the minions of Satan. ... Have you not seen those to whom... fighting was prescribed... saying: “Our Lord! Why have you ordained fighting for us? ... But what is wrong with these people, that they fail to understand a single fact?... He who obeys the Messenger obeys Allah... So fight (o Mohammad) for the cause of Allah. You are not responsible (for anyone) except for yourself, and rouse the believers” (Sura 4:71,74-78,80, 84).

Not all Christians and not all Muslims know or follow exactly what their respective kings say but what is important here is to point out that there are two different visions for life here on earth and when Christians and Muslims live in the same social space it is important to imagine what would happen if they obey their respective kings and how should they live together.

There are many different issues to analyze before one can arrive at a good understanding of different teachings of the Bible and the Qur'an and it is not the purpose of this writing to address this issue in a systematic way but it is important to start asking questions in order to understand better what the people of the other religion from ours is expected to believe from the teaching of their holy book and religion.

<sup>62</sup>This will be explained later but it is important to understand this term not as referring to non-Albanians but rather to anybody who is not native to the village of Malbardh.

<sup>63</sup>This is measurement is based on the assumption that the converts are more aware of the specific beliefs making the important core of the religion they transitioned from which is the religion of the people interacting with them in the environment of the inter-religious interactions we are studying.

<sup>64</sup>Jonathan Benthall distinguishes the “Islamic Toleration” from other egalitarian views of toleration, and it is important to not lose sight of this important element of tolerance, namely the egalitarian nature of it so that tolerance not be reduced to whatever definitions some with power want it to have (Benthall 2005).

<sup>65</sup>The title of this news documentary is important to notice “Muslims build the church and Catholics build the mosque.” The documentary itself focuses on the church that was already built (it is not clear why now after eight years did the media chose to cover this case since there was no actual building of the mosque yet). So you could see the church as tangible evidence of the existence of a special relationship between these people of different religions (this is the case of Malbardh in this study) but the equivalence with the reciprocity in the building of the mosque is only implied and presumed unproblematic or of equal value for the villagers but this is not necessarily the case because the building of the mosque was not a reality at that point and I did not analyze the processes involved in that particular project so I am not ready to admit what the title of the program assumes with regard to the equivalency of the engagement in both building projects in the same way by both groups. I focused on the dynamics as revealed in the building of the church and I will only tangentially notice the building of the mosque as influenced more by outside factors such as media and others.

<sup>66</sup>In September 2014, Henry Jardine, as a representative of the U.S. Embassy in Tirana, gave the village of Malbardh the award “Act Now” in recognition of “Their inter-religious cooperation and the voluntary initiative to build an all-inclusive place of worship.” Moreover, the journalist Marin Mema, received an important award from the Union of the Albanian Journalists in December 2014 as “Journalist of the Year” (Marku 2014).

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<sup>67</sup>In Appendix A I have included the information about the participants of the focus group and notes relevant to the focus group as well as other interviews.

<sup>68</sup>The building of the mosque that was just started when I went to the village in April 2015 was apparently related to the publicity of the media but one of the participants in the focus group wanted me to believe that they had considered building the mosque even earlier. I have decided to not probe the aspect of the building of the mosque because it seemed less clear that it was not influenced by outside factors while the building of the church was done well before any publicity would have troubled the waters to be able to see clearly the undercurrents at work.

<sup>69</sup>The building of the church is significant with regard to understanding the reality of inter-religious harmony in this village. However, how it relates to the villagers' understanding of God and religion is more important. To enter this inner world of thoughts and ideas one must overcome several barriers connected with their immediate struggles and life concerns in a poor village.

<sup>70</sup>The other woman I encountered in the village was another hard working woman coming home on a donkey. Though a Muslim married in a Muslim family, she was related as a sister in law to a Catholic lady (evidence of mixed marriage during communism) whom we also saw visiting with her just as she set out to go to her village on the other side of the mountain.

<sup>71</sup>With regard to the idea of building a mosque earlier, the situation is less clear as to the desire and sustained effort from the inside to have one built. Some reasons suggested include such as the very short time of having had a mosque inside the village, being close to the village graveyard, and the fact mentioned that some did not like the idea of noise coming from the minaret five times a day, but this whole development with the building of the mosque remained peripheral in the conversations in spite of me asking about it.

<sup>72</sup>There is one whole chapter (chapter 19) in the canon of Albanian traditions of the north where Malbardh also fits, which describes in some detail the different kinds of *kumbari* distinguishing the one related to (1) baptism, (2) marriage, which refers to the families of the bride and groom and (3) hair cutting of the child which opens the door for inter-religious *kumbari* (Shtjefen Gjecovi, *Kanuni I Leke Dukagjinit*, published by "Kuvendi", pp 70-73).

<sup>73</sup>As you may notice here, the mosque that had just started when I first visited the village in April 2015 was now built by the time I went to the village again in September 2015.

<sup>74</sup>The important fact that the church was built in 2006, but it was not until the media picked up the story eight years later that the interest for building the mosque was awoken is telling of the intensification underfoot in Malbardh and in Albania more generally as the result of these outside factors.

<sup>75</sup>The contrast with the instigation from the inside for the building of the church this offer and the influence of the media as an outside influence on Malbardh is very significant to note.

<sup>76</sup>Again, it is significant to note the contrast of the impetus to build the church with the initiative of the insiders and the apparent role of outside factors such as the media and others from outside of the village in the building of the mosque. I consider this new reality to be precipitated significantly by the publicity of the case because the church was built eight years prior to this newfound momentum with the media coverage and the building of the mosque.

<sup>77</sup>In this connection, I am reminded of a very astute insight of Os Guinness with regard to the important difference between USA and Europe with its "tradition and close-knit living situations" as a factor in preserving society facing change. This is in line with the basis for the hope of these villagers to preserve their inter-religious harmony in their village through fostering naturally their traditional way of life (Guinness 2012, 133).

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<sup>78</sup>My conclusion is that this Malbardhian goodheartedness will be tested now that the realities of religious pluralism include not only indigenous cultivation of different religious ideas but also easy transplanting of foreign ideas. Therefore, I hope that pluralistic wisdom will be added to ensure that the existing harmony of Malbardh will transition into no less than true inter-religious tolerance. With hundreds of Albanian Muslims enlisted with the Islamic terrorists of ISIS, there is now present, in whatever small measure among the Albanian Muslims and their mosques, the element of intolerance. This will need to be confronted at different levels if Albania will remain ‘a garden of religious harmony’ in the Balkans, as we see represented in Malbardh.

<sup>79</sup>(Poulton and Taji-Farouki 1997, 242) The very loose way the term ‘Muslim identity’ is used here can only be justified as a label to identify people in a region by a name but it is very problematic if one assumes the name ‘Muslim’ to mean more than a label. Of all the cases at least this is definitely true if one uses the label ‘Muslim’ for Albanians of post-communist Albania until today.

<sup>80</sup>(*Random House Webster’s College Dictionary* 1995, 611) A random dictionary explains the meaning of harmony in this way: “1. Agreement; accord; harmonious relations. 2. a consistent, orderly, or pleasing arrangement of parts; congruity.” I agree that harmony as a word indicates an even higher level of interaction than the word ‘tolerance’ seeks to convey because it is more like ‘an arranging of parts’ of one entity, so in one sense it does not seem right to say that we have harmony between religious others in Albania but we do not have robust inter-religious tolerance yet. Yet, I argue that this is most likely the case in Malbardh at this point in time.

<sup>81</sup>This opens an important discussion which is impossible to develop here as it deserves but the broad lines of argument include the acknowledgment with Ninian Smart [N. Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983), chaps. 3-8] that there are at least six dimensions of religion: (1) ritual, (2) mythological, (3) doctrinal, (4) ethical, (5) social, and (6) experiential. This is important in order that we do not appear to hold that religion is to be reduced to a set of beliefs but at the same time no one should ignore the central place of beliefs in a religion since the particular emphasis of a religion is established in terms of basic beliefs about reality and the place of humanity in this reality. Ninian Smart writes: “the world religions owe some of their living power to their success in presenting a total picture of reality through a coherent system of doctrines” (*The Religious Experience of Mankind*. 3d ed. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1984, p.8).

With another student of religions, William A. Christian, we affirm that “two doctrines are opposed if they cannot be jointly accepted without absurdity” [William A. Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines: A Study in the Logic of Dialogue Among Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p.2]. Christian doctrines of the deity of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of salvation based on the historical death of Christ on the cross and his subsequent resurrection in Jerusalem in AD 30 are opposed by the Qur’anic doctrine as explicitly written in Sura 19:35; 5:72, 75 and in Sura 4:156-158. From such opposition at the level of doctrine there is natural progression and we observe also that opposition takes place on the level of courses of actions advocated by various religious communities. How to treat religious others is another area of discussion that can be illustrated by explicit commands which include opposition (Sura 2:216-218; 9:29-30; 123). Again, doctrinal opposition can bring opposition in the disposition of the followers of doctrines but because of other factors it is possible to avoid such confrontation. Yet, it is not appropriate to envision for followers of different doctrines to be in doctrinal harmony; this is what I am clarifying at this point, namely that different religions have different visions and cannot be harmonized without changing those religions into something else.

<sup>82</sup>Christianity and Islam are irreducibly the world’s foremost missionary religions. Christianity’s major teachings of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus are considered as blasphemy and sin by Islam to be opposed in their religious mission while they are to be proclaimed to everybody as good news by the Christians in their own religious mission. The lives of their followers are to be aligned to these respective missions which are at opposing ends of each other and that is why we cannot talk about inter-religious harmony. This sounds very pessimistic and politically incorrect, but I am looking at the theoretical and theological dimension of the situation based on declared theological goals of both religions; I am not precluding peace and harmony which is possible in the broad scope of social interactions nor predicting

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the real future of people who are unpredictable in their theoretical inconsistencies for which we should be more grateful.

The term “mutually exclusive” here refers to Christianity’s and Islam’s opposing views about important aspects of reality both in the theoretical realm and as the proscribed goals of such religions in important areas of life for their adherents. For example, the deity of Jesus Christ is foundational to Christianity theoretically and to Christians practically, while this is definitely opposed by Islam. One of the important goals of Christians, their worldwide witness to their faith of Christ being the only way to salvation for every person and, therefore, seeking everyone’s conversion to Christ, is opposed by the goal of Muslims who are involved in making Islam supreme over all religions in the whole world by all means and converting away from Islam as deserving death. These specific views and goals make it impossible for these two religions to be in harmony as defined here, as parts of one whole, but we need not be all brothers from the same mother to live in peace together. Again, this needs not be a dismal picture of the inter-religious interaction because instead of harmony we can strive for tolerance; tolerance is achievable and it is truly a glorious achievement of mankind.

<sup>83</sup>I feel the need to qualify again, that harmony, as defined with having the same goal in their efforts as parts of one whole, when it is spoken as being between religious adherents of different religions living according to their life visions which contradict each other, (precisely where they contradict each other because there are plenty of areas of possible agreement socially), cannot be theoretically expected, but nevertheless, it can practically exist, albeit for other than the reasons their religion may require and due to human inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies. We should welcome whatever good and harmonious relationship is displayed in our common social space, however, the proper word for the interaction possible between followers of these two religions, as conscientiously applied in its specifics by its adherents, is tolerance.

<sup>84</sup>But just like teams are only a small group of representatives we do not imply here that every believer of one particular religion fits this category. The majority of the people considered as belonging to a particular religion are less concerned than their representatives to keep the distinctions clear and for all practical purposes the religious people of different religions may find between each other a lot more in common in furthering the good in society together. The representatives are considered here only with regard to their religious distinctions, theoretically, not as we find them in real life where they have to engage with other people in their environment in other extra religious ways. Living in a society involves all of us in simultaneously interacting contexts where the religious and the practical merge seamlessly and not as we are dissecting them in this discussion for the purpose of understanding the nature and makeup of religious belonging and interaction.

<sup>85</sup>Apparently there was not any momentum related to the needs of the Muslims in Malbardh for a mosque because their religious life was not connected with a mosque in their village but even though they were Muslims it was connected with the old church. It was not until 2014, when the media decided (for unknown reasons) to highlight the case of Malbardh related to the building of the church, which happened eight years prior, that this Muslim man approached the Catholic co-villager with whom they went a decade earlier to the leaders of the Catholic church for the building of the church. It is possible that again some infrastructure needs might have welcomed the media attention about their inter-religious dynamics and funding of another religious building, this time a mosque, might spill over to pave the road to the village in the mountain. It is curious that the media from the beginning started with “Muslims build the church and Catholics the mosque” when there was not any real movement in the village to build a mosque. There needs to be a proper journalistic investigation of these connections in order to outline them well without prejudice but our focus now is in the dynamics of the inter-religious interactions in the village as related to the church primarily because the mosque seemed not such a village preoccupation and was down in the field below not in Malbardh proper as it sits on the hill. The response of the Catholic member of the village is significant to indicate the lack of such impetus from inside the village for a mosque beside the obvious impropriety of asking Catholic church leadership to build a mosque.

<sup>86</sup>I do recognize that the Catholic villager was apparently more aware in 2014 of the impropriety of the Catholic leadership to help build a mosque as requested by his Muslim friend, and generally from my research for this study it is true that the Catholics are more aware of their faith than the majority of the

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Muslims, but since the village of Malbardh is 95% Muslim and I naturally met with many more Muslims, it is fair to say that the mentality of the village as generally represented by the Muslim majority is what is described here.

<sup>87</sup>Albania is not immune from the evils of extremism experienced in other parts of the world not least because Albania has been opened wide to the world with its various influences for the last 27 years and there are reports of Albanian Muslims fighting in the ISIS ranks (Mejdini 2016). As an Albanian myself, I know how easy it is to brush aside such uncharacteristic expressions of Albanian religious life. But neglecting to pay attention now to the attitudes of Albanians as they develop under various influences, including the internet, and disorienting pressures of life in the global village, will not be justified especially in light of the evident reality in many parts of the world of suffering from inter-religious strife and violence. In order to protect the peace and promote tolerance in Albania I found it important to understand the factors contributing toward this desired outcome and measure the status of such factors today in order to more effectively focus on the areas needing improvement.

<sup>88</sup>With regard to the influence on the environment of Malbardh it is easier to see how Milot figures prominently, because of the daily interaction as a bigger center where the high school and more opportunities for the youth are located, thus influencing the mentality of the young people, arguably, even more strongly than the environment in the village itself. I was alerted to this very early in my visit to the village noticing the proximity of Milot and the presence of people from Milot as friends with my Malbardh interlocutors during my interviews, but at the time I intended to methodologically restrict the focus only to Malbardh.

<sup>89</sup>So Malbardh could be seen as a simple branch of a big tree of villages and communities that bear the same kind of fruit in terms of the peaceful and harmonious inter-religious interactions of its inhabitants. If we could trace all the braches and the roots of Malbardh it would be ideal but this is not a matter of horticulture. While we are focused at the particular fruit of this particular village, as evidence of a good case of Albanian inter-religious interaction, we have assumed the connectivity of Malbardh to the broader region and, therefore, it is important to note the connections and their influence in the inter-religious environment of Malbardh to ascertain to the best of our ability the best interpretation of what we find there.

<sup>90</sup>In considering this particular questionnaire developed by several professors at a Holland university in an international cooperation, it was very helpful to consider the process for developing of this tool (Broer et al. 2014).

<sup>91</sup> In the first page of Appendix B where this questionnaire is translated, you see a disclaimer (indicating the use of the tool just to test the reliability of the questionnaire) that is kept in this version as it is in the original in English but I received direct permission to actually use this questionnaire to measure tolerance at the University of Shkodra and not to simply test the tool itself.

<sup>92</sup>Nico A Broer et al., "Measuring Religious Tolerance among Final Year Education Students. the Birth of a Questionnaire.,"<sup>83</sup>. Referring to Potgieter et al (2014:3) writes that tolerance 'involves decision-making based on a certain value system, ethical **behavior**, reasonable argument, difference, as well as a spectrum of behavior.'

<sup>93</sup>(Schirmacher 2014, 15:72–75) Here is a good discussion of the meaning of religious freedom indicating the legitimate limitations in light of other human rights and pointing out illegitimate ones while emphasizing "a famous ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) dated May 25, 1993...[saying] 'The freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a democratic society.'"

<sup>94</sup>See table with selected items and notice item 33 in the category measuring respect. In the published article presenting the questionnaire it was item number 35.

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<sup>95</sup>Broer et al., “Measuring Religious Tolerance among Final Year Education Students. The Birth of a Questionnaire.” 94. Item 2: “I live strictly according to the rules of my religion/philosophy/life and worldview.” Item 3: “When having to take an important decision, I am strongly aware of my religion and/or my beliefs which are part of my religion/philosophy/life and worldview.”

<sup>96</sup> “Factors” here relate to grouping of questions related to measure a certain aspect of tolerancesuch as “respect,” “empathy,” “value of own religion,” “sense of freedom,” “sensibility to differences,” and “origin of own values.”

<sup>97</sup>From personal correspondence with Nico Broer in November 2016.

<sup>98</sup>*The correspondence view of truth:*

When we speak or write, or even think, we need to make sense. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s great contribution in this regard is worth reflecting at this juncture: “The sense-giving relation between language and the world is called ‘picturing’ because the words in a basic (elementary) sentence are supposed to stand for objects in the same way that points on the surface of a picture stand for points in physical space. Everything that we can say, and equally everything that we can think, must be a projection of a possible arrangement of objects”(Dancy and Sosa 2001, 524). A correspondence view of truth would be one that holds that true is such a statement in words that corresponds properly to the “arrangement of objects” that it refers to.<sup>98</sup>

From the point of view of the correspondence view of truth perspective, conversion is a serious matter of tolerance. Conversion is understandably disturbing for the people of the tradition the convert left behind, but to be protected as the right to pursue one’s own path toward any possible attainment of personal alignment with one’s view of reality. The right of freedom to follow one’s path within the law, according to the dictates of one’s conscience, is a pillar of the great western civilization exemplified in Europe and the United States. To jeopardize this pillar of freedom of conscience and belief is blindness to the privilege we are bequeathed by having this clearly also now enshrined in international law and the Declaration of Human Rights (Schirmacher 2014).

<sup>99</sup>As I indicated I am familiar with analyzing the theological dimensions of conversion from my previous work with religious organizations but in this study those dimensions are bracketed in order to surface the other aspects such as the cultural, social and personal dimensions of conversion.

<sup>100</sup>So (1)*Apostasy*, or defection, would refer to the abandoning of a certain faith of a certain recognized religious tradition and would be considered here as conversion because it does “constitute an important form of change, both individually and collectively in the contemporary setting” (Rambo 1993, 13). (2)*Intensification*, refers more to a case when the concerns or the beliefs of the community one may belong to nominally, start becoming paramount in one’s life giving shape to that individual’s activities and pursuits. (3)*Affiliation* would be the term appropriate for somebody becoming part of an institution or community of faith. It may be part of a previous “defection” type of conversion or it may be without any prior religious commitment. (4)*Institutionaltransition* refers to moving within one recognized religious tradition between different groups or denominations that make that tradition and it can be not as deep as another kind of conversion but consist in simple change of affiliation because of whatever reason. (5)*Traditiontransition*, often takes place in times of cultural change and upheaval, conquest or contact with a foreign power and a different worldview. But in a place like Albania where we already have the different traditions of major world religions such as varieties of Christianity and Islam, the “tradition transition” type of conversion need not include such historical upheavals any more. In the words of another writer they are “universes next door” (Sire 1997).

<sup>101</sup>An “institutional transition type involves the change of an individual from one community to another within a major tradition” says Rambo (Rambo 1993, 13), thus implying denominations such as Baptist or Presbyterian within the Protestant branch of Christianity rather than the move from Protestant to Catholic

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tradition. Even though some of the comments of the converts imply their understanding to be of a smaller scale of change when an Albanian Catholic becomes an Evangelical, this is due to specific factors in Albania which need more clarification but we should not muddle the situation here (Intervista me Xhoni, p.2).

We are seeking to represent the thinking of our converts in the context of the perception of the population in general and not to give precedence to a specific perspective on what should constitute a tradition, so for Albanians generally, as expressed also in the legal categorization of these five religious bodies (Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, Sunny and Bektashi) as distinct religious communities, we would consider a transition of an individual from one to another of these religious communities as a “tradition transition.” So the perception of some converts that the jump from Catholicism to Evangelicalism is of a lower threshold than the jump of converts from a Muslim background to Evangelicalism, can figure in our study as an explanatory factor for some important aspects of the environment of conversion but not as the categorizing principle of what constitutes a religious tradition in Albania.

<sup>102</sup> *Clarifying the distinctions of traditions in Albania:*

We need to clarify at this point the distinction between the “institutional transition” and “tradition transition” types of conversion because in Albania it is possible for many, as we see in some of the interviews with converts from Catholicism, to consider the traditional branches of Christianity, namely Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical as generally constituting one “tradition” when contrasted with both Sunni and Bektashi branches of Islam as constituting another tradition. If we considered the Christian religious institutional bodies of Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical, as consisting one tradition it would assume they have one worldview, ritual system, symbolic universe and life-style. This can be a long discussion but for our purposes, again focusing our study phenomenologically, it seems best to recognize the general perception of the population of each religious branch as a separate enough tradition, even though there is no question that the divide between any of the Christian branches contrasted with any of the Muslim branches in terms of worldview, ritual system, symbolic universe and life-style, could bring valid arguments for a different conclusion.

<sup>103</sup> *Consideration of gender and level of formal education in our sample:*

The male and female ratio is good in that is not very different but in itself it does not seem very important, although more generally in the Albanian culture one would expect males to be more prone to explore other options different from what their family of origin has provided. We interviewed mainly males from the cases of conversion in Malbardh, two other cases are females whom we could not contact as they have moved away from the village through marriage and otherwise, but we have more cases in our sample of females from Muslim families in this region, one even from nearby Milot.

It is a fact that most of these converts make a group of young people who went to the university except for one person from Milot, but it is not crucial to determine for our purpose in this study how important a variable is either gender or formal education. We have been focusing primarily on the variable of awareness of religious teachings as an important factor in evaluating the existence of tolerance in the environment of conversion. This awareness and understanding of religion in our study is not considered in its relation to formal education but is gauged with regard to the perceptions of the converts who are probably the most aware of religious differences and are able to evaluate the level of this variable in their immediate environment where they were brought up and where they converted.

<sup>104</sup> Even though we had to stop after 21 interviews for practical reasons in the course of this study, it was also deemed not relevant to our specific focus to have more interviews. Our primary focus was the cases of conversion in Malbardh and its immediate environs, whatever they may be, studied to shed more light in the environment of inter-religious interactions of the immediate area of Malbardh, to explore the edges of those conversions with regard to the interactions and responses toward religious conversion.

In selecting the candidates for the interview it was not important which tradition they came from, but when we look back at what constitutes the sample we can make some observations that may be relevant

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indirectly. Happening to have a higher number from Catholic tradition in our sample can be a fair reflection of the percentage of Catholics in the area but it is even more likely that it reflects what is seen in several of the interviews, namely that converting to Evangelical Christianity is not converting to a different faith for Catholics, but more as a focusing of the Catholic faith better into having a personal relationship with God in Christ giving up most of the trappings of religiosity. However, this apparently was not the perception when they first heard about Evangelicals but what they understood after they received their message. Here we come to the importance of perceptions of others based on the awareness of one's own religion.

<sup>105</sup>In seeking to interview those undergoing such "tradition transition" it became apparent that by far the most prevalent situation was that of individuals from Muslim background converting to Christianity, primarily of the Evangelical kind, but some include the Catholic tradition, rather than an individual from a Christian background converting to Islam. I have not found any such cases of the last kind of direction in the area of Kurbin which is the broader area of Malbardh. This may be due to different reasons, including the relatively small number of "tradition transition" conversions from Malbardh, there are probably about five such cases we know from Malbardh and all of them from Muslim background religiosity to Evangelical Christianity, and others may be able to elucidate further what the full picture includes but our interest here is not to ascertain this aspect.

<sup>106</sup>In our discussion about the reasons for such lack of more cases of conversion between the two major world religions of Catholic and Islam in the region, it was mentioned that their focus as Catholics or Muslims seems to be reviving the faith among the population belonging traditionally to their religious background and not reaching out in any significant way to evangelize or propagate Islam or Catholicism to the traditionally perceived individuals of the other religion. This explanation sounds very convincing even though both religions are irreducibly expansionistic theologically.

The coexistence in Albania for a few centuries of these two theologically opposing world traditions in the midst of one people, one nation and even one family sometimes, is a curiosity that makes such explanations of possible arrangements plausible. During the period of communism, prohibition of any form of religious expression and even abolishing any practice of any religion, created a much more homogeneous environment among Albanians in Albania than at any other period in history since Islam broke the generally Christian flavor of the country after the conquest by the Ottoman Empire in the last part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>107</sup>*Curious reality of the direction of "tradition transition" conversion:*

From our perspective in seeking to understand the dynamics of inter-religious interaction, it does not matter which direction of conversion is involved, and I would have been happy to have the full spectrum of cases from all directions. But apparently, the most common "tradition transition" kind of conversion is from either Catholic or Muslim tradition converting to Evangelical. In the course of my interviews I asked the converts about cases of conversion from Catholic or Evangelical to Islam, and they could not think of any (Intervista Nr. 4 -F, p.1). Orthodox Christians are much rarer as a population in the region where we focused this study so they did not figure at all in my sample.

When I asked about conversions from Islam to Catholic tradition, somebody mentioned a friend, L.T., whose mother was Catholic while his father was Muslim. We were not, however, able to connect with him (Intervista Nr. 4 -F, p.1). One can argue that this is a case of "tradition transition," but it would take more analysis of the specific case to come definitely to this conclusion. Nevertheless, the point here is that although such cases are rare, they are not nonexistent. Marenglen, the convert from Malbardh, told me of a young woman from Pllana, just across the river from Milot in the region of Lezha, who had become a Catholic coming from a Muslim background family.

<sup>108</sup>This is most prominently the same kind of situation we would expect in any direction of the "tradition transition" because the reactions of the family members and friends are not concerned as much with the



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wellbeing of the religious tradition they belong to but much more with their personal sense of loss and confusion. In our study, we have not evidenced any form of institutional opposition to the conversions we have analyzed. This does not mean there is no such effort on the part of the institutionalized religions as to protect their perceived folds but in the stories, we did not get any such interference of an institutional kind with these particular individuals. There may have been individuals who have expressed their views and exerted their influence but this was not portrayed as an institutional attack on the individual or their family. This should speak well for the Albanian religious institutions at least until other evidence surfaces.

*Relative softening of the reaction to conversions toward Evangelicalism:*

Another factor to consider with regard to the preponderance of conversions from Catholic and Islamic traditions to Evangelical rather than any other direction, is the possibility that this actually softens the feeling of betrayal in joining another side since the primary and culturally prominent sides are Catholic and Muslim while the Evangelical entity is less prominent and thus less embarrassing or less obvious to pin down as a case of “going to the other side.” For Muslim families and friends of converts, this feeling of “going to the other side” is assuaged by thinking that the Catholic side is not gaining on them. For the Catholics who see their members convert to Evangelical faith it may be that they consider such conversion a momentary lapse or a conversion to a faith that is not far away theologically and possible to correct again in the future when the youthful enthusiasm wanes.

*Relative irrelevance of lack of conversions away from Evangelicalism:*

The fact we do not have cases here of “tradition transition” away from Evangelical Christianity does not figure as a major factor in understanding the current situation of inter-religious interactions either. This is due to the relatively small numbers of such families in the community, but we can sense the attitude at least one Evangelical brings to the table when facing harsh inter-religious opposition in the experience of one of the converts, Marenglen, who was impressed to the point of switching his allegiance to Evangelicalism as the result (Intervista Nr.1- M.R).

*Accepting Evangelical conversion may be easier hence making tolerance easier:*

This is all speculation simply to point out that if we find tolerance in the experience of converts to Evangelical faith, theoretically, it presents passing a lower threshold for acceptance of the convert than if it was from one to the other of the more entrenched religious traditions in the area, namely Catholicism or Islam.

This means that if we found robust tolerance expressed with normal acceptance of conversions to Evangelical faith, we may not have seen, still, all that is possible to come out of the religious hearts when converting from Catholicism to Islam or from Islam to Catholicism happens at the same noticeable rate. The difference is only presumed theoretically and from the combing of the interviews we may be able to gauge if there is more reason to believe the case would be much different if conversions in other directions were analyzed.

<sup>110</sup>*Muslim and Evangelical perspective differs on apostasy:*

These are good and worthy issues to discuss but we cannot do them justice here due to our more specific focus being the phenomenological understanding of the environment of conversion. Nevertheless, what people understand as “apostasy” depends on their personal conclusions derived from their cultural upbringing and theological sophistication. Generally speaking, for Muslims it may be easier to label anybody from a Muslim background who becomes a Christian as an apostate, independent of the level of understanding or practice of Islamic faith. On the other side of the spectrum I believe it may be more difficult for an Evangelical to label somebody, who may have identified with the Evangelical community, an apostate if he leaves, because in their understanding it is not related to simple phenomenological explanations but it has much to do with internalized specific personal belief and theological doctrine.

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<sup>111</sup>As I have explained in discussing the survey with the students of education at the university of Shkodra, the environment of Malbardh, as a representative environment of the area from where most students in Shkodra came from, is both the informing and the informed environment of the lives of such students of education at the University of Shkodra that we surveyed. I find it helpful to remember in this connection what an expert on religious conversion writes: "We have a tendency to split the person and the environment. We forget that the political, religious, economic, social, and cultural worlds are shaped by people. Conversely, people are shaped by the socialization processes of the wider world. The networks of relationships and the cumulative effects of education, training, and institutional structures all influence the potential convert" (Rambo 1993, 166).

Interviewing the converts among the students, gives us insight in the dynamics of the environment in Malbardh and the region it represents, both directly through the converted villagers of Malbardh among those students and indirectly through the comparisons and contrasts with the others from the broader region. It also informs us about the kind of influence we can expect from the mentality fostered through the impact of the university experience and education on these students which they will bring back to the environment of Malbardh as some of them will literally come to teach Malbardh children in its village school.

One example in particular should illustrate this; the case of Besnik. Besnik is from Malbardh, born and raised there in a family of Muslim background, who went to study education in Shkodra, was converted to Christianity there, and upon graduation came as a teacher in his own village. In the example of this one member of the village we have all the elements that I am referring to among the reasons for probing the environment of the University of Shkodra, especially in the education department; (1) reflects the mentality of the family and the village he came from, (2) reflects the influence of the environment and education at the University of Shkodra, (3) reflects the influence that will come back to the villages in the form of teaching the young generation in the village schools. We cannot go very far in our prognosis of the future trend of such influence, especially since some of the converts are more optimistic while others more pessimistic about the future of tolerance, but they, nevertheless, help shed more light on the different elements of the current reality of inter-religious environment in Malbardh. Such ideal cases to study as Besnik's are rare necessarily and we should consider the opportunity to explore our questions through the eyes of such an ideally placed individual as a great advantage of this study.

To put our findings from the converts of Malbardh in the context of similar cases from the broader region as best we can, it was important to expand our survey through the interview to other converts in the same general environment both as part of the University of Shkodra where they studied and most of them were converted, but also as coming from similar background as far as being from the same region of Albania as Malbardh.

<sup>112</sup>*Limitations of interviewing:*

We should be aware of the limitations of this approach in that subjectivity and isolated instances cannot be generalized automatically. Nevertheless, such an opportunity to see tolerance in action where it matters most, in the lives of the converted people, is a privilege. Being aware of this privilege, I prepared well in advance to formulate my approach and guiding questions to allow for a free flow of conversation and telling of experiences while making sure to cover important aspects of the conversion experience that are most pertinent to our goal of ascertaining the nature of the inter-religious interactions in Albania.

<sup>113</sup>*Conducting, Transcribing and Approaching the analysis of the interviews:*

Conducting the interviews included in this study was long and hard work and could not have been done without the help of several people at important junctures and in different ways to ensure the making of appointments, recording the audio properly and transcribing faithfully all of the interviews; but, I was overseeing everything so the resulting product is faithful to the reality of interviewing in person even though in written form it looks so dry. The converts were very friendly to me and opened up with some difficult things in the process of the interview and I hope their confidentiality will not be betrayed by those who read the interviews in full. Because I had already created some rapport with them and some of

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them knew of me, I also empathized with them at appropriate moments but was careful to capture their words rather than assume I knew what they meant.

I divided the interviews into three groups, (1) Malbardh converts, (2) converts in the immediate area around Malbardh, and (3) converts from the University of Shkodra.

The first two categories make one interconnected group of friends due to the proximity of the village of Malbardh and Milot and Fushe-Milot where the converts have interacted. Their stories of conversion also show the influence of one or the other of the converts in the process, and as it may be expected they have grown much closer together as the result of their newfound common faith.

<sup>114</sup>In this connection my personal bias, as of Evangelical faith myself, was always guarded against trying to let the words of the converts speak with their emphases but there also is an advantage here with regard to understanding Evangelical clichés which need to be explored further to be able to capture in more natural words what they intended to say. It was very easy for me to empathize with the converts and at times feeling as if I should stop and encourage or congratulate them which would have hindered the process but as far as seeing the world through their eyes it was definitely an advantage.

<sup>115</sup>They are relatively farther away from Malbardh as the immediate original background of the converts, although they also are from the same general region of northern Albania. What they all have in common is their experience at the University of Shkodra where we conducted the survey to measure the level of tolerance among the students of the university, so this will inform our insights from that previous probe as well as the other way around.

<sup>116</sup>There is no substitute for reading each interview in its entirety to understand the unique way each of the individuals came to their current position but here we will strive for capturing the main movements by keeping in mind our main interest is in understanding the environment of their conversion. Following Rambo's "stage model" in analyzing the stories of conversions it was also helpful to have clear in my mind the distinction of "motifs" and "types" of conversion. I have referred earlier to the importance of clarifying the rationale for choosing to focus on the "tradition transition" type of conversion in this study and I believe it will be helpful to note the motifs of the conversions we observe in the interviews.

<sup>117</sup>This project was started in 1994 and continued until 2006 covering almost all of the villages of Albania during the summers which should consist of a very interesting item of study considering the impact we see it had in these two converts from Malbardh.

<sup>118</sup>The percentage of Catholics in the area around as a whole is larger than in Malbardh but still not majority in Milot. Since they all lived within walking distance of Malbardh and the Milot area, for all practical purposes they lived in the same environment and they socialized in the same environment.

<sup>119</sup>NLI has a long history as an Evangelistic organization starting in 1951 in the United States and spreading among students, primarily, in over 190 different countries. The first major public event of this organization in Albania was the showing of the JESUS Film, dubbed in Albanian in December 1991 in the Palace of Congresses in Tirana. By the time our converts saw the JESUS Film in their village in 1998, which was spearheaded by NLI in partnership with many Evangelical churches and individuals, NLI's activities with students in Tirana and other university centers was growing steadily, reflected in growing numbers of Albanian students accepting Jesus Christ of the Bible as their personal Savior and Lord of their lives, which is one way they present the gospel, the main message of the Bible, in line with the historic Christian doctrine of the trinity, common for all Christian traditions in Albania (Elliott and Karoshi 2012). Without going any further on this tangent, it suffices to say that as members of the Evangelical Alliance of Albania (VUSH), since its reconstitution in 1992, this organization is now part of the Evangelical community recognized as one of the five traditional religious communities in Albania (Cimbalo 2013).

<sup>120</sup>From what I remember this was not necessarily a serious case of mismanagement but simply a case of Besnik's scrupulosity with what for others may seem insignificant.

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<sup>121</sup>This would mean for example, that someone could understand what a Christian view of life in the womb and abortion is, as distinct to what the Muslim view on this same issue is, and be able to be tolerant of those people holding either while personally be convinced about one held as true. This may be a level of understanding rarely to be achieved at any time and place but we need to start here as the theoretical point of affirming true tolerance in order to appreciate the distance still possible for awareness to travel before counting for true tolerance in specific cases.

In real life we are of course happy simply with peaceful interactions that allow for freedoms of others to flourish even if the motivation remains obscure to us and may not include full awareness of the ideas. We actually should celebrate such expressions even when we do not know the true motivations, but we are here engaged in a different exercise, namely accounting for the nature and meaning of the environment of conversion and inter-religious interaction, hence we have to evaluate the level of intentionality and awareness of specific religious teaching for this purpose is important.

<sup>122</sup>**Two contrasting villages: Malbardh and its southern neighbor, Gjorm**

Besnik tells the story of one time when he wanted to distribute some gifts to the children of the school that would come in shoeboxes from Evangelical churches which could include some small brochure about Jesus as the reason for their generosity. Besnik says that in this case there was a small booklet with the story of Jesus included in the gift boxes but the teachers and the community of Malbardh did not object and everything went very well. This would amount to a great example of good will toward the Christian faith among the teachers and families of Malbardh, a predominantly Muslim village. To highlight this kind of attitude in Malbardh, Besnik contrasted it with what he expected in Gjorm. Gjorm is a village only 4-5 km away in the same general area of Kurbin and like Malbardh is a predominantly Muslim village albeit much larger and with two Mosques in it. Besnik has started to teach at their village school last year and he thought of doing the same thing he had done in Malbardh distributing some gifts for the children on Christmas. When he realized that the gifts would have to include again an Evangelical explanation of Jesus story amounting to a presentation of the Christian faith, Besnik was concerned that in Gjorm such a thing would not go as well as in Malbardh. He said that he expected many negative reactions and thus did not do it. He concluded by saying “So, in Malbardh you feel accepted but here it is quite the opposite” (me Besnik, p. 6). Besnik has contrasted Gjorm with Malbardh in other connections as well when he compared his experience as both a pupil and later as a teacher in the village of Malbardh where no one seemed to distinguish between Catholic or Muslim children, but in Gjorm, in his classroom this past year, there were two catholic girls whom he found sitting at the end of the classroom and were referred somewhat antagonistically by their classmates as “the catholic” (me Besnik, p.2). The teachers are asked both by pupils and by colleges as to what religion they belong to while that was not Besnik’s experience in Malbardh only a few kilometers away. Asked specifically how typical Gjorm is in the area compared to Malbardh, Besnik unhesitatingly said: “Gjormi is different. I have said sometime that we breath the same air and drink the same water but the difference between us is very great. ... Muslims are the people in Gjorm and Muslim are the people in Malbardh but the difference is very great. ... beside this, Gjorm and Malbardh are very interconnected through marriage, you would be hard put to find many families that have not given or taken daughters in marriage between the two. [Nevertheless, the norm in the region] is a village like Malbardh and not like Gjorm. Gjorm is exceptional.” (me Besnik, p.3). Needless to say, the reality of Gjorm is very interesting and also important to note in our study, even if as a contrasting picture so nearby, raising questions of the difference being between the two villages with regard to the environment of inter-religious interactions. Gjorm has two mosques functioning for many years while Malbardh only now, since two years ago, acquired its first mosque, and is the difference in the attitudes of the classmates of Gjorm from that in Malbardh’s classrooms a matter of time under the influence of religion?

*From Malbardh today to the other end of the spectrum of responses: an excursus*

Marenglen became a missionary for the same Evangelical organization which was instrumental in his conversion at the University of Shkodra. He went as a missionary to a Muslim country nearby and even though he made many friends there among the Albanian speaking Muslims, and is loved by many of those Muslims in that country who even came to his wedding celebration close to Milot recently, he was

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beaten up one time by some Albanian Muslims to whom he had preached earlier and were pretending to continue the conversation with him when they cornered and hit him.

There is no comparison between that reaction by the Albanian Muslims this nearby country and the responses of Muslims that Marenglen and Besnik encounter in their village of Malbardh, which is another way of saying that the inter-religious responses in Malbardh are without hint of intolerance of the kind found among Muslim Albanians in an adjacent country. While this contrast positions the environment of inter-religious interactions in Malbardh in the peaceful and friendly side of the spectrum it remains to be confirmed if the word “tolerance” is the best characterization for other less obvious reasons. These less obvious reasons include what has been clarified as requirement of specific religious knowledge of conflicting views in interaction between the individuals who hold such views for the sake of such views.

If this harsh reaction against Marenglen by Albanian Muslims in a nearby country is an instance of intolerance, is it an expression of religious intolerance? Could they have had extra-religious reasons and thus beating Marenglen up was not related to religion? Apparently, this was religiously motivated because the reason was the belief of Marenglen as unacceptable for the Albanian Muslims that beat him. He was not of another hated nationality; he was not engaged in any other activities with them or others in that country, and there were no other occasions to have offended any other sensibilities of those people. But they definitely were sensitive to religious views, were aware of their own beliefs and had become aware of Marenglen’s Evangelical message as contradictory to theirs.

If the friendly responses of Malbardh Muslims were with regard to the faith of Marenglen and Besnik, then why would it not amount to religious tolerance? We seek to answer this conceptual difference more fully below but at this juncture it may be important to distinguish the features of a few differences. Malbardh’s Muslims different from the Albanian Muslims of the other context, have known Marenglen and Besnik for a longer time. They have lived together in the same environment peacefully and there was trust based on commonalities of belonging to the same group of people in the same village as opposed to having a newcomer bringing a contradictory message to the message of the religion of the community as it was perceived by the other Muslims. There is the similarity of having no other extra religious grievances toward Marenglen in both contexts but in the peaceful context we have the advantage of previous longer relationship and possibly trust and felt affinity.

Here we can also say that the awareness of such a message of the religion of the Muslim community in Malbardh is not the same as the awareness of the message of the religion that other Muslim community sought to uphold. This may be the main ingredient that is the most relevant and toward which many strands of our study have pointed to, namely the awareness of specific religious teaching on the part of the villagers of Malbardh, especially as it pertains to their traditionally considered the religion they belong to; Islam, is lacking in significant ways.

We are not distinguishing here between the difference of the religion or its message between the two Albanian Muslim contexts, Malbardhian and other, but distinguishing between the level of awareness or understanding and adherence to it. It would take another study to show positively that there are no appreciable differences between the kinds of Islamic religion the two Albanian Muslim communities follow. For now we take it at face value that it is one basic and even Albanian flavored Islam in both contexts but, in different ways in this study, we have shown that there is no depth of commitment to follow Islam from the villagers of Malbardh; there is only superficial recognition of Islam, as traditionally belonging to such religion, practiced sporadically through celebrating feasts and not much more than that. Besnik describes this situation well when he says several times in different contexts during the interview: “The village does not have a good religious knowledge, ... the whole village is raised without cultivating religion, there were no information and not any kind of preaching... we are not brought up with religious culture, we did not have such a way set before us to follow” (me Besnik, p.2, 7). It is the awareness or knowledge of Islamic teachings and conscientious practice that seem different not the kind of religion between the two Albanian Muslim communities with two radically different responses to Marenglen in Malbardh and in Shkup, the other discussed context here.

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But Malbardh is changing; the centuries old ruins of the Catholic church now have a functional building of a chapel nearby and a brand-new mosque is functioning everyday as an important symbol and center of activity among the villagers of Malbardh now. Will the responses toward religious converts change too? Besnik is apprehensive. Asked to compare the environment when he converted (presumably in 1998 or when he came back to the village in 2007) with the situation he perceives at this point (in 2017) he answered: “At that time there was less fear. Today it would be more difficult. It should have been the opposite [he opines]. But I think this is so because of the new [church and mosque] buildings in the village” (me Besnik, p.6). This is saying that the Catholic church and Islamic mosque in Malbardh are now bringing much more awareness of the religious teachings of the different religions that is going to deepen the convictions of the people in the village to the point that those, who like Besnik would think of converting, should be more fearful of consequences. How far in the future is this prognosis for? Besnik says that already “... today it would be more difficult” for a convert in Malbardh, but we will not get ahead of ourselves with analyzing this now.

<sup>123</sup>This is also validated when considering their experience at the university, prior to their commitment, when they explored and engaged in entertaining the Islamic way of thinking and acting willingly to try it on. This intentionality in investigating Islam, different from how they were when they first met Christian Evangelicals as teenagers at the JESUS Film showing in their village in 1998, would qualify their conversion as more robustly “tradition transition,” than if we considered as conversion their first reactions in 1998.

<sup>124</sup>In their understanding, conversion by its nature is bound to be affecting all of life and includes the outward expressions of one’s life because conversion into Evangelical faith distinctly emphasizes explanation of the “hope that is in you” (Bible 1 Peter 3:15).

<sup>125</sup>Our converts, and the general population, are not interested like us to distinguish between the different ingredients needed in the concept that uses the word tolerant as a referent. But they can be helped to see, to help clarify and expose the nuances of the reality of inter-religious interactions in Albania in the exemplary case of good relationships in Malbardh. The responses of the villagers in Malbardh, including members of the convert’s families and friends, all show admirable respect for the convert. The reasons why they show respect includes many aspects present in any normal relatively friendly culture in a small village but, and not as an indictment, they lack the understanding of the specificity of religious import and for that reason it is insufficient to consider their respect as the respect of inter-religious tolerance. Their response is admirable and appropriate. I hope that as they grow in their understanding of their background religion or the religion of the converts they will still exemplify such admirable attitudes of respect but our focus here is on the meaning of their responses now.

<sup>126</sup>This last explanation as to what are some of the extra religious reasons for the harmony bear further study; but I included in the interview a question (question 9) and some probing to this effect which surfaced in different ways the truth that every convert still felt strongly as fully belonging to the family of origin without regard to the fact that their family holds a different religious label from what they have chosen for themselves. Generally, the converts considered family identity and national identity as not determined or jeopardized by personal religious identity. Their personal choice was not seen as breaking from the members of the family but as bringing good news for the family and the nation as well. In the following chapter we will offer a fuller explanation together with the suggestions and recommendations after reflecting on the integrated conclusions from the three research probes we conclude here.

<sup>127</sup>We prepared well the direction of the semi-structured interviews as reflected in the interview guide we used and conducted over 20 interviews with converts recording an audio version of the interview. We then transcribed those interviews for analysis, which yielded ample evidence for the conclusions we arrived at. We analyzed the interviews following the description as guided by the “stage model” and then moved to interpreting and explaining the relevant observations in a methodologically rigorous way.

<sup>128</sup>The advantage of having the interviews after finishing the major part of research in the other venues was in helping shed more light from the findings from the fieldwork in the village and from the survey with students, but we first should note the conclusion on our findings from the surveys themselves.

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<sup>129</sup>My interpretation of the average Albanian as indifferent to religion, is not that they are not capable of deep religious faith or that this does not happen as just the cases we have been focused on reveal, but that culturally, distinctly religious understanding of the world, is relatively a newcomer in the Albanian society of these last two post-communist decades. This means that the “post-communist” generation or “converted generation,” as we might call those born around the 1990s will be asserting a new way of life as more religiously informed as they now become the generation that will dominate the cultural leadership in Albania.

<sup>130</sup>Claiming that this consists in the richness of a society, with regard to having multiple cultures, does not do justice to the full meaning of the word “rich” which implies not just variety but also a harmoniously functioning society where cultural perspectives do not cancel each other out but are like facets of the same shining diamond. In this connection, religious pluralism is not desirable because it is like facets of different worlds and not of the same diamond thus can more easily or naturally breed real conflict and antagonism. It is, therefore, not surprising to note that, generally speaking, societies have grown stable and have thrived when there has been a certain level of homogeneity and similar vision of life.

<sup>131</sup>From private correspondence with Kenneth Boa.

Pluralism is not such a wonderful cultural reality that we would invent if we had the option of a unified culture in line with our own ideas and worldview. But, in spite of whatever reasons one might have to dislike pluralism, people are more important than whatever religion and, therefore, for the sake of the value of people we need to endure them when they hold different religious visions. Pluralism is the next best thing exactly because we cannot have only the culture I prefer or the one that lines up with my worldview if we want to respect all people with their different views. Right here is the first principle of living in a pluralistic society: respect for all people independent of their view. This principle reflects a certain view in itself and we need to examine if ours, if our religion or worldview, can accommodate this without any qualifications.

<sup>132</sup>With the fall of communism in Albania there opened a new period of freedom and democracy which has given opportunity to the growth of a lot of different ideas and religions to flourish. Eventually, at least theoretically, such divergent views would pull the country in different directions to the point of breaking it without some common commitments to fostering a flourishing society for everyone. It is the argument of this study that fostering inter-religious tolerance is important at this juncture in Albania.

<sup>133</sup>It is a gross understatement to say that culture is not an easy thing to change, but the fact that cultures change is what keeps this discussion alive. It is evident for Albanians that have lived during communism that the Albanian society has changed and with this social change there is much cultural change as well even if it becomes perceptible for those who know where to look for it.

<sup>134</sup>Even though Albania would seem as if it has experience with pluralism because of the presence of Christianity and Islam for several centuries in its midst, it would be better to consider the arrangement along the lines of a practical *modusvivendi* than a conscious pluralistic arrangement which now is necessary with the new reality of living primarily in the bigger cities and with a much greater informational dynamic and instant influence from around the world through internet, social media and incredible mobility.

My focus in this study from the beginning has not primarily been on the social and political measures as much as in the philosophical and cultural dimension of the issue of inter-religious interactions. However, such important measures should be cultivated intentionally by a responsible discussion in the academia and the responsible media before it is translated in educational and social policies. Fortunately, there is some inertia in the Albanian cultural mentality which is in the right direction but it needs to be strengthened with a wise articulation at different levels of our common national vision of one pluralistic society committed to ideals of freedom and democracy.

<sup>135</sup>The information we gathered is sufficient also to give a positive answer as to what characterizes this environment of inter-religious interactions, but we cannot bypass the definitions and clarifications needed throughout the process of this study to understand our conclusion that the Albanian environment of inter-

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religious interactions is characterized by harmony between people of different religions. This would sound incorrect in the ears of those converts, if they heard it without our interpretation, because they used the word “tolerant” to describe their environment several times, therefore, we need to refer to the sections of interpretations in this study to show why their word “tolerance” is interpreted as less than tolerance here. From the perspective of these converts, it seems that if they use the word tolerance for the way they perceived their environment of conversion to be, it is not in small part due to the general feel of the environment not due to the analysis and definitions we have developed in this study. They were not aware of the requirements developed here to qualify an environment as tolerant or as simply harmonious, but, from the other questions that seek to clarify those aspects with other words, it should be clear that the actors of their environment of conversion in large part are not religiously very literate or very concerned about ideas. The general view seems to be a more relaxed view of religion and concern mostly with its impact on family honor and status and advantage. Because most of the people of the environment we study are not students the prevalence of emphasis then should be on what is concluded outside of the survey of students and this conclusion holds up the one arrived with the analysis of the village of Malbardh, namely, harmony.

<sup>136</sup> Interestingly enough it was not right after building of the church but after the media pushed this story raising the public awareness of the building of the Church, that somebody offered the money and the mosque was built.

<sup>137</sup> The relevant usefulness of anthropology as a science to contribute for the broader context is explained well by anthropologist by Peter Van der Veer in his lecture at University of Rochester in 2013:

“Given the social power of abstract models in policy making it is essential for the social sciences to have a counterforce in anthropology. Let me summarize briefly what in my view is the comparative advantage of anthropology: (1) Anthropology is primarily an engagement with difference and diversity and focuses on problems of cultural translation. As such it offers a critique of the universalization of Western models. (2) A necessarily fragmentary, but holistic approach to social life offers a greater potential for social science than the analysis of large data, undergirded by game theory and rational choice theory. (3) “Wholism” as the assumption of integration of nations and civilizations is different from anthropological holism which implies the drawing of larger inferences from the intensive study of fragments of social life. (4) The anthropological contribution to the study of embodied practice emphasizes the social and provides a critique of sociobiological determinism which is full of Euro-American prejudice. An emphasis on the body and its disciplining requires an attention to configurations of power that cannot be replaced by psychological experiments or tests.” Van der Veer, Peter. 2013. “The Value of Comparison.” The HAU-Morgan Lectures Initiative A HAU and University of Rochester Collaboration.

<sup>138</sup> The well known adage that “the religion of Albanians is Albanianism” seeks to serve in this same way to value religion in the context of primary commitment to loving the nation made up of religious others.

<sup>139</sup> A student of Albanian history would not have a problem identifying the period during communism as the high point of such a clear-cut public culture where it would have been easy to give a definite answer to every aspect defining it, but now, after 27 years of life in the post-communist Albania, with a young generation who does not remember anything about communism, there is no definite way of answering what are “the common ideals of the public good” and what are “the shared standards.” Even the most sacred symbols of national unity, such as the Albanian national hero Scanderbeg’s status, is being challenged by some ideologically motivated quarters of the younger generation that grew up after the fall of communism (Jazexhi 2017, 1). The challenge is not significant because of the implausibility of such radical interpretations but it is telling of the potential danger from the religious zeal of the younger generation.

<sup>140</sup> Development of such a democratic culture also includes the intention to find areas of agreement within the disagreements so that we arrive at more important agreements about more substantial issues while enduring disagreement over less important issues. This process means that we need to study carefully the reasoning of the different views and understanding the basis or the roots of the specific positions discussed according to their traditions of analysis which again would emphasize the role of education about religious issues and religious traditions. We should not forget that we have to define the role of the



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media in this discussion because it has become evident that specific interests within the leadership of the media can yield enormous influence toward delegitimizing certain structures of social and political authority. Maybe an even bigger problem is the lack of understanding how the social media militates against rational debate. It seems so much easier for people to speak very harshly and irrationally when responding on the social media which would not be the case if they spoke face to face. Even television programs with debates in the studio are not good examples of civilized discussion of important issues but sitting face to face with others of other views necessarily predisposes moderation and tolerance.

<sup>141</sup>The challenge of life in the city is related to feeling displaced in an intense social space. Coming into the city though is an opportunity and as much as we may not want for the villagers to continue with the mentality of the village when they come in the city, we actually need to foster in the big city the mentality of the small village we belong to in our neighborhoods. In some respects, it is fortunate that their village life is a recent past because they still recognize the need for a community where they are known and appreciated.

The solution may be found in forming the smaller communities preferably based on geographical space which facilitates face to face interaction. This should be the focus of those concerned for the wellbeing of people everywhere, to help with forming of healthy community in specific geographical locations where people can know and interact with each other amicably and beneficially for the whole community irrespective of ideological, ethnic or whatever other distinctions they might have in their midst. It is natural that the first communities will germinate along whatever distinctions exist, either ideological or religious distinctions, but in a geographical area defined functionally to facilitate some level of personal interaction, there should be ways to bring diverse people to be engaged in face to face interaction for the good of their immediate community as their unique “village.”

<sup>142</sup>Open discussions, dialogues and debates can be the ways these options are explored creating the atmosphere where the truth of different views is evaluated and consensus developed but also where disagreements are clarified and we move along in tolerance and respect committed to expressing good will toward the other and protecting the right of individuals to embrace the opposite view from ours in freedom from fear of mistreatment. I realize this is the ideal and there may be many considerations that give us pause or cause to fear envisioning the possible responses in reality, but we must not give up what the way toward true tolerance includes, namely, protecting the freedom of conversion.

<sup>143</sup>The practice of *kumbari*, forming family ties of committed friendship with those of another religion was the way Albanians forged their unity with fellow Albanians of a different religion. It is interesting how this was used to not remove all the borders created by differing religions as it is evident that mixed religious marriages were very rare before communism. It does seem that for Albanians the area where religion is deemed most important to be guarded is in the immediate family. Albanians of pre-communist times seem to reflect great wisdom in being reticent about inter-religious marriage and fostering unity with their religiously estranged fellow countrymen by means of *kumbari*, participation in celebrations and other expressions of good will but in principle not include marriage across religious traditions. The family remained the last stronghold of religious sentiments but it was relentlessly attacked not without success by the atheistic Albanian state until 1990.

<sup>144</sup>At present, it seems that both of the mentalities with regard to marriage, those fostered before and after the important communist period of Albania, are continuing at this post-communist period after 25 years of democracy, but the resistance of religions has grown stronger every year as is apparent by the stories I know personally in the course of these last 20 years of work among young people at the university.

The challenge again is great in keeping the balance in the pluralistic environment where society should protect by law the right of marriage of anybody to the person of their choosing, while each religion has the right to demand of its adherents to not marry outside of their religion. As far as this study goes, anthropologically, it is not crucial to impose a certain regulation of marriage with regard to religions in order to progress toward robust inter-religious tolerance. We need to protect the right of the religions to foster the life of their religious community with integrity and faithfulness to their view of reality and marriage is too sacred an area for outsiders to impose their view.

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<sup>145</sup>The cultivation of a certain view of reality within the family is the right of the husband and wife as a unit and they can choose to take advice from whomever but need to be respected and protected in their responsibility to educate their young in their preferred tradition. Again this right of the parents to educate their children comes into play when we envision the space where propagation of all religions and freedom of information and conversion are also protected. The issue of public education as well is another aspect to square with all of these considerations, conversion, culture, marriage, in creating the conditions for tolerance.

<sup>146</sup> *Imaginatively assuming belonging together as a nation of common ancestry:*

I venture to talk about “the same root” because in the case of Albanians there is ample evidence in different ways, (place names of churches in many places or even known families and tribes with both Christians and Muslims), that Albanians perceive all those who speak Albanian to be basically belonging to the same nation as to a big family. Knowing the history of the Albanian people and language it is obvious that in no period of history would anybody – at least not any group of people of another origin and another language group – who was not of Albanian stock, desire to become Albanian since it would not bring any benefit which becoming Greek, or Roman, Turkish or even Slavic, could possibly bring by incorporation into a bigger people or people of a dominant political regime. The Albanian language was not the language learned in schools or the language of any Empire and it was spoken simply because they learned it from speaking at home or in association with each other as Albanian speakers mostly in the context of another dominant language that held sway in the region at large. This does not mean that there were not some loners or small and marginalized groups like the Gypsies who would learn Albanian and even be assimilated but it is very clear that even after being assimilated those people of another origin would still know and let it be known that they belonged to a different group (Vllah, Arumun, Gypsies, Serb, Greek, Turkish). It is safe to assume that those who speak Albanian today, most likely, at least more than 90% of them, come from Albanian stock. Even if this is not defensible biologically, assuming that we could know exactly our ancestry, Albanians are justified to think that they belong together because of their language. The purpose of these assumptions is not to convince anybody about its truth but to present a way Albanians may have come to their perceptions as we saw in the village of Malbardh with the tribes of Buzebolla and Smaci who came from Catholic stock; how the original arrangements of their settlement regarding the church in their village which had belonged to Gallata and their church of Shen E Premte indicate their deeply structured and friendly relationship with the other Catholic families in the broader area, even after they later assumed Islam as their religion of the majority.

<sup>147</sup>Religion in Albania, especially the coming of Islam, was associated with a traumatic period in the history of Albania as we had to live with a new reality under the Ottoman domination but it does seem curious that between themselves, Albanians who remained Christian and Albanians who took on Islam as their religion, lived with some understanding of belonging to each other in a more significant way. So when time came to assert the national belonging of Albanians during the national renaissance period of the late 1800s and early 1900s, religion was always put on the side not as a major factor in fostering unity.

<sup>148</sup>In this context of good will and trust, with this understanding of the possible rationale behind it, the tradition of taking part in specific religious celebrations of the people of a different religion makes sense. Visiting and greeting the adherents of one religion at the occasion of their celebration by people of a different religion has been a common occurrence in Albania. With the growing awareness of one’s own religion and the other’s it is to be expected that some individuals would consider it strange to wish someone “happy Easter” or “happy Bajram,” when in their mind it is designating the wrong interpretation of the will of God for people according to their understanding of the truth of reality.

*Transparent formal recognition of the other’s ritual:*

We have entered here the difficult terrain of maintaining the integrity of each religion while engage each other in the common social space we live in together and this is a difficult place to keep the balance, therefore, again I clarify, the representative leadership is responsible to keep this tradition with understanding. The visits and greetings of the religious others on the occasion of their celebrations

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are, therefore, to be understood as expressions of good will to the persons not as affirmations of the truth value of the celebration itself. This much should be apparent by the fact that the religious representative of one religion has not abdicated the truth of one's own religion when visits and greets the representative of the other religion on the occasion of their religious celebration which by implication reflects a truth claim at variance with what the other believes. In this context I, therefore, suggest that Albanians of different religions should preserve the tradition of participating formally in each other's religious celebrations. This means I suggest that the representatives should be responsible for such expressions of good will and not necessarily every religious believer because it may give the wrong impression that the religious celebrations are, therefore, of neutral truth value which is definitely not what each of the religions teaches its followers.

<sup>149</sup>It became very apparent in the course of this anthropological study that the primary, secondary and the university education are crucial environments for the development of the broader environment of tolerance in our society that we hope for. Almost all of our contacts we interviewed in one form or another have expressed their impression of a school experience mostly devoid of any religious prejudice which is a great good for the society of Albania. Albanian education started with people who recognized the distinctive value of the Albanian language for cultivating the education of Albanians at a time when those few educated Albanians that existed were all schooled in foreign languages.

<sup>150</sup>So Albanians from the beginning of their modern national life have shown incredible wisdom in shaping an Albanian environment and education that fosters unity in spite of religious diversity. We should not expect any less today even though we face a reality deeply influenced by the years of the communist regime of the recent past. It is the remnant of such attitudes of religious disparagement fostered during communism which inform the minds of most leaders in the educational system of Albania today who even as they recognize the need to deal with the religions, they are careful to distinguish they mean "the religious fact" for fear that their speech might get dirty by associating too closely with religious beliefs. Such problems of deep seated ignorance and prejudice about the nature of religion, and especially of the distinctive of different religions, does not bode well for the project the current leaders of government have undertaken in spite of their good intentions.

<sup>151</sup>There needs to be a serious and healthy discussion, which respects all religious and non-religious people in considering their views honestly and learnedly, when choosing one of the many tried ways, to proceed with the teaching about religion. Following the suggestions in a book by Marsden (Marsden 2014), Thomas S. Kidd writes: "Christians, secularists, and people of other fundamental commitments should simply admit their clashing assumptions, honor them as best they can, and eschew any notion of politically dominating the other side. ... we will hopefully find areas of shared agreement, and good politics will seek to discover and maximize those areas for the public good."

<sup>152</sup>The influence of the Albanian national public school:

The Albanian public school, divested of any form of religious teaching and without any of the trappings of any religion has been a socializing environment for several generations of Albanians helping in not enforcing any perceptions of religious belonging. This has changed since the fall of communism in the early 1990s, but in several interviews, it has become clear that the public school in the village still provides the opportunity for socialization of children from both traditions to become friends with arguably good results for the general climate of harmony among the people of both traditions. These young converts I interviewed, averaging only 24 years of age, were generally positive about interacting with people of the different religious tradition and in no case did I get the impression of any entrenched dislike or distrust of the people of the other tradition that they grew up with.

In one case, during the interview, I was told of an occasion when all the school children were sent to the Catholic church including one girl from a Muslim family and her father came and took her away which seems like a strong reaction. It may be that traditionally there is an unspoken understanding that one does not seek to convert the member of the other religious tradition which could have contributed to the peaceful coexistence. It may be that the conversions were seen primarily as disruptions brought by the foreign intruders, as the Muslim armies were during the long years of Ottoman occupation, but once things settled

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then it may seem as if they are set for good and you cannot or should not undo. These are simply options to explore in the future and not conclusions at this point. Another aspect of this reality is that the northern Albania where we have focused this study is known for Catholicism to be the dominant traditional religion and the most ancient one about which Albanians are more proud to have retained than the Muslim populations that are either not as passionate about their tradition or can become easily irritated by the uncomfortable awareness of being a later layer over Catholicism associated with the Muslim invasion of the country. This explanation may not be the whole truth about the reasons of having relatively very few “tradition transition” converts between Islam and Catholicism, but the fact remains that we had to turn to converts to Evangelical Christianity in order to explore the nature and meaning of the environment of conversion as perceived by those most directly exposed to its inter-religious attitudes and actions.

<sup>153</sup>The impact of communism on the educational system with regard to religion should not be underestimated in the mentality it has created and the persisting bias enforced by the secularized Educational tendencies. In this connection, the study would relate the importance of religious conversion and the reality of the shaping force of religion seen in the lives of people interviewed as representatives of a large part of the Albanian society. Respect for the perspectives of the religious adherents should be required by protecting participation in the process of their representatives.

<sup>154</sup>*Importance of formal education with regard to tolerance:*

Importance of the school is evident in the interviews with the converts to socialize the kids to create the basis for a peaceful environment. The most important concern is to guard against the tendency to precipitate in segregated and isolated clusters and groups so the system should militate against such a tendency while we already have a good tradition.

The contribution of the public schooling should not be in informing on the specifics of the faiths but on the critical thinking about faith and worldview acquiring so they learn to ask the right questions and engage religion genuinely interested to understand and able to discern where the truth value lies. Relationship of the school with the family is crucial as well to protect the rights of parents over their children’s education while keeping them informed and engaged appropriately.

Let us now turn to the suggestions based on this study about the future path of public education with regard to religion. The goal of public education in Albania should be to foster an environment where people from different religious background socialize freely in pursuit of a truth based education which otherwise is spoken of as scientific education. In seeking such an environment where children and older students mix freely it is advisable to not reverse what has functioned well in the Albanian public schools until now with regard to the dress code avoiding extremes.

It needs to be recognized that religions propose different accounts of reality, as they see it from different perspectives, and the goal of education is to make such accounts available for relevant discussion to students in their educational environment guided by informed educators. It would be wrong to assume that “religious fact” can be taught as if the religious traditions are “simply variants within a common class... [or viewing] religions as ‘various manifestations of one common experience’ of the divine transcendent” (Newbigin 1982, 99). This is not the correct educational posture with regard to religion because whatever “essence of religion” an individual thinker may think it is it will include aspects that another religious person will deny passionately.

Religious accounts of reality are being disseminated very well in our society, primarily among the people interested to learn about religion and mostly along the lines of the religion of the family, and for 25 years they have been cultivating the lives of many individuals. So the young people of today are being inculcated in their homes and through their religious education in their proximity that religion is relevant to life in the world because it portrays, or at least is convincing that it portrays, accurately the nature and meaning of the reality in which we live focusing on the spiritual but with direct relevance to the world of material objects in which we live. Good education then would need to include, in a relevant way and in appropriate times and measure, such accounts of reality without prejudice.

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<sup>155</sup>We should strive for deep learning and the contribution of Variation Theory in education helps defining what we mean here: “Pupils should intend to understand the material for themselves, rather than simply reproduce the curricular content... interact critically, rather than passively accept ideas and information ... relate their learning to previous knowledge and experience, rather than concentrate on the assessment requirements... use organizing principles to integrate their ideas, rather than think unsystematically ... relate evidence to conclusions, rather than simply memorize facts” (Wright 2007, 247–48).

<sup>156</sup>Public Education, therefore, should view introducing the different religions along the lines of presenting differing worldviews and we should agree with Wright when he concludes: “If we choose to ignore worldviews, whether in the religious traditions we are studying or in the assumptions that we bring to such study, then our understanding will inevitably be impoverished” (Wright 2007, 180).

<sup>157</sup>It is not only the directness of knowing the other from experience in the flow of things that matter to the Albanian in one’s daily life, but also the closeness of belonging in terms of family relations, which is generally assumed in Albania to exert strong shaping influences almost deterministically. Familial belonging, therefore, with the assumptions of the importance of the forming of a person through the bonding of the common life experience, is paramount in how Albanians evaluate people and the import of their religions as well.

Albanians engage people and not their religions. Especially with fellow Albanians they presume the deeper familial bond imagined of common ancestry as more substantial than religious teachings which they do not imagine to function differently or contradict such normal intuitive way of approaching others in any human interaction. This may be due to the reality of religion not determining the lives of people in the different religious traditions in such distinct ways for them to be known in the experience of Albanians as “foreigners.” The emphasis in Malbardh of the importance of knowing their fellow villagers as “their own,” without regard to religion is just one expression of this epistemological principle. When Marenglen or Besnik show publically their understandings of their worldview, as in the case of their Christian wedding celebrations, which is obviously a different religion from that of their fellow villagers, the villagers participate and openly share their friendliness without assuming they have converted. They can relate to the person independent of religion or treating religion as secondary to treating the person as more important.

## APPENDIX A

### Shenimet fillestare per gatitore per analizen e Malbardhit:

Malbardhi... ku gjendet ne harte, sa banore ka, cfare perberje etnike/fisnore, moshore, fetare, politike, ekonomike, arsimore, emigracioni, kriminaliteti, klima, prodhimi, raporti me fshatrat e tjere... cfare eshte karakteristike e Malbardhit, historia, njerezit e permendur te fshatit... apo per cfare e mbajne vecan Malbardhin fshataret e vendit dhe per cfare e mbajne te tjeret Malbardhin?

Vendi I kishes ishte mbajtur ne kujtesen e fshatareve si vend I shenjte aq sa pemet nuk I priteshin per dru zjarri edhe pse nevoja I shtynte fshataret te shkonin per dru goxha larg. Gjate komunizmit dhe nga prinder komuniste perseri femijet nuk lejoheshin ti kullotnin bagetene ne lendinen e kishes.

Cfare historie ka kisha e Malbardhit? Si perceptohej kjo kishë ne mentalitetin e Malbardhasit, vend I shenjte, vend me fuqi magjike, vend I tjeterkujt, vend I te krishtereve, vend I mire I fshatit? Eshte ne lidhje me kete kishë ne vecanti apo ne pergjithesi per kishat dhe katolicizmin? Si ndryshon ky koncept per kishen nga koncepti per xhamine? Meqe ishte edhe nje vend ku ka qene xhamia ne fshat pse nuk ruhej I njejti respekt apo perceptim I shenjterise se vendit te xhamise? Ndoshta ka te beje ne pergjithesi me myslymanizmin apo ne vecanti me historine e xhamise se fshatit?

Kuptimi per fene: Kuptimi per Zotin vs. Kuptimi per traditat fetare ose ritualet fetare. Duke analizuar kuptimin per jeten apo cfare eshte me e rendesishmja ne jete. Ndikimi I komunizmit dhe ideologjise materialiste si edhe presionet praktike te jetes duken ne kendveshtrimin per cfare eshte me e rendesishmja per ta. Si shprehet kjo rendesi qe ata I japin gjerave? Nga fjalet dhe nga veprimet e tyre ne cfare fushash?

Perberja etnike e fshatit me lidhjet familjare a mund te pershkruhej si nje familje e madhe? Sa ndikon ne marrredheniet e perditshme perkatesia fetare e familjeve? Si e kuptojne fetarine e vet dhe te tjetrit fshataret? Si ka ndryshuar nderveprimi midis familjeve nga komunizmi deri sot? Cfare na tregojne martesat apo mos martesat brenda fshatit per afersine e konceptuar midis fshatareve te feve te ndryshme? Cfare roli ka perkatesia fetare ne perceptimin e njeri tjetrit si anetar I barabarte I fshatit? Ne cfare aspekti pranohet ndryshimi dhe sa I rendesishem eshte per jeten funksionale te tjetrit me te drejtat per privilegjet e te qenit banor I fshatit? Si ka ndikuar emigrimi ne fizionomine e fshatit? Si ka ndikuar politika ne atmosferen e fshatit? Cilat jane problemet e zakonshme te fshatit? Si zgjidhen zakonisht problemet mes familjeve?

Si lindi ideja e ndertimit te kishes se fshatit? Kush ishin aktoret kryesore te organizimit dhe mobilizimit te burimeve te nevojshme (mosha, perkatesia fetare, arsimi)? Cfare lidhje kishte me perfaqesues nga jashte fshatit? Cfare diskutimesh kishte ne lidhje me ndertimin e kishes midis fshatareve? Cfare perfitimesh pane fshataret ne ndertimin e kishes? Cfare menduan fshataret nga publiciteti qe mori ngjarja? Cfare levizjesh te tjera nga njerez te jashtem jane pare ne lidhje me kete aspekt fetar te jetes se fshatit? Cfare ka ndryshuar, cfare te rejash kane mesuar apo cfare eshte qartësuar per fshataret si rezultat I kesaj ngjarje?

Tani, pas planifikimit te gjithë pjesës paraardhëse ketu mora vesh per fillimin e themeleve te ndertimit te nje xhamie. Cfare dinamike prezanton ky realitet I ri? Si e konfirmon friken time te intensifikimit te dinamikës fetare te audiences tone?

### **Pyetje per diskutim me perfaqesuesin e fshatit qe do ndihmonte ne organizim:**

Per intervistat apo fokus grupet???

Analyzing the dynamics of the interviews, best way to approach, vendi, ushqimi apo kafe,

Kush do ishin **njerezit e pershtatshem**... sa perfaqesues te fshatit jane keta?

Intervista apo fokus grup?

Si do dukej intervista, me regjistrim, me shenime?

Pyetjet: cilat jane **fushat per eksplorim**, cilat jane **5 pyetjet per ata** (pseja e 5 eshte natyrshmeria e bisedes)? Sa kohe na duhet per nje focus grup (minimumi 1 ore)? Roli I Genit (mencuria e nxjerrjes se te vertetes nga zemrat e Malbardhasve) dhe prezantimi I qellimit tim (hera e pare dhe hera e prezantimit te projektit me vone).

Kur eshte dita me e mire (11-12 Prill dhe **25-26 Prill** dhe 6 Maji per shengjergj?), cfare duhet te bejme per pergatitje, lajmerim? Sa mund te bejme brenda dites? ...

### **Fushat per eksplorim?**

Identiteti,

Tjetri apo jo-vehtja, nivelet e afersise per cfare pune? Martesa, biznesi, komshilliku, kumbaria, perkatesi tjetër, feja?

Feja dhe Zoti

Kisha dhe xhamia

Toleranca apo harmonia.

Teza e supozuar:

Si do vertetohej kjo teze?

Shprehjet ‘nje zot per te gjithë’, cfare ka rendesi..., mos bej keq..., pse jemi myslyman, cfare

do te thote per mua te jem myslyman, cfare thote myslymanizmi sipas meje, si I kuptojne festat fetare nga si I festojne dhe cfare festojne, si perfshihen te ndryshmit ...

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**(Fokus grup, pranvere, 25 Prill, 2015)**

Shenimet reflektuese mbi ditën e kaluar në Malbardhë me fshataret e “fokus grupit”:

Një fshat me afër 1500 myslymanë dhe rreth 80 katolike pranon ndertimin e një kishë katolike në themelet historike brenda fshatit. Evidentimi nga media e bëri ngjarje atë që kishte ndodhur pa bujë në fshat disa vjet më parë.

Prezantimi mediatik e theksoi rastin si duke dhënë pershtypjen e një ndermarrje aktive të fshatareve në ndertimin fizik të kishës por e verteta në lidhje me investimin nga fshataret është me modeste dhe e kuptueshme në varferinë e fshatit sepse ishte kisha katolike që pagoi për ndertimin dhe punimet ishin të paguara e jo vullnetare.

Kjo formë prezantimi nga (gazetari Mema?) nuk e zbehtë të verteten që fshataret myslymanë e donin kishën në fshat dhe që nuk paten objeksione fetare të ndonjë forme por mbithekson iniciativën e fshatareve për objektin e kultit të një feje tjetër kur në fakt dallimi midis feve të perceptuara nga fshataret ishte shumë më i vogël se sa nënkuptohet nga media.

Për të kapur vertetësinë e këtij niveli të nderveprimit me baze fene qofte si harmoni organike deri në tolerancë ideologjike një organizovë një sondazh në formën e një bisede të fokusuar (focus group) me përfaqësues të fshatit.

Njërezit që erdhen ishin të moshave të ndryshme, duke përfshirë kryeplakun dhe përfaqësues të dy feve me njohuri të mira për realitetin e fshatit (shiko shenimet më poshtë).

Ata u lajmëruan nga një bashkëfshatar i tyre (A.R) në formë jo formale për një takim me një shok të vëllait të tij (M.R) në lidhje me njohjen e historisë së fshatit për shkak të lajmit të ndertimit të kishës.

**Pyetja e parë pra ishte thjesht njohëse e historisë së fshatit.** Në shpjegimet e ndryshme që u dhënë u bë e qartë prejardhja nga lartësia e malit të bardhë e dy grup fiseve kryesore (Smaci dhe BuzeBolla???) ku fokusi ishte në Smacin e ardhur me vone në mal dhe më heret në vendbanimin e tanishëm më poshtë por pa ndonjë nevojë për të shpjeguar se ishin të gjithë të krishterë.

Kjo (të qenit fillimisht të krishterë kur erdhen në Ndershegas) dëltë natyrshëm nga biseda për një kishë që ishte e fshatit në mal që kur zbriti në fushë ia la një zonë tjetër dhe mori si shkëmbim një tokë me afër vendbanimit të ri. Pastaj u shpjegua si ishte blerë fusha në rreze të lartësimit ku qëndron fshati nga ata që e kishin dhe që ka shumë të ngjarë të ishin myslymanë por persëri nuk u theksua apo qartësua në këtë aspekt (ka ndonjë arsye të dyshojmë këtë supozim?). Njëri nga bashkëbiseduesit tregoi se kur kishte shkuar ushtar gjatë kohës së



komunizmit ne jug te Shqiperise, afer Korces, njeri nga pleqte me te cilin beri muhabet atje qe e njihte zonen I kishte thene qe ti nuk je nga 'Malbardhi' por nga 'Ndershegasi' dhe djali ishte cuditur por kur kishte ardhur ne shtepi e kishte pyetur baben dhe ai I kishte thene, 'po, ashtu eshte'. Ky detaj I vogel lidhet me shume gjera por perseri theksohet roli perzieres I Komunizmit dhe shkembimit te pervojave me bashkeatdhetare te cdo skaji me funksione te shumta homogjenizuese. Shoqerite e ushtrise mbeten gjithmone nga ato qe kane lidhur shume shqiptare te traditave te ndryshme. Aksionet e rinise gjithashtu.

Fusha natyrshem ishte me e lehte per Myslymanet ta kontrollonin dhe ata qe jetonin aty per te patur privilegjin e tokes se bukes u duhet te merreshin vesh me myslymanet sundues keshtu qe zbritja nga mali I afroi tek toka e bukes por edhe tek presioni I konformimit. Nuk u diskutua shume kur u bene myslymane dhe si nje pjese ndenji e krishtere por kur pyetja e dyte fokusoi vemendjen tek realiteti fetar atehere vershuan shembujt e menyres si jetojne ne harmoni me njeri tjetrin... neper dasma e morte jane bashke madje kerkojne vecanerisht tjetrin si perfaqesues per ta nderuar (cilat ishin rastet e permendura pershkrues te harmonise nderfetare dhe si doli specifikisht me fjalet e tyre?) per te arritur deri tek shakaja se katoliket jane te merzitur me myslymanet nga ngritja e cmimit te mishit te derrit qe eshte rezultat I shtimit te madh te konsumit nga myslymanet te ketij mishi te ndaluar nga feja e tyre.

**Pyetja tjeter ishte ne lidhje me befasine qe shkaktoi prezantimi mediatik I ndertimit te kishes. Si do ta tregonin ata perseri historine nje audience te huaj sic jam une? Pak a shume ata ishin te kenaqur me formen mediatike te prezantuar nga gazetari qe sipas mendimit tim ishte sensacional, dhe vijuan te tregojne perseri si fshati gjithmone e ka ruajtur respektin per ate kishë dhe as gjate komunizmit nuk lejohej as prerja e pemeve te rrezuara.**

Me treguan historine kur para disa vjetesh nje prift vjen me nje kamion te vogel per te marre ca nga druret e rene dhe fshataret nuk e lejojne ti marre sepse ata nuk I marrin as per vete e po te ishte e pranueshme per ti marre ata I merrnin tek shtepia e tyre. Kjo nenvizon faktin qe per ta kisha dhe ambienti I kishes ishin te fshatit por te lene vec per mosperdorim sakrifikues ne respekt pothuaj bestytnor ndajfuqise shpirtore te lidhur me kishen qe akoma I kishte themelet aty.

Ndertimi I kishes ishte nje ceshtje jo problematike per fshatin qe kishte kete perceptim per shenjterine e atij vendi sa edhe pse ne rrenoja shkonte te ndizte qirinj a te bente ndonje pelegrinazh ne lidhje me nevojat e shumta qe kishin fshataret pa dallim feje.

Ndertimi I kishes dukej se ishte bere diskutim nga disa fshatare qe shikonin lidhjen e ndertimit me rregullimin e rruges se fshatit qe do u sherbente edhe nevojave praktike te tyre. Ne kete kontekst edhe ndertimi I xhamise ishte diskutuar sepse per nje kohe te shkurter kishte qene nje ndertese e vogel e perdorur si xhami per ndoshta 10 vjet dhe pastaj ishte bere klase shkolle dhe tani trualli pa ndertese ishte pjese e varrezave te fshatit.

Katoliku qe ishte prezent ne bisede tregoi si ne rrjedhen e diskutimeve per ndertimin e kishes kishte shkuar tek perfaqesuesi katolik per te kerkuar prej qendres ndertimin ne fshat te kishes se vjeter dhe ai kishte hezituuar per shkak te raportit teper dispropocional me myslymanet ne fshat . Katoliku I kishte shpjeguar se askush nuk do ankohej por perkundrazi do ta deshironin sepse ai I shihte shpesh si zakonisht shqiptare kryesisht myslymane kalonin para deres se tij ne rrugen per tek themelet e kishes per te ndezur qirinj lutje per nevoja te ndryshme.

Kisha katolike kishte pranuar levrimin e fondeve dhe kështu u pagua për ndertimin e kishës që gjithë fshati ishte i gezuar ta kishte sepse nuk e kuptonte si të katolikeve por si të fshatit.

Pyetja e fundit ishte në lidhje me ndikimin e publicitetit në mendimin e tyre dhe atmosferën e fshatit: **Mire që bota u cudit nga lajmi I myslymanëve që ndertuan kishën po ju a u cuditet?** A filluat ju duke menduar se ndoshta kjo gjë që kemi bërë në është vertetë me e madhe se e kishim menduar me parë dhe ky respekt ndaj katolikeve duhet të plotësohet edhe me ndertimin e xhamisë që plotëson pamjen e tolerancës ndërfaqë?

Tendenca ishte për të nënkuptuar se ata nuk ishin ndikuar nga reagimet e të jashtmeve por patjetër që u kishte pëlqyer vëmendja e ambasades Amerikane dhe kishin mirënjohje për gazetarin aq sa kishin menduar për të vënë emrin e tij rrugës së fshatit që falë vëmendjes së tanishme mund të rregullohej nga ndonjë dashamirës.

Por shenja e ndikimit të vertetë të publicitetit ishte fillimi i ndertimit të xhamisë vetëm pak javë me parë sepse kur i pyeta në lidhje me xhaminë pergjigjet përfshinë edhe pranimin se një myslyman i kosovës kishte marrë iniciativën për të pyetur nëse donin që ai të kontribonte për ndertimin e një xhamie tani që ishte ndertuar kisha.

Një tjetër pergjigje interesante erdhi nga katoliku që tha se një bashkëfshatar i kishte kërkuar që të shkonte prapë tek përfaqësuesi kryesor i katolikeve që të subvenciononte ndertimin e xhamisë tani që kisha ishte ndertuar. Katoliku e thoshte me nënqeshje se kjo kerkese ishte absurde dhe sigurisht ia kishte shpjeguar kerkuesit absurditetin dhe arsyen e mosmarrjes së kësaj pergjegjesie por kjo kerkese është domethënëse në disa plane.

E para absurditeti nuk është shumë i dukshëm për shqiptarin për arsye të mosvlerësimit të kujdesshëm të çështjeve fetare dhe të shikimit të ndertimeve si formë të ndonjë rregullimi të ndonjë hapësire të jetës praktike por e dyta ka lidhje me pyetjen e ndikimit të publicitetit dhe besoj se tradheton një zgjim imagjinatë për të shikuar me sy të ri për reciprocitet në një situatë që fillimisht nuk kishte patur lidhje me ndonjë sakrificë të myslymanëve për të krishterët në ndertimin e kishës së fshatit.

Një nga bashkëbiseduesit (P.S) që e kuptonte tëhun e kësaj pyetjeje u mundua të theksonte se ndertimi i xhamisë ishte diskutuar edhe me parë. I njëjti bashkëbisedues tregoi se kur erdhi mundësia për të ndertuar xhaminë ata të fshatit nuk donin ta kishin xhaminë afër sepse nuk donin zhurmen e thirrjes së namazit dhe themelet e vjetra që tani ishin tek varrezat nuk ishin parë të përshtatshme nga investitorët e rinj.

Një nerv i lënduar u prek kur u përmend një gazetar tjetër që e njihte situatën dhe kishte shkruar negativisht për sensacionalizimin e çështjes. Ata njezëri ishin të merzitur me gazetarin që në fakt nuk kundërshtonte të vertetën e harmonisë Malbardhiane por prezantimin e qendës me ngjyra dramatike.

Në fund u bë e qartë për ta që une isha i interesuar për të kuptuar se si ata do ta ruanin këtë harmoni dhe nëse mundësia e ndarjes me fokusim tani tek xhamia dhe të tjerëve tek kisha do ishte pengesë. Ata thanë njezëri se sa të kishte jetë aty mentaliteti i vendit nuk do të ndryshonte por nuk degjova ndonjë ide specifike që nënkuptonte ndonjë pike referimi ndaluese të zhvillimeve të reja me praninë e xhamisë dhe kishës të ndertuara për kultivimin e besimeve respective.

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### **Field notes with some details from the focus group in Malbardh**

Some notes about the gathering of the participants for the focus group reflecting their uniqueness and representativeness:

The intention with this focus group in April 2015 was to gather together some representatives from the village who were well informed about the process of the building of the church in their village and were well respected and familiar with life in the village in general. The representativeness would include the spectrum of religions and preferably the formal leadership beside some of the informal influencers in the village. Much thought went into the securing a good dynamic in the group and couldn't avoid them knowing each other possibly making it difficult for them to express any strong disagreements in the presence of outsiders. This difficulty would be balanced by the respectability of the participants who would uphold their honor by saying openly what they believed. I spent a few hours discussing with one of the informants in the village to ensure inviting the best representatives considering age, profession, political affiliation but most importantly the respectability in the village and especially those who were most knowledgeable about the building of the church and could help in explaining some background history and would have insights in the mentality and cultural make up of the village.

Much thought went into preparing for the main thrust of the discussion and coming up with the few questions and the flow of the discussion (see Appendix A for the preliminary ideas). Together with the main informant from the village, who has become a friend of mine for several years now, we discussed the way of recording the conversation without creating a stumbling block for the relaxed environment which we thought would be best in this case. We agreed that he would be the one to keep a close eye on the content without recording it necessarily if he felt it would be awkward so we would not raise any concerns and dilute their participation but we would sit down immediately afterward to write down together the main flow of the conversation with the main exchanges and ideas seeking to capture the specifics that stood out rather than record every word. Below here we have the basic points discussed at length but recorded from memory as we were driving away from the meeting and at the café we stopped to finish to our satisfaction the capturing of the ideas.

I was introduced as a friend of the village informant, who is interested to understand the process and the background of the building of the church in Malbardh in order to explain it to some outsiders, including foreigners as the result of me writing this study in English. This would remove some pressure from them to perform for any immediate media impact and speak to me as one of their own who wants to present the case in the best way and as thoroughly as possible to outsiders. I was pleased with the make up of the group which was as below:

1. B. V., about 53 years old, a respected man who is taken usually as the representative of his extended family. He is from a Muslim background but married to a catholic woman. He was the head of the non-communist Democratic Party chapter in the village for more than 20 years, which speaks of his long and important influence in the village soon after communism fell. He worked with the tax authority, which again would reflect an important role in society. He derived from the original Smaci family; one of the two main families in the village which are the Buzebolla and Smaci.
2. H. H., about 52 years old, he is a descendant of the original Buzebolla family. He is considered very handy and helpful in the village being willing to lend a hand to anybody and well liked. He was a driver in government institutions which implies personal affinity to some important leaders in society and their confidant. He now drives a Medical Emergency Ambulance. He is active in the Socialist Party which is

the other main party in the country giving us the view from the opposite angle of the representatives of the Democratic Party.

3. P. S., about 67 years old. Worked in the forestry field as a technician. He is considered as very knowledgeable and wise in the village and is very well respected. He was the one others let speak and explain the most during our discussion almost as their spokesperson in many ways.
4. I. T., about 53 years old, very well respected and well read who was asked by the people in the village to become their (kryeplak) head-elder or administrative authority in the village but he didn't accept that role which implies humility. He is of the original Buzebolla family, worked in construction and went to Greece for work. He thus brings a perspective of those in contact with the wider outside world as well representing a good number of the village people who emigrated to make ends meet.
5. N. Gj., 68 years old. He was the main catholic representative. He worked as an economist or accountant at the factory in the city of Lac nearby, which also means a respected position of some expertise. He is considered well read and well informed. We invited him and a few others for a longer conversation over lunch (including Hasan and two others from the village) later in the day.
6. A. L., about 48 years old. He is the Kryeplak or the head-elder leader of the village. He is from the original Smaci family. Obviously he was the formal top leader in the village and was well informed about everything with regard to the process of the building of the church and also the process of the building of the mosque which had started a few weeks prior.
7. S. S., 55 years old. He was described to me as a "worker," implying respectable hard work ethic. His father was most respected in the village for his wisdom and was "brigadier," almost the same as "kryeplak" today because he was the head of the village work unit (the cooperative) where everybody belonged during communism and thus was very important leader in the village. The son would have been presumed important and respectable to begin with but it appears he earned respect with his own hard work ethic.
8. A. R., 39 years old, son of the secretary of the communist chapter in the village who was a well respected man. As a young man he also went to Greece for work and is married and doing different jobs. From the original Buzebolla family. He contacted some of the people to invite them to the meeting.
9. M. R., about 34 years old, brother of Agron. One of the converts in the village and the main informant who helped answering questions of design of the make up of the focus group. The one who together with his brother helped gather these representatives of the village for the meeting and the assigned note taker during the meeting who participated in the discussion only in key moments to introduce the researcher and later to keep a good working atmosphere. He also helped later to clarify a few points as we discussed the received content.
10. Y. D. the researcher and the one to guide the discussion.

#### **Some observations on the participants:**

Their **ages** cover from mid 30's (youngest is 34) to well into the 60's (oldest is 68), so covering the age spread of mature age in the village, and would bring the current perspective on the village well based also on the spread of the **two main original families of Buzebolla and Smaci** even though removed somewhat to have different last names. **The main religious backgrounds are represented** with the Catholics and Muslims but also the converts into Evangelicalism (my informant friend). **The leadership of the village**, both the formal (the head elder) and other informal important leaders are represented; those with respectable parents and personal reputation of wisdom and credibility. **We have representatives from the main political parties** in this group which is important to note because politics have been a very important factor in the life of Albania since the fall of communism. Even **the key**

**negotiator for the building of the church is included** in this group. **Lack of women** in this group is normal for the culture because the women would be included in their husbands' ideas as family representatives and if we had invited women it would change the dynamics. We wanted the meeting to feel informal and relaxed talking freely about the building of the church as between friends in the comfort of a gathering over coffee at the village café where you don't see women normally.

**Notes from the discussion as reported by MR (assigned note taker):**

Bajrami thote qe ne nuk e kemi patur kurr si problem perkateine fetare, madje brenda fisit tone kemi lidhje fisnore me familjet katolike, jo me larg se para dy muajsh kishim nje rast vdekje te njerit nga fisi yne me perkatesi myslimane ku i parë apo drejtues i ceremonise mortore ishte PashkDedë Frroku qe eshte nga krahu katolik i fisit tone.

Bajrami eshte i martuar me nje katolike nga zadrima, dhe kur u fejua me te e ema e saj i kerkoi te emes se Bajramt qe te pakten te dielave ta lejonte nuesen te ahkonte ne kishë.

Dhe e ema e Bajramit i thote: Vetem nese nusja nuk do e ardh vete sepse une shkoj tek kisha cdo te marte dhe te shtune.

Petriti, na tregoi shkurtimisht historine e kishes se malbardhit dhe lidhjet e malbardhasve me fene katolike.

Tregoi qe vendi qe sot quhet Malbardhe perpara se te banohej nga malbardhasit quhej Ndershegas, nders malbardhi ndodhej ne anen lindore te malit, ( pra pas Malit) dhe kufizohej me fshatrat Skuraj, Gallatë, dhe Vinjollë.

Kur Malbardhasit jetonin ne Malbardhin e vjeter ata ishin katolik dhe sherbimet fetare i kryenin ne kishen e Shen E Premtes qe sot ndodhet ne territorin e fshatit Gallate si rezultat i nje shkembimi terrioresh mes fshatit Malbardhe dhe Gallate.

Dhe kur kane ardhur ketu ku jane sot tokat qe jane ne fushe ju jane blere fshatareve te Shullazit, te cilet pretendojne qe edhe toka ku gjendet kisha e Shen Mëhillit te kete qene e tyrja perpara se Malbardhasit te vijne ne Ndershegas.

Petriti mendonte qe kisha e Shenmehillit mendohet te jete ndertuar rreth viteve 500 ndersa konvertimi i malbardhasve nga mysliman ne katolik mund te kete ndodhur rreth viteve 1750.

Ne lidhje me harmonine dhe tolerancen fetare ne Malbardhe Petriti e sheh si dicka te trashегuar dhe bazuar mbi brez pas brezi.

Petriti tha gjithashtu se ne Malbardh ka patur nje Xhami por nuk ka funksionuar me shume se 10 vite dhe eshte shkaterruar dhe nuk eshte ndertuar me.

Kur u pyet nese shqiptari eshte shqiptar kur eshte mysliman, apo shqiptari eshte shqiptar katolik, apo shqiptari ehte shqiptarpastaj mnd te jete edhe katolik edhe mysliman, Petriti por edhe te tjeret ishin dakord qe shqiptari eshte ahqiptar perpara se te jete katolik po mysliman. Pra te gjithë deklarojne qe feja nuk perckton identitetin e tyre si malbardhas apo si shqiptar.

Isufi pervecse ishte dakord me Petritin ne gjithcka u tha me siper, ne muhabet e aiper ndersa fliate per bashkejetesen dhe harmonine ne malbardhe, beri deklaraten qe ne malbardhe nuk kemi asnje te huaj. Kjo deklaratë nenkupton qe as myslimanet dhe as katoliket nuk e konsiderojne dike te huaj per shkak te perkatesise fetare, pra sipas mendimit te tyre i huaj nuk quhet ai qe ka fe tjetër por ai qe vjen nga nje vend tjetër.

Isufi tha qe lidhja jone me katoliket eshte lidhje shume e natyrshme, ne kemi te pakten 7 nuse katolike ne familjen tone te ngushte.

Kur u pyeten nese fakti qe bashkjetesa e tyre disi ka shkaktuar nje çudi tek te huajt dhe nderkombetaret, ka ndikuar qe ata te mendohen me thelle apo ta rimendoj e perkatesine e tyre fetare, tendenc e myslimaneve ishte te deklararin qe kjo perben cudi per te huajt ndersa per ne eshte gje normale dhe nuk shkakton asnje lloj efekti.

Ndersa kur u pyeten se mos valle lajmi per ndertimin e kishes ka ndikuar ne fillimin e ndertimit te xhamise, Petriti pati nje reagim disi ke te tensionuar dhe ju duk pyetje me tendence

dhe tha qe kjo nuk ka ndikuar fare dhe qe kerkesa per ndertimin e xhamise eshte bere ne nje kohe me te hershme se sa te ndertohej kisha dhe shume me perpara se te behej lajm ndertimi i kishes.

Dhe shprehte nje lloj sigurie qe ndertimi i xhamise nuk do i ndikojte marrdheniet nder fetare ne malbardhe te pakten edhe per keto brezat e tanishem, perte ardhmen me te larget dihet se cfare ndodh sepse tani njerezit neper vende te ndryshme levizin dhe kane lirine e besimit ndersa ata qe do jetoj e ketu do vazhdojne te ruajne zakonet e mire te bashkejeteses.

Hasani p deklaruar qe ndertimi. Xhamise ka lishje direkte me ndertimin e kishes tha qe fondi per ndertimine xhamise erdhi menjehere pasi ndertimi i kishes beri lajmin qe beri, pavarisist se kerkesa per ndertimin e xhamise ishte bere vite me pare.

Ndersa Agimi tha qe dikush qe kishte degjuar per ndertimin e kishes erdhi dhe. Interesua dhe tha qe ishte gati te financonte per ndertimin e xhamise.

Ndersa ndertimi i xhamise ne fushe arsyetohet me mungesen e tokes ne mal, dhe at qe po financojne ndertimin e xhamise kane thene qe nuk e duan shamine afer varreezave, k mund te gjendej toa por dhe nuk donin qe ta blinin token sepse sipas tyre xhamite ndertohen ne tok te dhuruara nga myslimanet, dhe e vetmja mundesi k qene ai vendi ku po ndertohet.

Nikolla i pyetur se si e shpjegon ndertimin e kishes, tregoi qe ai vete ka qene nje nga niciaret e pare i cili ka shkuar tek Rrok Mirdita, dhe tha qe Rrok Mirdita k refuzuar e ndihmoje ne ndertimin e kishes duke dhene si arsye banimin e fshatit nga shumice myslimane, kete fakt e deklaroi edhe Agim Lika kryeplaku i fshatit.

Nikolla tha qe kam hyre garant vete tek rrok Mirdita qe fshataret e tij mysliman e pranojne ndertimin e kishes.

Dhe eshte kthyer ne fshat ka marre firmen e 10 perfaqesuesve te fshatit dhe pasi e ka oegjitimuar kerkesene dhe ne organet shtetore perkatese ka shkuar serish tek Rrok Mirdita dhe pastaj kerkesa eshte pranuar.

E pyetem Nikollen se cfare e shtynte te besonte aq shume sa te hynte garant tek Rrok Mirdita per ndertimin e kishes?

Ai u pergjigj qe isha i sigurt qe do pranohej ndertim i kishes sepse duke qene se rruga per tek kisha kalon perpara shtepise time, une cdo te marte e cdo te shtune shikoja bashkefshataret e mi mysliman qe shkonin tek kisha e pa ndertuar per te ndezur qirinj.

Ky fakt me jepte mua garanci qe ndertimi i Kishes do ishte shume i mirepritur nga myslimanet e fshatit,dhe koha e vertetoi qe ashtu ishte.

Nikolla tregoj se mbante mend qe e ema kur i vinin myslimanet e fshatit per festat fetare, mbane ene te posacme per to qe te mos i perlyente me mish derri ne respekt te fese se tyre. Por me kalimin e kohes myslimanet e fshatit kne filluar te hane mishin e derrit, dhe ben shaka duke thene qe i vetmi inat eshte qe pse ata kane filluar te hane mishin e derrit sepse kio ka

ndikuar ne rritjen e cmimit

Te gjithë treguan qe familjet e malbardhit pavarisist perkatesise fetare, kane mesuar brez pas brezi qe kisha eshte vend i shenje per fshatin dhe nuk lejohet te merret drute apo ndonje gje tjeter ne territorin e kishes. Kjo bindje ka bere qe kisha te jete e rrethuar nga lisa shume vjecar, madje dhe lisat e rrezuar nuk jane prekur si rezultat i bindjes qe ato i perkasin kishes.

Nikolla tregoi nje histori kur jo para shume vitesh nje prift ka urdheruar te merren drute per tu perdorur per institucione shtetore, dhe ka ardhur me nje makine per te marr drute dhe malbardhasit mysliman nuk e kane lene as priftin ti marre drute.

Kjo tregon qe malbardhasit myslimn e shohin kishen si te tyren perpara se t shohin si te priftit, apo klerit katolik.

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### Shenime te tjera nga intervistat dhe hulumtimet rreth Malbardhit:

Pyetje per perfaqesuesin tek zyra e bashkise ne Milot:

Sa banore, lindje/vdekje/martesa  
Perqindje perkatesie fetare  
Krahasim i Malbardhit me fshatrat e zones  
Krahasim me periudha te tjera  
Ndikimi me i madh ne perberjen e popullsise

Informacion i dhene nga perfaqesuesi i zyres:

**1543 banore te Malbardhit...** nuk ka largime... fshat perfaqesues... dominon popullsia myslymane... me shkollim... i njohur dhe i dallueshem nga pemet e larta qe duken nga larg...

**12119 te Milotit.** Miloti ka 12 fshatra (kjo bie ne kontradike me informacionin nga interneti por nuk u shpjegua)...

**2300 banore te Fushe Milotit.**

Nje liste (jo e plote) e banoreve katolike te Malbardhit:

1. Pashk Ll.
2. Paulin Ll.
3. Bardhok Gj.
4. Nikoll Gj.
5. Lon Gj.
6. Ndue Gj.
7. Preng Gj.
8. Gjin Gj.
9. Pashk Gj.
10. Pashk Gj. (2)
11. Ndre Gj.
12. Mark Gj.
13. Marjan Gj.
14. Val Gj.

Afersisht 70 katolike ne fshat?

Malbardh, Milot, and Kurbin administratively:

Milot, Kurbin - Wikipedia

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milot,\\_Kurbin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milot,_Kurbin)

**Milot** is a town and a former municipality in the Lezhë County, northwestern **Albania**. At the 2015 local government reform it became a subdivision of the municipality Kurbin. The population at the 2011 census was 8,461. The municipal unit of **Milot** is composed of the town **Milot** and 14 villages, including Fushë **Milot**, Mal i Bardhe

Pershtypje nga informatori nga fshati Malbardh lidhur me fshatrat e njohur te zones:

Gallata – tipik fshat katolik

Skuraj – katolik

Shullazi – Myslyman. Katoliket nuk njihen si vendas.

Milot dhe F.Milot – raporti eshte me i perafert katolik/myslyman.

Vinjolle – Myslyman.

Shkopet – Katolike (tipik).

Perqindja e ndarjes fetare ne Malbardh: ... dominance Myslymane por kjo e ben me te ngjashem kete fshat me Shqiperine ne pergjithesi.

Duke qene ngjitur me Milot dhe F.Milot qe kane perqindje me te perafert myslymane/katolike (asnjehere nuk u qartesua kjo sakte se sa) por u theksua nje dinamike me e larte nderveprimi ne jetese te perbashket ndoshta edhe me e theksuar kjo se sa pjeset e ndryshme te Shqiperise qe kane xhepa grupimesh me homogjene por sigurisht duhet shqyrtuar dhe matur nga te tjere.

Disa shkrime nga Kastriot Marku lidhur me Malbardhin jane informative dhe gjenden lehte ne internet. Edhe burime te tjera lidhur me historine dhe zakonet jane te vlefshme ne pasurimin e idese per kontekstin e jetes se fshatit dhe zones por jane te rendesishem vetem si sfond pergjithesisht informues, orientues dhe krahasues ne lidhje me interesin antropologjik imediat empirik te pershtypjeve te aktoreve te sotem qe reflekton ky studim.

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### **Nje bisede me gjyshin, babin dhe dajen e Gusti Prenges ne Lezhe**

**(Interviste jo-formale, Qershor 2015).**

Gjyshi i Gustit, ka qene organizatori apo i deleguari i posacem per organizimin e mbi 50 dasmave dhe morteve qe ishin koleksione te komplikuara te aspekteve te ndryshme te jetes shqiptare te zones se Mirdites.

Babai i gjyshit te Gustit ishte nje person i njohur ne zonen e vet per mencurine e vleresuar ne ndarje gjyqesh prandaj ishte i punesuar me rroge gjate nje periudhe te kohes se Zogut ne kete rol ndermjetesuesi. Me ardhjen e Komunizmit, ky njeri me influence dhe lidhje te rendesishme edhe me kishen katolike u be objekt persekutimi nga komunistet dhe u burgos ne moshe te thyer por menjehere pas lirimt nga burgu u thirr per te administruar nje dasem te madhe 500 veteshe me nje perberje te madhe komunistesh te pranishem duke mahnitur ata qe e dalluan aftesine per te respektuar ne detaje pa asnje shenim raportet e komplikuara midis 500 dasmoreve. Ekuivalenti I rendesise se ketij roli nuk kuptohet lehte nese nuk eshte parasysh konteksti kulturor dhe domethenia e elementeve qe tregonin diferencimet dhe vleresimet ne raportet e komplikuara te dasmoreve.

Gjyshi i Gustit, pra djali i ketij administratori impresionues, u be gjithashtu nje person i kerkuar per te drejtuar keto lloj ceremonish te rendesishme megjithese ishte i ri, 28 vjec kur ne prani te me te vjeterve u thirr te luante rolin e percaktuesit te vendeve ne dasem. Njohja e zakoneve por edhe e njerezve me rrethin e tyre te miqesise ishte e rendesishme per te parashikuar ardhjet dhe nevojat qe duheshin plotesuar ne situata varferie dhe komplikimesh terreni apo largesie udhetimi.

Sa thase oriz duheshin, kur do te vinin familjaret e te vdekurit dhe kur do te vinin miqte nderkohe qe ne vapen e veres i vdekuri duhej varrosur brenda dites? Berja e me shume se nje



ceremoni ne dite te ndryshme ne varesi te grupeve ishte nje zgjidhje inteligjente e administratorit te mencur.

Ne lidhje me aspektin nderfetar te ceshtjes se ceremonive ajo qe dallova une ishte se ne nje zone si Mirdita kohezioni social ishte teper i larte dhe martesat qe ishin gjithmone me shkuesi normalisht organizoheshin midis fetareve te njejte, pra katoliket dhe myslymanet nuk perziheshin ne martesat megjithese mund te ishin fqinje apo te ndare edhe brenda nje fisi. (Gjate Komunizmit ishte periudha e pare kur Shqiptaret u perzien neper shkolla te perbashketa dhe fenomeni i martesës me dashuri solli ne drite perzierjen e njerezve ne martesë nga fe te ndryshme dhe megjithese me pak veshtiresi realiteti i ndryshuar postkomunist ne kete aspekt eshte nje faktor i rendesishem i konvertimeve nderfetare te Shqiptareve te sotem.)

Ndersa martesat pra ishin brenda fetareve te njejte, shkuesit dhe krushqit mund te ishin te cfare doshem dhe shprehje e vleresimit dhe afersise qe ndjenin bashkekombasit per njeri tjetrin pamvaresisht nga feja. Nje aspekt i kesaj afersie ishte tradita e 'kumbarise' qe megjithese per katoliket kishte kuptimin e prinderimit te dyte per femijen e kumbarise, per myslymanet jo domosdoshtmerisht mbante te njejtin kuptim por te pakten i lidhte dy familjet me nje miqesi te tille qe per cdo aspekt praktik ishin si vellezer. Ne lidhje me dasmoret qe vleresoheshin sipas rrangut per tu ulur ne tavoline nuk kishte rendesi feja por mosha apo largesia dhe rendesia e zones se prezantuar nga ai person.

Ne rastin e krushqise qe dergohej nga fshataret e Malbardhit qe perfshinte katoliket ne martesat e myslymaneve nenkuptohet qe ata konsideroheshin si vellezer ne respektimin e zakoneve e traditave shqiptare. Katoliket duket se mund te ishin krushq me te lehte sepse s'kishin ndonje ndalim dietik por ndoshta per myslymanet mund te parashikohej ndonje rregullim i pershtatshem.

Vezhgim: Tradita e kumbarise, dhe roli i kesaj perkrah zakoneve te tjera ne ruajtjen e afersise mes bashkekombasve te feve te ndryshme sic duket ne festimet e dasmave dhe morteve eshte nje tradite e rendesishme shqiptare qe shpjegon ne nje mase te konsiderueshme harmonine e bashkekombasve te feve te ndryshme.

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Shenime intervistash jo-formale ne Malbardh (Shtator, 2015)

### **Sot, 29 Shtator 2015 ne Malbardh me rastin e festes se Shen Mehillit...**

Kur po ngjiteshim me Genin dhe Agronin, dy vellezer nga Malbardhi, ishte interesante te degjoja pershendetjet e tyre me fshataret e tjere 'ju ndihmofte' qe nuk ishte e qarte per mua nese ishte 'zoti ju ndihmofte' apo 'Shen Mehilli ju ndihmofte'. Ka te ngjare qe te jete nje pershendetje e pergjithshme jo vetem per festen e Shen Mehillit (pyet Genin per kete).

Pastaj u takuam me Kryeplakun, Gimin, dhe ai na qerasi me pije dhe femijet aty afer me biskota. Kryeplaku na shoqeroi brenda kishes se vogel prej guri dhe arritem para nje statue te vogel te Shen Mehillit duke folur per aspektet e festes dhe kujtimeve te tij ne lidhje me Rrok Mirditen si perfaqesues i larte i katolikeve per domethenien befasuese te qendrimit the fshatare shqiptare pamvaresisht nga feja. Kryeplaku na tha se ishte shume i gezuar qe kjo

kishe dhe ky fshat kishte vertetuar fjalen e Dom Rrok Mirdites ne nje ambient European se Shqiptaret Myslymane e Katolike shkojne ne kishe bashke. E kishte takuar Dom Rrok Mirditen para disa kohesh ne nje ngjarje ne kishen e Shen E Premtes dhe aty kishin folur per kete dinamike shqiptare qe fshati Malbardh prezantonte me se miri.

Ai me tha qe e kishin mbajtur pak me te heshtur festimin kete rradhe per shkak te disa vdekjeve vetem dy jave me pare. Edhe nje fshatar tjeter e perseriti te njejten arsye per festimin pa buje te kesaj rradhe. Ndoshta ngaq vitin e shkuar kishte patur vizita nga persona te rendesishem me rastin e bujes mediatike ata ndiheshin sikur duhet te shpjegonin dallimin me festimin pa buje te kesaj here. Ata ishin natyrisht nga familje myslymane dhe kjo ishte feste katolike por as qe i shkonte ne mendje kujt qe kishte ndonje domethenie kjo ndarje fetare. Shen Mehilli ishte festa qe festonte fshati dhe fshati kishte pesuar nje humbje pak dite me pare prandaj gezimi i festes nuk mund te ishte njesoj.

Kryeplaku me mori e me tregoi Kembanoren apo me sakte rrenojen e Kembanores qe ishte vendi ku fshataret ndiznin qirinj. Ne hypem ne anen lindore te rrenojes nga ku shkembijnje te nxirrnin ne buzën e prishur te strukture, qe nga siper ngjante si nje oxhak nga ku dilte tymi i qirinjve qe digjeshin brenda mureve te pjeses se poshtme te Kembanores germalme, dhe aty beme fotografi.

Pasi beme fotografi te shume lisave te rrezuar e te paprekur nga te gjitha anet e asaj zone te konsideruar te shenjte (nje burre qe calonte nga nje kembe me proteze druri me tregoi si afer 50 vjet me pare kur ishte nxenes i shkolles aty afer shkonte per te marre dru larg atij vendi te konsideruar te shenjte) beme fotografi edhe te nje grupi te rinjsh qe luanin volejbol midis nje lisi te rrezuar paralel me shiritin blu te detit adriatik ne horizont.

Malbardhi eshte nje mikrokozmi i vertete shqiptar me gjithe historine, traditen, problemet si edhe potencialet e medha.

Pastaj takuam disa burra te vjeter qe sapo kishin mbaruar se ngreni si shume te tjere togje togje neper ate zone. Pasi u prezantuam dhe filluam biseden une desha edhe nje fotografi me ata perfaqesues te moshuar te fshatit pastaj arritem te flasim per ceshtjen e fese.

I pyeta per domethenien e dergimit te **krushqve katolike** nga myslymanet dhe ne pergjigjen qe ai dha nuk dallohej ndonje theks i vecante ne qenien katolik apo myslyman. Krushku i pare zgjidhej si i zoti nga fshati dhe krushqit kishin pergjegjesi te sillnin nusen me hir apo me pahir qe nenkuptonte se ata ishin gati per lufte po te dilte nevoja. Interesante ishte qe kur i pyeta per martesat midis katolikeve e myslymaneve ata me thane qe tani ishin normale por me pare ishin te rralla.

**Kumbaria** ishte nje forme e perhapur e afrimit te katolikeve dhe myslymaneve dhe ne kete kontekst mund te shihet pse martesat ishin jo aq te perhapura per shkak te kompleksitetit qe sillte brenda familjes se vogel por duhet mbajtur parasysh gjithashtu qe martesat beheshin me mbleseri keshtu qe s'kishte pse kapercehej nje kufi qe pranohej sic pranohet veshja e nje bluze me ngjyre te ndryshme per te luajtur nje ndeshje miqesore me nje skuader tjeter... ne kete rast nuk ka kuptim te pyesesh pse nuk e vesh fanellen e tjetrit... eshte nje konvencion qe nuk cenon ndonje aspekt te rendesishem funksional te komunitetit...

Njeri nga pleqte me pyeti c'mendoj une per fene qe une si zakonisht iu pergjigja se 'feja eshte

ajo qe ben njeriu sipas mendimit te tij per Zotin' pastaj duke u ndalur ne ecjen tone te ngadalte ne zbritje nga vendi I kishes, me dha pergjigjen e tij: "fete jane parti politike," duke me pare sikur donte te theksonte se ky ishte konkluzion I pjekur dhe ishte gati ta mbronte me argumenta.

Ky mentalitet nuk eshte i rralle mes shqiptareve dhe i thene si konkluzion kushedi sa here i deklaruar nga ky burre ne te 80tat, ishte domethenes.

Shoku i tij nje vit me pak se 90 vjec, erdhi per dreke ne shtepine e bashkefshatarit te tij ku isha ftuar edhe une. Gjate drekes biseduam per shume aspekte te jetes se fshatit. Nje pyetje e rendesishme qe bera: "cfare do te thoshte nje Malbardhas per permbajtjen e fese se tjetrit?" nuk mori pergjigje direkte nga Deli Tafa (89 vjec) por ne pergjigje te pyetjes "cfare mendojne fshataret per fene e tjetrit" ai filloi nje shpjegim te gjate duke thene se ai vete ishte me afer Luterit ne lidhje me nje besim joinstitutional. Ai tha se megjithese xhamine e re e kishte afer shtepise ne fushen poshte kodres se fshatit (nuk dukej se kishte rendesi per te qe ishte myslyman) ai me shpesh vinte ketu ne maje te kodres tek kisha. "Leke te harxhuara kot" ishte nje shprehje qe ai perdori per t'iu referuar xhamise se re por edhe per te nenvizuar qe ai kishte nje mendim per Zotin qe nuk ia perkufizonte ndonje fe e institucionalizuar me ndertesa.

Ky fjalim i gjate me dha pershtypjen se pergjigjia per pyetjen e kuptimit te fshatareve per fene e vet ne dallim te tjetrit ishte e zakonshmja pergjigje Shqiptare 'nje zot egziston' si tek kisha si tek xhamia dhe pak rendesi kane format e shprehjes se kesaj duke I konsideruar cfaredo obligimi fetar specific si vegla te ndryshme ne dukje por qe kryejne te njejten pune, pra me nenkuptimin se permbajtja e fese se tjetrit nuk ishte faktor ne sjelljen e bashkefshatareve shqiptare te seciles fe.

Duke I bere te njejten pyetje nje bashkefshatari tjetër ai tha se dallimi me domethenes per ta do ishte 'katoliket hane mish derri kurse myslymanet jo (nuk supozohet se duhet)' nderkohe qe te gjithë e pranojne me te qeshur qe 'katoliket jane merzitur se eshte rritur cmimi i mishit te derrit tani qe edhe myslymanet po e hane me qejf.' Ne fakt domethenia e ngrenies se mishit te derrit eshte e madhe per Shqiptaret si shenje perkushtimi te shprehur ne njefare kufizimi apo sacrifice por nuk shkon me larg se san je dallim dietik qe eshte praktikisht pa ndikim domethenes midis dy familjeve qe respektojne deshirat dietike te tjetrit. Ne kete kontekst toleranca e Shqiptareve do te ishte durimi i preferencave te tjetrit kur e fton ne tavolinen tende apo je i ftuar ne tavolinen e tjetrit por ne lidhje me fene si formatues te sjelljes dhe praktikave jetesore ne nderveprim shoqeror, ekonomik dhe politik me te tjeret, niveli i dallimeve per tu duruar apo akomoduar eshte pothuajse joegzistent sidomos deri ne vitet e fundit te dekadës se dyte pas komunizmit. Shenjat e para te nevojës se diskutimit dhe akomodimit te zhvillimeve fetare jane bere te dukshme me shfaqjen e veshjeve islamike ne domethenien e tyre per ligjet e shkollimit publik Shqiptar.

Ne rastin e Malbardhit keto shenja te nevojës se akomodimit te fese se tjetrit akoma nuk jane shfaqur por (1) me ndertimin e xhamise ne fushen perballe fshatit dhe (2) me perseritjen e perditeshme te thirrjes myslymane me amplifikim te nje regjistrimi kasetofonik apo (3) me shfaqjen (per here te pare ne perjetimin e nje bashkefshatari 30 vjecar) e hoxhes ne nje varrim ne fshat, po zhvillohet hapesira fetare qe mund te sjelle nevojën e akomodimit te nje kerkese fetare te bashkefshatarit deri tani te pashfaqur ne Malbardh.

Pyetjes time ne lidhje me kete potencial zhvillimi te diferencave fetarisht te motivuara midis malbardhasve per te kercenuar harmonine nderfetare egzistuese fshataret shprehen bindjen se kultura e banoreve te ngulur aty nuk ka per te ndryshuar por sigurisht qe nuk kane ndonje garanci apo forme specifike te parashikuar per kete.

Ata njihnin njeriun dhe kishin lidhjet familjare e kuptimet e perbashketa kulturore qe nuk prekeshin nga feja. Feja mund te ishte ose nje rast per te ngrene ndonje ushqim te vecante ose nje obligim siperfaqesor si kryerja e nje angarie.

Ne fakt ketu eshte thelbi i ceshtjes se harmonise nderfetare shqiptare; Shqiptaret e feve te ndryshme jane si Amerikanet e partive te ndryshme. Shqiptaret e thone 'fete jane parti' kur fete behen objekt interesimi dhe rrezikojne te behen fokus i rendesishem. Nenkuptimi eshte qe partite jane percarese por edhe jane te barabarta dhe thjesht zgjedhje te barazvlefshme qe nuk duhen marre teper seriozisht perndryshe behesh nje partizan i verber dhe nenkuptimi eshte nje person i bezdisshem dhe agresiv.

Pyetjes time nese ndertimi i xhamise ne kunderpergjigje te kishes nenkuptonte arritjen e nje realiteti kur do rriteshin konfrontimet nderfetare iu dha nje pergjigje e thjeshte pa ngurrim qe jo.

Pastaj u largova me nje mesues te shkolles se fshatit dhe ai foli per nje ambient te brendshem me problematik te fshatit me konsum dhe prodhim droge pervec marrredhenie te prishura ciftesh. Nje femije kishte thene se gjyshi i kishte treguar per nje mallkim te merituar nga nje be rrene e atyre qe u vendosen se pari ne kete fshat. Mesuesi e konfirmoi mendimin e njohur se fshataret e kerkuan ndertimin e kishes me shpresen e ndertimit te rruges dhe gjithashtu nuk u duk se ishte i shqetesuar per ndikimin e ndertimit te xhamise si kunderpergjigje e ndertimit te kishes qe ai e shihte te lidhur direkt me perfaqesuesin myslyman te myftinise perkatese nga fshati gjorm...

Si perfundim bisedat e mia ne fshat me japin nje ide me te qarte te konceptit te fshatareve per ndertimin e kishes, ndertimin e xhamise si kunderpergjigje, realitetin e harmonise nderfetare jo te bazuar ne njohjen e permbajtjes se feve por njohjen nderpersonale dhe afinitetin kulturor kombetar, reflektuar ne dergjimin e krushqve dhe ne morte, kumbarite dhe mosshqetesimin per prishjen e harmonise nderfetare ne te ardhmen e aferme.

## APPENDIX B

The survey with the students of education at the University of Shkodra included 139 valid questionnaires with another 30 that were not valid. The number of students of education in the cycle II, in different specialities (English, Italian, History/Geography, Biology/Cemistry (minor) and other, Informatics, Mathematics, Physics, Language and Literature, Elementary education and Physical Education and Clinical Psychology) for the academic year of 2016-17 was 277.



Translated Questionnaire as part of the international study with  
Driestar:

### **Pyetësor 'Feja dhe toleranca'**

Ju lutem shënoni vendin e duhur (dhe gjithashtu emrin e studiuesit që ju ftoi të merrni pjesë në këtë anketë).

Universiteti Driestar për shkencat e aplikuara (Gouda, Holandë) bashkëpunon me North West University (Potchefstroom; Republika e Afrikës së Jugut) në një studim mbi tolerancën fetare. Pjesë e punës kërkimore është ndërtimi i një pyetësori që u mundëson studiuesve të matin tolerancën fetare. Në këtë fazë pyetësori është ende në formë drafti.

Të dhënat e mbledhura nga ky studim pilot nuk do të përdoren për të matur tolerancën fetare, por vetëm për të përcaktuar besueshmërinë e pyetësorit (Është marrë leje specifike për përdorimin e këtij pyetësori si matës të tolerancës në Shqipëri). Prandaj është e rëndësishme që përgjigjet tuaja ndaj pyetjeve të pyetësorit të reflektojnë mendime të sinqerta. Përgjigjet ndaj pyetjeve nuk duhen parë si të sakta ose të pasakta. Procesimi i pyetësorit do të ndodhë në mënyrë anonime. Plotësimi i tij merr afro pesëmbëdhjetë minuta.

- ☐ E kam lexuar këtë tekst dhe jam dakord. (to the next screen)
- ☐ E kam lexuar këtë tekst dhe nuk jam dakord. (to the last screen)

E kam plotësuar këtë pyetësor krejt vullnetarisht.

Askush në asnjë mënyrë nuk më ka detyruar apo shtyrë të marr pjesë në këtë studim.

E kuptoj se mund të ndaloj së plotësuar pyetësorin në çdo kohë.

Po e plotësoj pyetësorin pa prituri ndonjë shpërblim.

Nuk ka asnjë marrëdhënie midis studiuesve dhe meje.

E di që procesimi i të dhënave të pyetësorit bëhet në mënyrë anonime.

- ☐ Bie dakord me deklaratimet e mësipërme. (to the next screen)
- ☐ Nuk bie dakord me deklaratimet e mësipërme. (to the last screen)

Jeni mashkull apo femër?

- ☐ mashkull
- ☐ femër

(to the next screen)

Cili është viti juaj i lindjes?

(to the next screen)

Në çfarë viti po studioni këtë semester?

- ☐ viti i parë
- ☐ viti i dytë
- ☐ viti i tretë
- ☐ viti i katërt
- ☐ viti i pestë ose më lart

(to the next screen)

Shënoni cilat thënie aplikohen për ju.

- ☐ E shikoj veten si dikush që i përket njërës nga fetë/filozofitë/jetë dhe botë kuptimet e organizuara. (to the next screen)
- ☐ Besoj në një forcë/fuqi të mbinatyrshme, por nuk i përkas një grupimi të organizuar fetar/filozofik/jetë dhe botë kuptimor. (to screen 10 – statement 01)
- ☐ Nuk e konsideroj veten se i përkas një grupimi të organizuar fetar/filozofik/jetë dhe botë kuptimor dhe gjithashtu nuk besoj në një forcë/fuqi të mbinatyrshme. (to screen 10 – statement 01)

Në cilën nga fetë/filozofitë/jetë dhe botë kuptimet e mëposhtme e konsideroni veten se bëni pjesë??

- ☐ Krishtërimi
- ☐ Islami
- ☐ Hinduizmi
- ☐ Budizmi
- ☐ Taoizmi
- ☐ Judaizmi
- ☐ Sikhizmi
- ☐ Feja tradicionale afrikane

(to screen 10 – statement 01)

**Shënoni të gjitha thëniet që mund të aplikohen për ju.**

Termi “fe/filozofi/jetë dhe botë kuptim” përfshin besimin në një forcë/fuqi më të lartë ose të mbinatyrshme.

01. Feja/filozofia/jetë dhe botë kuptimi përkufizon gjithçka në një seri rregullash dhe dogmash.
02. Unë jetoj në mënyrë strikte sipas rregullave të fesë/filozofisë/jetë dhe botë kuptimit tim.
03. Kur më duhet të marr një vendim të rëndësishëm, unë jam shumë i/e vetëdijshëm/me për fenë time dhe/ose besimet e mira që janë pjesë e fesë/filozofisë/jetë dhe botë kuptimit tim.
04. Unëndihem i/e sigurt dhe i/e mbrojtur kur takoj njerëz që aderojnë në një feosejetë dhe botë kuptim tjetër.
05. Unëu ndërhyj sa më pak të jetë e mundur njerëzve që aderojnë në një feosejetë dhe botë kuptim tjetër.
06. Unë nuk dua t’ia di se çfarë mendojnë, ndjejnë ose bëjnë njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetërfeose botëkuptim.
07. Unëjam mik/e me njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër feosejetë dhe botë kuptim.
08. Unë nuk ndihem i/e kërcënuar nga bota përreth meje.
09. Unëmund të t’ia kaloj mjaft mirë me dikë që iu mbahet normave dhe vlerave të ndryshme nga të miat.
10. Të gjithë njerëzit duhet të jenë në gjendje të kalojnë mirë me njëri-tjetrin, pavarësisht se cilat norma dhe vlera janë të rëndësishme për ta.

Nuk jam fare dakord				Jam shumë dakord	Nuk aplikohet
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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**Shëno të gjitha thëniet që mund të aplikohen për ty.**

Termi “fe/filozofi/jetë dhe botë kuptim” përfshin besimin në një forcë/fuqi më të lartë ose të mbinatyrshme.

11. Ka norma dhe vlera që duhet të jenë të rëndësishme për të gjithë njerëzit, pavarësisht nga feja/jetë dhe botë kuptimi i tyre.

12. Unëkam disa norma dhe vlera të përbashkëta me njerëz që aderojnë në një fe/filozofi/jetë dhe botë kuptim krejt të ndryshëm nga imi.

13. Në bisedat me njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër feosejetë dhe botë kuptim unë gjithmonë u qëndroj besnik/e normave dhe vlerave të mia.

14. Vleratdhe normat që dalin nga një fe/filozofi/jetë dhe botë kuptim të ndryshëm nga imi nuk mund t'i japin drejtim jetës sime.

15. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua rrjedhin të gjitha nga feja ose jetë dhe botëkuptimi im.

16. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për muamë bëjnë të jem mjaft ndryshe nga njerëzit e tjerë.

17. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për muatani nuk janë shumë të ndryshme nga vlerat që kam mbajtur në fëmijëri.

18. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për muatani m'u rrënjosen nga prindërit e mi.

19. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për muatani m'u rrënjosen nga shkolla(t) që ndoqa.

20. Unëjam në gjendje t'iu shpjegoj të tjerëve ato vlera dhe norma që janë të rëndësishme për mua.

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Nuk jam fare dakord					Jam shumë dakord	Nuk aplikohet
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Shëno të gjitha thëniet që mund të aplikohen për ty.**

Termi “fe/filozofi/jetë dhe botë kuptim” përfshin besimin në një forcë/fuqi më të lartë ose të mbinatyrshme.

21. Unëndihem mjaft rehat në shoqërinë e një personi që aderon në një tjetërfeosejetëdhebotëkuptim.

22. Unë nuk dua t'ia di se çfarë mendojnë, perceptojnë dhe bëjnë njerëzit bazuar në fenë ose jetë dhe botë kuptimin e tyre.

23. Unë nuk ndihem i/e kërcënuar nga idetë dhe veprimet e njerëzve të tjerë bazuar në fenë ose jetë dhe botë kuptimin e tyre.

Nuk jam fare dakord					Jam shumë dakord	Nuk aplikohet
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



- |   |                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 24. Unëmendoj se po kontribuoj në mirëqenien e qenieve të tjera njerëzore si unë kur i respektoj idetë dhe bindjet e tyre.                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 25. Më duket e lehtë të pranoj sjelljen e njerëzve të tjerë që unë vetë nuk e konsideroj të pranueshme.                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 26. Unëjam në gjendje t'i kuptoj njerëzit që aderojnë në një feosejetë dhe botë kuptim të ndryshëm nga i imi.                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 27. Unëkam prirje të fortë për t'iu besuar njerëzve që aderojnë një feosejetë dhe botë kuptim të ndryshëm nga i imi.                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 28. Unëkam besim të thellë në bindjet e mia.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 29. Unëjam i mendimit që njerëzit e tjerë duhet të kenë të drejtë për të patur bindjet e tyre, edhe nëse unë i konsideroj ato të gabuara. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 30. Unëbesoj në një shoqëri ku të gjithë njerëzit kanë të njëjtat bindje.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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### Shëno të gjitha thëniet që mund të aplikohen për ty.

Termi “fe/filozofi/jetë dhe botë kuptim” përfshin besimin në një forcë/fuqi më të lartë ose të mbinatyrshme.

- |  | Nuk jam fare dakord      |                          |                          |                          | Jam shumë dakord         | Nuk aplikohet            |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 31. Unëbesoj që fejaosejetë dhe botë kuptimi im është e drejta/i drejti.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 32. Unëmendoj që njerëzit mund të arrijnë tek e vërteta vetëm përmes fesë ose jetë dhe botëkuptimit tim.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 33. Unëbesoj se të gjitha fetë ose jetë dhe botë kuptimet në fund të çojnë tek e vërtetë.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 34. Unëjam i/e bindur se fejaosejetë dhe botë kuptimi im mund të pasurohen përmes dialogut me fe ose jetë dhe botë kuptime të tjera.             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 35. Sipas mendimit tim, liria personale është synimi më i lartë për të cilin mund të përpiqesh në jetë.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 36. Unëjam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet t'iu përmbahen parimeve që gjenden në një shkrim të shenjtë.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 37. Unëjam i/e mendimit që njerëzit duhet të jetojnë dhe të sillen sipas parimeve që nuk rrjedhin nga një fe apo jetë dhe botë kuptim i caktuar. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 38. Unëi respektoj besimet fetare të njerëzve me bindje shumë të ndryshme nga të miam.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

39. Bazuar në fenë apo jetë dhe botë kuptimin tim, unë jam pak a shumë i/e kënaqur me masat e marra nga qeveria. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

40. Unë nuk dua t'ia di nëse vendi im qeveriset nga të krishterë, myslimanë, hindu, budistë apo ndjekës së Epokës së Re. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

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41. Unëjami/e bindurqë jam në gjendje të marr pjesë në shoqëri duke marrë parasysh vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

42. Unë do të doja të bëhesha anëtar i një shoqërie ku përjasja e secilit ndaj jetës të ishte njësoj si e imja. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

43. Unëjami/e bindurse njerëzit pavarësisht dallimeve midis tyre duhet të synojnë një bashkëjetesë paqësore. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

44. Unëjami/e bindurse njerëzit duhet t'i tregojnë aq respekt njëri-tjetrit saqë të jetë e mundur bashkëjetesa paqësore midis tyre. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

45. Unëjami/e bindurse njerëzit duhet të kërkojnë mënyra për t'i kapërcyer dallimet që ekzistojnë midis njerëzve në shoqëri. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

46. Unëjami/e mendimit që njerëzit duhet të respektojnë dallimet që ekzistojnë midis njerëzve të ndryshëm në shoqëri. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

47. Unë mund ta imagjinoj shumë mirë linjën e mendimit të njerëzve që aderojnë në një sërë vlerash krejt të ndryshme nga të miat. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

48. Unë i respektoj dhe nuk i dënoj njerëzit bindjet e të cilëve janë të ndryshme nga të miat. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

49. Unëjami/e bindurse të gjithë njerëzit po kërkojnë për një fuqi më të lartë/të mbinatyrshme. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

50. Unë ndihem i/e lirë të socializohem me respekt me njerëz që mbajnë bindje mjaft të ndryshme nga të miat. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

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Faleminderit që e plotësuat këtë pyetësor.

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Ju lutemi mbylleni shfletuesin tuaj.

Table 1. Results of the completion of the questionnaire.

	N	M	SD
01. Feja/filozofia/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi përkufizon gjithçka në një seri rregullash dhe dogmash.	139	3,68	1,57
02. Unë jetoj në mënyrë strikte sipas rregullave të fesë/filozofisë/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimit tim.	139	2,96	1,72
03. Kur më duhet të marr një vendim të rëndësishëm, unë jam shumë i/e vetëdijshëm/me për fenë time dhe/ose besimet e mira që janë pjesë e fesë/filozofisë/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimit tim.	139	3,98	1,43
04. Unë ndihem i/e sigurt dhe i/e mbrojtur kur takoj njerëz që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim tjetër.	139	3,50	1,68
05. Unë u ndërhyj sa më pak të jetë e mundur njerëzve që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim tjetër.	139	3,53	1,64
06. Unë nuk dua t'ia di se çfarë mendojnë, ndjejnë ose bëjnë njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose botë-kuptim.	139	3,17	1,74
07. Unë jam mik/e me njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim.	139	4,13	1,46
08. Unë nuk ndihem i/e kërcënuar nga bota përreth meje.	139	3,75	1,62
09. Unë mund të t'ia kaloj mjaft mirë me dikë që iu mbahet normave dhe vlerave të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	3,83	1,54
10. Të gjithë njerëzit duhet të jenë në gjendje të kalojnë mirë me njëri-tjetrin, pavarësisht se cilat norma dhe vlera janë të rëndësishme për ta.	139	4,46	1,14
11. Ka norma dhe vlera që duhet të jenë të rëndësishme për të gjithë njerëzit, pavarësisht nga feja/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi i tyre.	139	4,35	1,37
12. Unë kam disa norma dhe vlera të përbashkëta me njerëz që aderojnë në një fe/filozofi/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim krejt të ndryshëm nga imi.	139	3,86	1,60
13. Në bisedat me njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim unë gjithmonë u qëndroj besnik/e normave dhe vlerave të mia.	139	4,12	1,38
14. Vlerat dhe normat që dalin nga një fe/filozofi/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim i ndryshëm nga imi nuk mund t'i japin drejtim jetës sime.	139	3,16	1,70
15. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua rrjedhin të gjitha nga feja ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi im.	139	3,00	1,63
16. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua më bëjnë të jem mjaft ndryshe nga njerëzit e tjerë.	139	2,91	1,69
17. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani nuk janë shumë të ndryshme nga vlerat që kam mbajtur në fëmijëri.	139	3,11	1,66
18. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani m'u rrënjosen nga prindërit e mi.	139	3,42	1,66
19. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani m'u rrënjosen nga shkolla(t) që ndoqa.	139	2,58	1,62
20. Unë jam në gjendje t'iu shpjegoj të tjerëve ato vlera dhe norma që janë të rëndësishme për mua.	139	4,32	1,30

21. Unë ndihem mjaft rehat në shoqërinë e një personi që aderon në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptim.	139	4,07	1,48
22. Unë nuk dua t'ia di se çfarë mendojnë, perceptojnë dhe bëjnë njerëzit bazuar në fenë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin e tyre.	139	3,47	1,65
23. Unë nuk ndihem i/e kërcënuar nga idetë dhe veprimet e njerëzve të tjerë bazuar në fenë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin e tyre.	139	3,76	1,59
24. Unë mendoj se po kontribuoj në mirëqenien e qenieve të tjera njerëzore si unë kur i respektoj idetë dhe bindjet e tyre.	139	3,83	1,55
25. Më duket e lehtë të pranoj sjelljen e njerëzve të tjerë që unë vetë nuk e konsideroj të pranueshme.	139	2,52	1,56
26. Unë jam në gjendje t'i kuptoj njerëzit që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim të ndryshëm nga i imi.	139	3,91	1,47
27. Unë kam prirje të fortë për t'iu besuar njerëzve që aderojnë një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim të ndryshëm nga i imi.	139	3,14	1,63
28. Unë kam besim të thellë në bindjet e mia.	139	4,01	1,42
29. Unë jam i mendimit që njerëzit e tjerë duhet të kenë të drejtë për të patur bindjet e tyre, edhe nëse unë i konsideroj ato të gabuara.	139	3,91	1,53
30. Unë besoj në një shoqëri ku të gjithë njerëzit kanë të njëjtat bindje.	139	2,73	1,76
31. Unë besoj që feja ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi im është e drejta/i drejti.	139	3,76	1,64
32. Unë mendoj që njerëzit mund të arrijnë tek e vërteta vetëm sipas fesë ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptimit tim.	139	2,91	1,69
33. Unë besoj se të gjitha fetë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimet në fund të çojnë tek e njëjta e vërtetë.	139	3,52	1,66
34. Unë jam i/e bindur se feja ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi im mund të pasurohen përmes dialogut me fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptime të tjera.	139	3,48	1,58
35. Sipas mendimit tim, liria personale është synimi më i lartë për të cilin mund të përpiqesh në jetë.	139	4,22	1,32
36. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet t'iu përmbahen parimeve që gjenden në një shkrim të shenjtë.	139	3,51	1,56
37. Unë jam i/e mendimit që njerëzit duhet të jetojnë dhe të sillen sipas parimeve që nuk rrjedhin nga një fe apo jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim i caktuar.	139	2,89	1,60
38. Unë i respektoj besimet fetare të njerëzve me bindje shumë të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	4,01	1,50
39. Bazuar në fenë apo jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin tim, unë jam pak a shumë i/e kënaqur me masat e marra nga qeveria.	139	3,06	1,65
40. Unë nuk dua t'ia di nëse vendi im qeveriset nga të krishterë, myslimanë, hindu, budistë apo ndjekës së Epokës së Re.	139	3,80	1,64
41. Unë jam i/e bindur që jam në gjendje të marr pjesë në shoqëri duke marrë parasysh vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua.	139	4,22	1,46
42. Unë do të doja të bëhesha anëtar i një shoqërie ku përqsja e secilit ndaj jetës të ishte njësoj si e imja.	139	3,02	1,69
43. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit pavarësisht dallimeve midis tyre duhet të synojnë një bashkëjetesë paqësore.	139	4,31	1,24
44. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet t'i tregojnë aq respekt njëri-tjetrit saqë të jetë e mundur bashkëjetesa paqësore midis tyre.	139	4,21	1,24

45. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet të kërkojnë mënyra për t'i kapërcyer dallimet që ekzistojnë midis njerëzve në shoqëri.	139	4,16	1,30
46. Unë jam i/e mendimit që njerëzit duhet të respektojnë dallimet që ekzistojnë midis njerëzve të ndryshëm në shoqëri.	139	3,88	1,50
47. Unë mund ta imagjinoj shumë mirë linjën e mendimit të njerëzve që aderojnë në një sërë vlerash krejt të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	3,47	1,58
48. Unë i respektoj dhe nuk i dënoj njerëzit bindjet e të cilëve janë të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	3,95	1,51
49. Unë jam i/e bindur se të gjithë njerëzit po kërkojnë për një fuqi më të lartë/të mbinatyrshme.	139	3,03	1,73
50. Unë ndihem i/e lirë të shoqerohem me respekt me njerëz që mbajnë bindje mjaft të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	4,09	1,43

Table 2. Rearrangement of table 1 from the greatest mean to the smallest mean

	N	M	SD
10. Të gjithë njerëzit duhet të jenë në gjendje të kalojnë mirë me njëri-tjetrit, pavarësisht se cilat norma dhe vlera janë të rëndësishme për ta.	139	4,46	1,14
11. Ka norma dhe vlera që duhet të jenë të rëndësishme për të gjithë njerëzit, pavarësisht nga feja/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi i tyre.	139	4,35	1,37
20. Unë jam në gjendje t'iu shpjegoj të tjerëve ato vlera dhe norma që janë të rëndësishme për mua.	139	4,32	1,30
43. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit pavarësisht dallimeve midis tyre duhet të synojnë një bashkëjetesë paqësore.	139	4,31	1,24
35. Sipas mendimit tim, liria personale është synimi më i lartë për të cilin mund të përpiqesh në jetë.	139	4,22	1,32
41. Unë jam i/e bindur që jam në gjendje të marr pjesë në shoqëri duke marrë parasysh vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua.	139	4,22	1,46
44. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet t'i tregojnë aq respekt njëri-tjetrit saqë të jetë e mundur bashkëjetesa paqësore midis tyre.	139	4,21	1,24
45. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet të kërkojnë mënyra për t'i kapërcyer dallimet që ekzistojnë midis njerëzve në shoqëri.	139	4,16	1,30
07. Unë jam mik/e me njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim.	139	4,13	1,46
13. Në bisedat me njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim unë gjithmonë u qëndroj besnik/e normave dhe vlerave të mia.	139	4,12	1,38
50. Unë ndihem i/e lirë të shoqerohem me respekt me njerëz që mbajnë bindje mjaft të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	4,09	1,43
21. Unë ndihem mjaft rehat në shoqërinë e një personi që aderon në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptim.	139	4,07	1,48
28. Unë kam besim të thellë në bindjet e mia.	139	4,01	1,42
38. Unë i respektoj besimet fetare të njerëzve me bindje shumë të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	4,01	1,50

03. Kur më duhet të marr një vendim të rëndësishëm, unë jam shumë i/e vetëdijshëm/me për fenë time dhe/ose besimet e mira që janë pjesë e fesë/filozofisë/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimit tim.	139	3,98	1,43
48. Unë i respektoj dhe nuk i dënoj njerëzit bindjet e të cilëve janë të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	3,95	1,51
26. Unë jam në gjendje t'i kuptoj njerëzit që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim të ndryshëm nga i imi.	139	3,91	1,47
29. Unë jam i mendimit që njerëzit e tjerë duhet të kenë të drejtë për të patur bindjet e tyre, edhe nëse unë i konsideroj ato të gabuara.	139	3,91	1,53
46. Unë jam i/e mendimit që njerëzit duhet të respektojnë dallimet që ekzistojnë midis njerëzve të ndryshëm në shoqëri.	139	3,88	1,50
12. Unë kam disa norma dhe vlera të përbashkëta me njerëz që aderojnë në një fe/filozofi/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim krejt të ndryshëm nga imi.	139	3,86	1,60
09. Unë mund të t'ia kaloj mjaft mirë me dikë që iu mbahet normave dhe vlerave të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	3,83	1,54
24. Unë mendoj se po kontribuoj në mirëqenien e qenieve të tjera njerëzore si unë kur i respektoj idetë dhe bindjet e tyre.	139	3,83	1,55
40. Unë nuk dua t'ia di nëse vendi im qeveriset nga të krishterë, myslimanë, hindu, budistë apo ndjekës së Epokës së Re.	139	3,80	1,64
23. Unë nuk ndihem i/e kërcënuar nga idetë dhe veprimet e njerëzve të tjerë bazuar në fenë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin e tyre.	139	3,76	1,59
31. Unë besoj që feja ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi im është e drejta/i drejti.	139	3,76	1,64
08. Unë nuk ndihem i/e kërcënuar nga bota përreth meje.	139	3,75	1,62
01. Feja/filozofia/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi përkufizon gjithçka në një seri rregullash dhe dogmash.	139	3,68	1,57
<b>Total mean</b>		<b>3,61</b>	
05. Unë u ndërhyj sa më pak të jetë e mundur njerëzve që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim tjetër.	139	3,53	1,64
33. Unë besoj se të gjitha fetë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimet në fund të çojnë tek e njëjta e vërtetë.	139	3,52	1,66
36. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet t'iu përmbahen parimeve që gjenden në një shkrim të shenjtë.	139	3,51	1,56
04. Unë ndihem i/e sigurt dhe i/e mbrojtur kur takoj njerëz që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim tjetër.	139	3,50	1,68
34. Unë jam i/e bindur se feja ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi im mund të pasurohen përmes dialogut me fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptime të tjera.	139	3,48	1,58
22. Unë nuk dua t'ia di se çfarë mendojnë, perceptojnë dhe bëjnë njerëzit bazuar në fenë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin e tyre.	139	3,47	1,65
47. Unë mund ta imagjinoj shumë mirë linjën e mendimit të njerëzve që aderojnë në një sërë vlerash krejt të ndryshme nga të miat.	139	3,47	1,58
18. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani m'u rrënjosen nga prindërit e mi.	139	3,42	1,66
06. Unë nuk dua t'ia di se çfarë mendojnë, ndjejnë ose bëjnë njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose botë-kuptim.	139	3,17	1,74

14. Vlerat dhe normat që dalin nga një fe/filozofi/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim i ndryshëm nga imi nuk mund t'i japin drejtim jetës sime.	139	3,16	1,70
27. Unë kam prirje të fortë për t'iu besuar njerëzve që aderojnë një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim të ndryshëm nga i imi.	139	3,14	1,63
17. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani nuk janë shumë të ndryshme nga vlerat që kam mbajtur në fëmijëri.	139	3,11	1,66
39. Bazuar në fenë apo jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin tim, unë jam pak a shumë i/e kënaqur me masat e marra nga qeveria.	139	3,06	1,65
49. Unë jam i/e bindur se të gjithë njerëzit po kërkojnë për një fuqi më të lartë/të mbinatyrshme.	139	3,03	1,73
42. Unë do të doja të bëhesha anëtar i një shoqërie ku përqsja e secilit ndaj jetës të ishte njësoj si e imja.	139	3,02	1,69
15. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua rrjedhin të gjitha nga feja ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptimi im.	139	3,00	1,63
02. Unë jetoj në mënyrë strikte sipas rregullave të fesë/filozofisë/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimit tim.	139	2,96	1,72
16. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua më bëjnë të jem mjaft ndryshe nga njerëzit e tjerë.	139	2,91	1,69
32. Unë mendoj që njerëzit mund të arrijnë tek e vërteta vetëm sipas fesë ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptimit tim.	139	2,91	1,69
37. Unë jam i/e mendimit që njerëzit duhet të jetojnë dhe të sillen sipas parimeve që nuk rrjedhin nga një fe apo jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim i caktuar.	139	2,89	1,60
30. Unë besoj në një shoqëri ku të gjithë njerëzit kanë të njëjtat bindje.	139	2,73	1,76
19. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani m'u rrënjosën nga shkolla(t) që ndoqa.	139	2,58	1,62
25. Më duket e lehtë të pranoj sjelljen e njerëzve të tjerë që unë vetë nuk e konsideroj të pranueshme.	139	2,52	1,56

Table 3. Religious makeup of the sample (including comparisons)

	Netherlands	Estonia & Slovakia	Albania	Total
I regard myself as belonging to one of the organised religions/philosophies/life and world views.	98%	62%	76%	79%
Christianity	100%	100%	46%	84%
Islam			51%	15%
Taoism			1%	
Traditional African religion			2%	1%

I do believe in a supernatural force/power, but I do not belong to an organised religious/philosophical/life-and world view grouping.	1%	27%	18%	15%
I do not regard myself as belonging to an organised religious/philosophical/life and world view grouping and I also do not believe in a supernatural force/power.	1%	11%	6%	6%

Table 4.The differences between the ‘liberals’ and the ‘stricts’ for Albania

	liberal	strict
01. Feja/filozofia/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi përkufizon gjithçka në një seri rregullash dhe dogmash.	3,51	3,86
02. Unë jetoj në mënyrë strikte sipas rregullave të fesë/filozofisë/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimit tim.	1,53	4,41
03. Kur më duhet të marr një vendim të rëndësishëm, unë jam shumë i/e vetëdijshëm/me për fenë time dhe/ose besimet e mira që janë pjesë e fesë/filozofisë/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimit tim.	3,27	4,70
04. Unë ndihem i/e sigurt dhe i/e mbrojtur kur takoj njerëz që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim tjetër.	3,39	3,62
05. Unë u ndërhyj sa më pak të jetë e mundur njerëzve që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptim tjetër.	3,59	3,48
06. Unë nuk dua t’ia di se çfarë mendojnë, ndjejnë ose bëjnë njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose botëkuptim.	3,31	3,03
07. Unë jam mik/e me njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim.	3,89	4,38
08. Unë nuk ndihem i/e kërcënuar nga bota përreth meje.	3,60	3,90
09. Unë mund të t’ia kaloj mjaft mirë me dikë që iu mbahet normave dhe vlerave të ndryshme nga të miat.	3,56	4,12
10. Të gjithë njerëzit duhet të jenë në gjendje të kalojnë mirë me njëri-tjetrin, pavarësisht se cilat norma dhe vlera janë të rëndësishme për ta.	4,31	4,61
11. Ka norma dhe vlera që duhet të jenë të rëndësishme për të gjithë njerëzit, pavarësisht nga feja/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi i tyre.	4,07	4,64
12. Unë kam disa norma dhe vlera të përbashkëta me njerëz që aderojnë në një fe/filozofi/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim krejt të ndryshëm nga imi.	3,64	4,07
13. Në bisedat me njerëz që aderojnë në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim unë gjithmonë u qëndroj besnik/e normave dhe vlerave të mia.	3,79	4,46
14. Vlerat dhe normat që dalin nga një fe/filozofi/jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim i ndryshëm nga imi nuk mund t’i japin drejtëm jetës sime.	2,77	3,55
15. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua rrjedhin të gjitha nga feja ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptimi im.	2,50	3,51



16. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua më bëjnë të jem mjaft ndryshe nga njerëzit e tjerë.	2,67	3,16
17. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani nuk janë shumë të ndryshme nga vlerat që kam mbajtur në fëmijëri.	2,83	3,39
18. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani m'u rrënjosën nga prindërit e mi.	3,21	3,62
19. Vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua tani m'u rrënjosën nga shkolla(t) që ndoqa.	2,11	3,04
20. Unë jam në gjendje t'iu shpjegoj të tjerëve ato vlera dhe norma që janë të rëndësishme për mua.	4,03	4,62
21. Unë ndihem mjaft rehat në shoqërinë e një personi që aderon në një tjetër fe ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptim.	3,76	4,39
22. Unë nuk dua t'ia di se çfarë mendojnë, perceptojnë dhe bëjnë njerëzit bazuar në fenë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin e tyre.	3,50	3,45
23. Unë nuk ndihem i/e kërcënuar nga idetë dhe veprimet e njerëzve të tjerë bazuar në fenë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin e tyre.	3,73	3,80
24. Unë mendoj se po kontribuoj në mirëqenien e qenieve të tjera njerëzore si unë kur i respektoj idetë dhe bindjet e tyre.	3,27	4,41
25. Më duket e lehtë të pranoj sjelljen e njerëzve të tjerë që unë vetë nuk e konsideroj të pranueshme.	2,53	2,51
26. Unë jam në gjendje t'i kuptoj njerëzit që aderojnë në një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim të ndryshëm nga i imi.	3,59	4,25
27. Unë kam prirje të fortë për t'iu besuar njerëzve që aderojnë një fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim të ndryshëm nga i imi.	2,76	3,52
28. Unë kam besim të thellë në bindjet e mia.	3,71	4,32
29. Unë jam i mendimit që njerëzit e tjerë duhet të kenë të drejtë për të patur bindjet e tyre, edhe nëse unë i konsideroj ato të gabuara.	3,83	4,00
30. Unë besoj në një shoqëri ku të gjithë njerëzit kanë të njëjtat bindje.	2,70	2,77
31. Unë besoj që feja ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi im është e drejta/i drejti.	3,34	4,17
32. Unë mendoj që njerëzit mund të arrijnë tek e vërteta vetëm sipas fesë ose jetë-dhe-botëkuptimit tim.	2,61	3,22
33. Unë besoj se të gjitha fetë ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimet në fund të çojnë tek e njëjta e vërtetë.	3,41	3,62
34. Unë jam i/e bindur se feja ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimi im mund të pasurohen përmes dialogut me fe ose jetë-dhe-botë-kuptime të tjera.	3,09	3,88
35. Sipas mendimit tim, liria personale është synimi më i lartë për të cilin mund të përpiqesh në jetë.	4,00	4,43
36. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet t'iu përmbahen parimeve që gjenden në një shkrim të shenjtë.	3,17	3,86
37. Unë jam i/e mendimit që njerëzit duhet të jetojnë dhe të sillen sipas parimeve që nuk rrjedhin nga një fe apo jetë-dhe-botë-kuptim i caktuar.	2,90	2,88
38. Unë i respektoj besimet fetare të njerëzve me bindje shumë të ndryshme nga të miat.	3,99	4,04
39. Bazuar në fenë apo jetë-dhe-botë-kuptimin tim, unë jam pak a shumë i/e kënaqur me masat e marra nga qeveria.	3,04	3,09

40. Unë nuk dua t'ia di nëse vendi im qeveriset nga të krishterë, myslimanë, hindu, budistë apo ndjekës së Epokës së Re.	3,69	3,91
41. Unë jam i/e bindur që jam në gjendje të marr pjesë në shoqëri duke marrë parasysh vlerat dhe normat që janë të rëndësishme për mua.	3,79	4,67
42. Unë do të doja të bëhesha anëtar i një shoqërie ku përqsja e secilit ndaj jetës të ishte njësoj si e imja.	2,67	3,38
43. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit pavarësisht dallimeve midis tyre duhet të synojnë një bashkëjetesë paqësore.	3,94	4,68
44. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet t'i tregojnë aq respekt njëri-tjetrit saqë të jetë e mundur bashkëjetesa paqësore midis tyre.	4,14	4,28
45. Unë jam i/e bindur se njerëzit duhet të kërkojnë mënyra për t'i kapërcyer dallimet që ekzistojnë midis njerëzve në shoqëri.	4,07	4,25
46. Unë jam i/e mendimit që njerëzit duhet të respektojnë dallimet që ekzistojnë midis njerëzve të ndryshëm në shoqëri.	3,50	4,28
47. Unë mund ta imagjinoj shumë mirë linjën e mendimit të njerëzve që aderojnë në një sërë vlerash krejt të ndryshme nga të miat.	3,31	3,62
48. Unë i respektoj dhe nuk i dënoj njerëzit bindjet e të cilëve janë të ndryshme nga të miat.	3,67	4,23
49. Unë jam i/e bindur se të gjithë njerëzit po kërkojnë për një fuqi më të lartë/të mbinatyrshme.	2,74	3,32
50. Unë ndihem i/e lirë të shoqerohem me respekt me njerëz që mbajnë bindje mjaft të ndryshme nga të miat.	3,76	4,42

Table 5. Factor analysis categories

<b>Respect</b>
24. I think that I am contributing to the wellbeing of my fellow human beings when I respect their ideas and beliefs.
33. I believe that all religions of life and world views in the end lead to one and the same truth.
41. I am convinced that I am able to participate in society taking into account the values and norms which are important to me.
43. I am convinced that people despite the differences between them should seek a peaceful co-existence.
44. I am convinced that people should pay so much respect to one another that peaceful co-existence between them can be possible.
45. I am convinced that people should seek ways to overcome the differences that exist among people in society.
46. I am of the opinion that people should respect the differences that exist among different people in society.
<b>Empathy</b>
07. I am on friendly foot with people who adhere to another religion or life and world view.
08. I do not feel threatened by the world around me.

38. I respect the religious beliefs of people with convictions quite different from mine.
48. I respect and do not condemn people whose beliefs are different from mine.
50. I feel free to respectfully socialise with people who hold beliefs quite different from mine.
<b>Value of own religion</b>
15. The values and norms which are important to me, all stem from my religion or life and world view.
16. The values and norms which are important to me cause me to be quite different from other people.
31. I believe that my own religion or life and world view is the only correct one.
32. I think that people can arrive at the truth only via my religion or life and world view.
36. I am convinced that people should adhere to principles contained in a holy scripture.
<b>Sens of freedom</b>
09. I can comfortably get along with someone who adheres to norms and values different from my own.
10. All people should be able to get along with one another, regardless of which norms and values are important to them.
11. There are norms and values which should be important to all people, regardless of their own religion/life and world views.
13. In my encounters with people who adhere to another religion or life and worldview I always remain faithful to my own norms and values.
20. I am able to explain to others those values and norms which are important to me.
<b>Sensibility to differences</b>
06. I do not care what people who adhere to another religion or world view think, find or do.
22. I do not care what other people think, find and do based on their own religion or life and worldview.
25. I find it easy to accept other people's behaviour which I myself do not find acceptable.
40. I do not care whether my country is governed by Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or New Age followers.
<b>Origins of own values</b>
18. The values and norms which are now important to me were imbued to me by my parents.
19. The values and norms which are now important to me were imbued to me by the school(s) that I attended.

Table 6. Reliability of results on the six factors for Albania

		Albania	Liberal	Strict
1. Respect (Cronbach alpha 0.78)	Valid N	139	70	69
	Mean	4,02	3.73	4.31
	Standard Deviation	,94	1.05	.71
2. Empathy (Cronbach alpha 0.61)	Valid N	139	70	69
	Mean	3,99	3.78	4.19
	Standard Deviation	,95	1.04	.79
3. Value of own religion (Cronbach alpha 0.56)	Valid N	139	70	69
	Mean	3,22	2.86	3.58
	Standard Deviation	,99	.93	.91
4. Sense of freedom (Cronbach alpha 0.64)	Valid N	139	70	69
	Mean	4,22	3.95	4.49
	Standard Deviation	,86	.99	.61
5. Sensibility to differences (Cronbach alpha 0.38)	Valid N	139	70	69
	Mean	2,76	2.74	2.78
	Standard Deviation	.97	.97	.98
6. Origins of own values (Cronbach alpha 0.55)	Valid N	139	70	69
	Mean	3,00	2.66	3.33
	Standard Deviation	1,36	1.30	1.35
Total (Cronbach alpha 0.82)	Valid N	139	70	69
	Mean	3,53	3.29	3.78
	Standard Deviation	.57	.60	.41

Table 7. Results on the six factors (including comparisons).

		Netherlands	Estonia & Slovakia	Albania	Total
1. Respect	Valid N	177	121	139	437
	Mean	3,70	4,11	4,02	3,92
	Standard Deviation	,43	,74	,94	,73
2. Empathy	Valid N	177	121	139	437
	Mean	3,78	3,70	3,99	3,82

	Standard Deviation	,53	,77	,95	,76
3. Value of own religion	Valid N	177	121	139	437
	Mean	4,06	2,81	3,22	3,45
	Standard Deviation	,65	,84	,99	,98
4. Sense of freedom	Valid N	177	121	139	437
	Mean	4,17	4,11	4,22	4,17
	Standard Deviation	,37	,73	,86	,66
5. Sensibility to differences	Valid N	177	121	139	437
	Mean	3,69	3,45	2,76	3,33
	Standard Deviation	,57	,85	,97	,89
6. Origins of own values	Valid N	177	121	139	437
	Mean	3,90	3,21	3,00	3,42
	Standard Deviation	,65	,98	1,36	1,09
Total	Valid N	177	121	139	437
	Mean	3,89	3,57	3,53	3,68
	Standard Deviation	,27	,41	,57	,45

Table 8. Results with strict and liberal (including comparisons).

		Netherlands		Estonia & Slovakia		Albania		Total	
		liberal	strict	liberal	strict	liberal	strict	liberal	strict
1. Respect	Valid N	28	149	75	46	70	69	173	264
	Mean	3.85	3.68	4.07	4.18	3.73	4.31	3.90	3.93
	St Dev	.49	.41	.75	.73	1.05	.71	.87	.64
2. Empathy	Valid N	28	149	75	46	70	69	173	264
	Mean	3.92	3.75	3.65	3.78	3.78	4.19	3.75	3.87
	St Dev	.53	.53	.84	.65	1.04	.79	.89	.66
3. Value of own religion	Valid N	28	149	75	46	70	69	173	264
	Mean	3.30	4.21	2.46	3.38	2.86	3.58	2.76	3.90
	St Dev	.91	.48	.67	.79	.93	.91	.87	.76
4. Sense of freedom	Valid N	28	149	75	46	70	69	173	264
	Mean	4.11	4.18	4.08	4.15	3.95	4.49	4.03	4.26
	St Dev	.36	.37	.77	.68	.99	.61	.82	.52
5. Sensibility to differences	Valid N	28	149	75	46	70	69	173	264
	Mean	3.41	3.74	3.35	3.62	2.74	2.78	3.11	3.47
	St Dev	.59	.55	.87	.81	.97	.98	.92	.84

6. Origins of own values	Valid N	28	149	75	46	70	69	173	264
	Mean	3.54	3.97	3.11	3.38	2.66	3.33	3.00	3.70
	St Dev	.90	.57	.96	1.01	1.30	1.35	1.14	.96
Total	Valid N	28	149	75	46	70	69	173	264
	Mean	3.69	3.92	3.45	3.75	3.29	3.78	3.43	3.85
	St Dev	.27	.25	.39	.38	.60	.41	.49	.33

Table 9. Reliability of results (inculding comparisons)

Subscales (factors)	Items	Netherlan ds	Estonia &Slovakia	Albania	Total
1. Respect	24, 33, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46	0,62	0,84	0,78	0,75
2. Empathy	07, 08, 38, 48, 50	0,63	0,79	0,61	0,67
3. Value of own religion	15, 16, 31, 32, 36	0,76	0,72	0,56	0,73
4. Sense of freedom	09, 10, 11, 13, 20	0,49	0,78	0,64	0,65
5. Sensibility to differences	06, 22, 25, 40	0,51	0,67	0,38	0,54
6. Origins of own values	18, 19	0,69	0,65	0,55	0,64
Total		0,66	0,76	0,82	0,77

## APPENDIX C

### “Interview Guide” (As formulated in Albanian)

#### Konvertimi dhe Ambienti i Konvertimit

Pyetje per intervisten me nje te konvertuar rreth perceptimit te tij te ambientit te konvertimit ne Shqiperi 2017

**Emri** (ose inicialet):

**Viti i lindjes:**

**Vendlindja:**

- 1 **Si do ta pershkruaje ambientin e femijerise tende?** (I sati femije jeni? Cfare pune benin prinderit? Cila ishte ngjarja me e rendesishme qe mban mend ne familje? Emigracioni?)
- 2 **Cfare zakonesh dhe festash apo aktivitetesh ishin te rendesishme ne jeten e familjes dhe fshatit ku je rritur?** (kush ishin njerezit dhe strukturat e rendesishme per mbarevajtjen e jetes se fshatit? Si trajtohej familja jote ne raport me te tjeret?)
- 3 **Me cfare puptimi per fene je rritur?** (Kur ishe femije, cfare ishte me e rendesishme per ty ne lidhje me fene? Kishit ndertese fetare ne fshat? Cfare kuptimi kishin banoret per fene dhe cfare roli kishte perkatesia fetare ne perceptimin e njeri tjetrit si anetare te barabarte te fshatit/lagjes? Ka martesat te perziera ne fshatin tend?)
- 4 **Cfare besimi mbani tani?** (A mund te tregosh sa me hollesisht si filloi interesimi yt per besimin dhe cfare mendoje me pare, pastaj si dhe kur arrite ne konkluzionet e tanishme, si ishte ecuria dhe kthesat e jetes tende gjate gjithë kesaj periudhe deri sot?)

#### **Eksploro**

**kontekstin personal:** Cfare po synoje ne jete

**Nje situatë konfuze/krize:** Kur fillove ta vije ne diskutim fene? Cila ishte situata me e veshtire qe ke kaluar?

**Procesi i kerkimit te zgjidhjeve:** Si po mendoje per rrugen e arritjeve te tua? Si e zgjodhe degen e studimit?

**Kontakti me perfaqesuesin e besimit te ri:** Kush ndikoi ne kete kerkim dhe si?

**Nderveprimi me perfaqesuesin e besimit te ri:** Ishte ideja apo personi/shoqeria qe te terhoqi? Cfare te beri te degjosh? Si ndjeheshe ne perceptimin e vetes ne kete ambient te ri?

**Vendimi dhe perkushtimi:** Sa kohe u desh per te ardhur deri ne vendimin e konvertimit dhe si e shprehe kete vendim? Cfare po ndodhte ndersa po ecje drejt ketij vendimi?

**Pasojat:** Sa kohe t'u desh per te deklaruar besimin tend tek familja, shoket? Si reagues familja dhe shoket? Cfare zhgenjimesh kane ndodhur? Cila eshte situatë me e veshtire qe ke provuar per shkak te besimit tend?

- 5 **Cfare eshte me e rendesishmja ne besimin tend sot?**
- 6 **Cfare praktikash jane te zakonshme ditore ose javore dhe si ndikon besimi ne jeten tende praktike?**

- 7 Si do ta pershkruaje atmosferen ku ndodhi konvertimi yt: Tolerante? Indiferente? Perjashtuese?**
- 8 Si e mendoje para konvertimit nivelin e lirise se konvertimit ne Shqiperi dhe si mendon tani per te ardhmen?**
- 9 Si lidhet konvertimi yt me identitetin tend familjar, rajonal apo edhe kombetar? Ka ndikuar per te penguar identiteti kombetar? Po ai familjar?**
- 10 Cfare do te doje te kasha pyetur per konvertimin tend dhe ambientin ku ushtron besimin tend?**

\*\*\*



Intervistat e transkriptuara janë hequr nga ky botim  
për arsye të informacionit me përmbajtje personale të individeve  
(Faqe 276-374)

*Transcribed interviews are removed from this publication  
because of the personal information included in them.  
(Pages 276-374)*

Table 10. Summary of interviews with converts from Malbardhe and Shkodra Area 2017

#	Gender		Age	Muslim/Catholic		Malbardhe/Milot/other		Perception of Awareness			Perception of Tolerance			Church/Mosque	
	M	F		Muslim	Catholic	Malb/Milot	Other	Insufficient	Moderate	Sufficient	Indifferent	Tolerant	Excluding	C	M
1	X		34	X		X		X			X			X	
2	X		34	X		X		X				X		X	
3	X		31	X		X		X				X		X	
4	X		26	X		X		X					X	X	
5	X		20	X		X		X				X		X	
6		X	25		X		X		X		X			X	
7	X		23		X		X	X				X		X	
8	X		31		X		X		X				X	X	
9	X		22		X		X		X			X		X	
10		X	21		X		X		X				X	X	
11		X	24		X		X	X			X			X	X
12	X		24	X			X	X				X			X
13		X	21		X		X		X		X			X	
14	X		27	X			X	X				X		none	
15	X		25		X		X		X			X		X	

#	Gender		Age	Muslim/Catholic		Malbardhe/Milot/other		Perception of Awareness			Perception of Tolerance			Church/Mosque	
	M	F		Muslim	Catholic	Malb/Milot	Other	Insufficient	Moderate	Sufficient	Indifferent	Tolerant	Excluding	C	M
16		X	20		X		X	X					X	X	
17		X	22		X		X		X			X		X	X
18		X	24		X		X		X		X			X	
19		X	21	X		X		X				X		X	
20		X	23		X		X	X					X	X	
21		X	22		X		X		X		X			X	

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