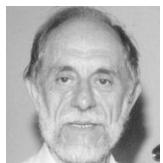


# A seminal book whose translation fulfills the spiritual needs of Albanian Bektashi in America



**By Peter Prifti**

In any discussion of Bektashism as a faith, two basic concepts are mysticism and liberalism. Bektashism is a profoundly mystical faith, one of the great mystical strains of the Islam religion. According to Bektashism, mysticism is the spiritual vitality or essence of man. Through mysticism man is able to break down the barriers that separate him from God, the ultimate goal of his quest.

Liberalism is also an essential part of Bektashism. As Baba Rexhep has said, "Bektashism is a liberal sect of Islam," inspired by the "deepest feelings of goodwill and brotherhood among all men." Symbolic of this liberal attitude is the Bektashi house of worship, the Tekke, whose doors are always open to all people.

The liberalism of the Bektashi faith is also evident in its attitude toward the two great monotheistic religions of Christianity and Judaism. Like Islam in general, Bektashism has a direct link with the Judeo-Christian Bible. Accordingly, the Bektashis believe not only in the Prophet Muhammad, but in Moses, the Christ and St. Mary.

Again, like Islam in general and Christianity, Bektashism accepts the doctrine of sainthood. However, the institution of sainthood in Bektashism is not bound by the formalism and rather restricted

character of the former. Bektashism teaches that any adherent of the faith can attain sainthood, as long as he sincerely pursues the path of perfection.

As an organized religion, Bektashism has a clerical hierarchy, composed of all those who have dedicated their life to the service of the faith. There are five levels or ranks in the hierarchy. The first, or lowest, is that of "myhyp" (muhib) a person initiated into the order by taking the blessing of a Baba, or a lay person. Such people are called "officers of religious service." This group includes all novices awaiting ordination to the rank of Dervish. The second is that of the Dervishes, which encompasses all the clergy who wear the distinctive garments that pertain to that rank. The third is the rank of the Babas. A Baba is the spiritual head of a Tekke, invested with power to ordain Dervishes and other qualified members of the order. The fourth rank is that of Grandfathers. A Grandfather is a Baba who heads the central Tekke in a "diocese" or jurisdiction of several Tekkes. He is approximately the counterpart of a Bishop in the Christian Church. Finally, at the top of the hierarchy is the Head-Grand-father, recognized as the highest authority of the Bektashi order.

In terms of numbers, the Bektashi order at present is relatively small, numbering an estimated seven million members, worldwide. But it has a venerable history, dating back to 1282, when the first Tekke was opened by Hunqar Hajji Bektash Wali, founder of the order. The majority of the faithful are in the Middle

and Near East, the regions of North Africa, and the Balkan, including Albania.

Bektashism began to spread in Albania centuries ago, following occupation by the Turks. By 1938 there were an estimated 200,000 Bektashi in Albania, or 20% of the country's total population. An interesting but little known fact is that, since 1925 Albania has been the world center of Bektashism. Prior to that date, the headquarters of the order was in Ankara, Turkey.

Bektashism thus holds a special place in the history and society of Albania. It has been a strong advocate of national sovereignty, political freedoms and social progress. The order played a particularly important role in the Nineteenth Century, during the period of the national movement. Among other things, the Tekkes at the time were active in distributing Albanian literature among the population—an action strictly forbidden by the Turkish authorities—and in affording shelter and protection to armed Albanian patriots fighting for the liberation of the country. Indeed, two of the most prominent patriots, the poet Naim Frashëri and statesman Ismail Kemal, were Bektashis.

In view of the intrinsic significance of Bektashism as a religious order, its role in the history of the Albanian nation, and the fact that today it fulfills the spiritual needs of many Albanians in the United States, there has been a need for English literature on Bektashism. Bardhyl Pogoni's translation from the Albanian of Baba Rexhep's work *Misticizma Islame dhe Bektashizma* (1970), aims at meeting that need.

The translator has full command of the Albanian and English languages. He has the capacity, moreover, to render Albanian into clear and concise English.

Prof. Pogoni has shown initiative and a flair for innovation in his approach to the original text, all in the interest of making the translation more appealing to the eye and easier to read. Thus, he has reorganized the section headings of the original into chapters and sub-headings within each chapter. He has indented, wherever it seemed appropriate to him, much of the matter in the original text, in order apparently to add emphasis and visual variety to the text. He has removed sources references that intersperse the printed matter in the original, and relegated them to the bottom of the page—the usual place for notes. With a view to making the translation more compact and unified, he also found it advisable on occasion to place some of the textual matter at the bottom of the page, where it occurs in the form of footnotes.

Two other points need to be mentioned in connection with the nature of the translation. One is that the translator was guided by the principle of economy in his work. As a result, the translation is considerably shorter than the original, and in places reads more like a summary of the text than a line-by-line translation. The rationale for this was to avoid the numerous repetitions of the Albanian text, which provide no new information on the subject at hand.

The second point is that this work does not pretend to be a translation of the entire text of the original. The work covers only the first part of the original text, ending with the section on Hajji Bektash and his counsel or teaching. The logic behind this decision presumably is that the story of Bektashism as told in Baba Rexhep's book (its roots in Islamic mysticism, its rise, its development, and

its teachings), essentially ends with this section. The rest of the Albanian text is devoted to the literature on Bektashism, consisting of poems by leading exponents of the order and commentary on their works.

Prof. Pogoni's approach as a translator, in this particular instance, is undoubtedly unconventional. But to be unconventional is nothing new in the field of translation. It is in fact a traditional prerogative of translators.

Two useful features of the translation are the Glossary and the Bibliography, both of them compiled by Pogoni. The Glossary, in particular, was indispensable for a work of this sort, since the Albanian text is full of Turkish and Arabic terms. Only those who are familiar with the exacting nature of transliteration and validation of sources can fully appreciate the problems and difficulties encountered by the author of this translation.

In sum, this translation of Baba Rexhep's valuable book serves a useful purpose. Pogoni's work, to be sure, is selective and limited in its objectives. In this sense, it is a modest work. But its merits as already pointed out, are obvious and recommend themselves to the reader. Certainly, the work is an aid to the enlightenment of the English-speaking world, with regard to the religion of Bektashism. It is an aid also to the younger generations of Albanians in America who do not understand Albanian well. Now, with the publication of Prof. Pogoni's translation, Albanians and non-Albanians alike have the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the original work.

## NOTE

Prof. Prifti wrote this text as an introduction to the English translation by Bardhyl Pogoni of *The Mysticism of Islam and Bektashism*, by Baba Rexhep, Naples, Italy, 1984, pp. 17-20. The original Albanian version of the book, *Misticizma Islame dhe Bektashizma*, was published in New York, in 1970.

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