

Albania's Bektashi are Muslim, but some of their practices resemble Christian ones

The sect, which was founded in the 13th century, confounds the idea of irreconcilable differences between the two faiths.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue



The Bektashi Temple in Vlore, Albania, revered by local Bektashis and by Christians, who refer to it as Saint Kozma. Photo by Ervin Ruci (via Creative Commons license).

The nation of Albania has one of Europe's most intriguing religious landscapes. Four major groups are usually identified: Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Bektashis. Although the last of these are little known outside the region, their importance is much greater than their small numbers might suggest. Estimates of the group's size vary wildly, from 60,000 to 750,000 in Albania alone.

Arguably, the Bektashis tell us much about a forgotten part of Christian history.

Depending on the sources you read, you will find very different stories about Bektashi origins and identity. The simplest explanation is that they follow a distinctive branch of Shi'a Islam, and they claim as their founder the 13th-century saint and mystic Haji Bektash Veli. His followers developed an Islamic Sufi order, with dervishes living in houses or lodges known as *tekkes*, each headed by a superior, a *baba*.

The Bektashi movement spread widely following the Ottoman Turkish conquest of the Balkans. In the 19th century, the Ottomans suppressed the order, or at least drove it underground, and it suffered further disasters during the ruthless communist tyranny of dictator Enver Hoxha, who closed all churches and mosques. Today, the movement has revived in Albania's atmosphere of broad religious tolerance—although it has suffered some violence from radical Islamists. Bektashis are now found across the Balkans, with their headquarters in Tirana. They also flourish in diaspora communities around the world, including in the Midwest of the United States.

So the Bektashis are Muslim, although they are often classed among the *Ghulat*, “exaggerators” or extremists,” those who go beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. Particularly troubling for other Muslims, whether Sunni or Shi'a, Bektashis preach a kind of trinitarian belief in which Muhammad and Ali are both considered divine alongside Allah himself, and divine figures can become incarnate. Bektashis permit the drinking of wine, practice a kind of baptism, and have a sacred meal that recalls the Eucharist. Their religious leaders closely resemble Christian models of priesthood, including the practice of celibacy, and they hear confessions. Bektashis allow followers to worship and pray in their own vernacular languages rather than just Arabic. Women are not veiled.

Such attitudes encourage excellent relations with Albania's Christians. In the 19th century, some Christians affiliated with the Bektashi order and participated in their ceremonies, although they also remained faithful members of their own churches. Bektashi and Christians alike still venerate great Albanian saints like Cosmas and Spiridon, even if they give them different names. At the grass-roots level, Bektashis have congenial relations with Christians, especially with the Orthodox. (Together with other Albanian faith groups, Bektashis also had a noble record of protecting Jews during the Holocaust.)

The resonances with Christianity might be explained in terms of parallel evolution, but they more likely indicate powerful direct influence. Western travelers to the former Ottoman lands long speculated that the broad appeal of Bektashis owed much to the persistence of crypto-Christian ideas. (Similar arguments are made for the much larger Alevi sect, which attracts tens of millions of believers in Turkey alone.) From the late Middle Ages, Ottoman Muslims ruled large Christian populations, and a great many of those people stubbornly held true to their churches. When conversions did occur, it was usually to the popular forms of Islam represented by the Bektashis. Canny Christians could escape the financial burdens and legal penalties imposed by Ottoman authorities by officially becoming Muslim, while still retaining much of their old belief system and religious practice.

Given the secretive nature of the Sufi orders, it remains open to question just how many older Christian beliefs and practices survive in clandestine form. Some observers have suggested that the devotion to Ali as an incarnate deity grew directly from Christian views of Christ, and Bektashis reportedly use John's Gospel.

Theology apart, Christians under Ottoman rule had many practical reasons to favor the Bektashis. *Tekkes* strongly resembled the older monasteries of the region, so that ordinary lay believers could be forgiven for seeing the new dervishes as lineal successors of Christian monks. There were also clear examples of physical continuity from one institution to the other. The main Bektashi shrine in Anatolia stood on the site of the Christian monastery of St. Charalambos. Bektashis allow and encourage the veneration of holy men of past generations, and there are no prohibitions on visual representations or icons. A Sufi *pir*, or master, was and is viewed very much like a Christian saint.

Not for a second am I trying to question the Islamic credentials of the Bektashis, who clearly define themselves as part of Islam. But they do confound the notion that there are irreconcilable differences separating Christians and Muslims. History provides many exceptions to that rule, and groups like the Bektashis challenge that model today.

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