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Commentary on the interview of Mr. Ibrahim Rugova to Corriere della Sera

Deceiving the world community - Ibrahim Rugova for Corriere della Sera

Despite his four months of specialization at the Sorbonne and the photograph of the Pope in his salon, Mr. Ibrahim Rugova has very little understanding of the authentic values of Christianity in the region where he has been elected as president. Moreover, he does not even mention the existence of the Serbian Orthodox Christian monuments that comprise more than 90 percent of the entire cultural and historical wealth of Kosovo and Metohija. He does not even mention the more than 100 Serbian churches and monasteries destroyed by Albanian extremists after the end of the armed conflict in 1999 (not in the time of war), which, by the way, he has never publicly condemned. More sensitive questions of the Corriere journalist Mr. Rugova gently evaded hiding behind Pope JP II.

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In his most recent interview with the respected Italian daily Corriere della Sera published on November 27, 2003 President of Kosovo Province Mr. Ibrahim Rugova once again attempted to deceive the world community by misrepresenting himself as a great peacemaker and protector of Christianity in Kosovo and Metohija.

"The Balkan Gandhi", as the Italian daily calls Mr. Rugova, speaks with warmth about Christianity, the Albanians as a people of Western orientation (sic), and mentions with pride the Albanian Roman Catholics who fought against the Ottomans (although the ethnic Albanians, generally speaking, were the strongest Ottoman allies in the Balkans), announcing the consecration of the foundation of a large Roman Catholic cathedral dedicated to Mother Theresa that is expected to be consecrated by none other than Pope John Paul II. The first impression readers of the article could get is that of a man and a society that affirms Christian values, tolerance, and Western and European culture - a music to the ears.

However, reality is completely different. Despite his four months of specialization at the Sorbonne (he studied and later earned his PhD in Pristina, not in Paris) and the photograph of the Pope in his salon, Mr. Ibrahim Rugova has very little understanding of the authentic values of Christianity in the region where he has been elected as president. Moreover, he does not even mention the existence of the Serbian Orthodox Christian monuments that comprise more than 90 percent of the entire cultural and historical wealth of Kosovo and Metohija. Although one cannot call him a typical Moslem believer, Mr. Rugova is far from being "defensor christianitatis".

In his interview he does not even mention the more than 100 Serbian churches and monasteries destroyed by Albanian extremists after the end of the armed conflict in 1999, which he has never publicly condemned. Moreover, during the visit of U.S. president Bill Clinton in November 1999 to Pristina and in the presence of Bishop
Artemije of Raska-Prizren and Kosovo-Metohija and representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Ibrahim Rugova publicly rationalized the destruction of Serbian holy shrines as alleged "political churches". That was quite a shock for the president and others especially after Bishop Artemije showed photos 14th century churches destroyed after the end of the conflict. The theory of so called "Serbian political churches" is not an invention of the "Balkan Gandhi" or the Kosovo Albanian Roman Catholic Bishop Marko Sopi who is also fond of it. As early as August 1995 Mr. Rugova publicly stated "that the monasteries and churches in Kosovo were Albanian and that the Serbs occupied them, destroying in the process a large number of Albanian churches" [http://www.hri.org/news/balkans/kosova/95-08-25.ksv.html] - a theory which is not based on a single historical proof and which he could not have learned during his sojourn at Sorbonne. In fact this quasi-historical theory has been launched and repeated in parrot-like fashion by a number of Albanian revisionist historians whose goal is equivocate the existence of Christianity in the region exclusively with Albanian Roman Catholicism in order to prove that Serbs actually never lived in Kosovo as indigenous population. This is also a way to find at least some "plausible" excuse how in "an ethnic Albanian Kosovo" the most important cultural monuments belong to the Serb Orthodox people and their history.

Is this "a sympathy for Christianity" in Kosovo, Mr. Rugova?

UNESCO delegation (Feb, 2003) visiting the ruins of the 14th century church of the Holy Virgin Odigitria, near Suva reka. Only a 20th century bell tower survived attack of Albanian extremists (even the surrounding trees were cut)

(more about the church: [http://www.kosovo.com/odigitria.html])

Rugova's paramilitary organization - FARK

Mr. Rugova, considered to be "a great peacemaker", directly blessed and supported the paramilitary organization known as FARK (Armed Forces of the Republic of Kosovo), funded from abroad by his émigré premier Bujar Bukoshi and commanded by former Yugoslav People's Army officer Tahir Zemaj, who was murdered earlier this year by members of the rival paramilitary (KLA) group close to KLA clans. Together with the KLA FARK participated in operations against the Serbian military, police and civilian population; the only difference between the two organizations, as is now the case among Rugova's LDK, Thaci's PDK and Haradinaj's AAK, is that each of them is fighting
to get the biggest piece of the pie from illegal trafficking and political power behind the smoke screen of building "democratic and multiethnic" Kosovo. The treatment of the Serbs by these political parties and paramilitary organizations was more or less the same, although it's true that the KLA managed to take the lead in its crimes and aggression against Serbs and some FARK "officers" appeared as witnesses on trials against Mustafa Remi and Daut Haradinaj. When the first operations conducted by the KLA against Serbian authorities and the civil population began in 1996, Rugova consciously deceived the world community by saying that these were secret operations by the "Serbian intelligence service" - the same what some today's K/Albanian politicians try to explain when Serbs are attacked or killed.

Mr. Rugova's version of KLA - FARK (Armed Forces of "Kosovo Republic")
The first photo shows the FARK commander Tahir Zemaj with Rugovas emigree premier Bukoshi displaying a new anti-aircraft "stinger". On the other photo Zemaj poses with a few of his comrades. Bukoshi was in charge of funding which came mostly from diaspora and drug smuggling. While Mr. Rugova was publicly acting a "Gandhi of the Balkans", on the other hand he was supporting his paramilitary organization responsible for crimes against civilians too. His sudden "interest" in Christianity is another way to improve the declining image of the Albanian nationalism, the goal of which remains territorial unification of all Albanians.... of course, under the Kosovo political and military elite (photo source: http://www.trepca.net/2001/zemaj/libri.htm)

Later, when he himself was threatened by the KLA, Rugova and his family managed to flee to Italy with the help of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, who "generously" arranged his transport to Belgrade and his escape to Rome. KLA leaders had many reasons to suspect that some leading Rugova's men were in fact working secretly for Milosevic's intelligence. Immediately after arriving in Italy, where he was welcomed as a great martyr, Rugova resumed his role of the martyr satanizing all Serbs and claiming that more or less the entire province of Kosovo had been transformed into a wasteland. His entire political activity was and remains a façade of supposed pacifism hiding a lack of a clear vision of modern democratic society and respect for the basic rights of all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity. Ibrahim Rugova was and remains more or less a politically impotent symbol created by the Western media as a counter to Slobodan Milosevic. However, more cautious analysts will quickly conclude that Ibrahim Rugova practically exists and acts today only as a figurehead without any real political initiative and power. Perhaps the entire secret of his political success lies in the inability of his rivals from the former KLA to whitewash their wartime biographies and affirm themselves as true democratic leaders.

(More about relations between UCK/KLA, FARK, Western Intelligence Services and NATO on http://www.kosovo.net/who.html)
A photo which may cost Rugova his life

Rugova claims that he was forced to make this photo in spring 1999. However, no one can deny that it was thanks to Milosevic and Italian Foreign Ministry that Rugova and his family safely left Kosovo. The true danger for him in Pristina apparently was near a Serb police, which was according to Milosevic even guarding his villa from Thaci's gunmen, but the KLA which saw Rugova as a Milosevic's political puppet. Even today in his "free Kosovo" Mr. Rugova is heavily guarded by UNMIK police.

Political impotence and a lack of responsibility

For Mr. Rugova the Serbs and other non-Albanians represent a single amorphous mass of "national minorities" that are supposed to serve as a decoration to the supposed multiethnicity of Kosovo. Attacks in which Serbian children and elderly are murdered represent incidents that "spoil Kosovo's image". When bishop Artemije requested a minute of silence for the slain Serb children in Gorazdevac neither Kosovo Parliament nor Mr. Rugova supported his idea. He has never visited an Orthodox church or a Serb-inhabited enclave, unlike his colleagues from the PDK and AAK who, considering their KLA past, can even allow themselves a display of sympathy toward the Serbs. Of course, in the interview for the Italian daily, Mr. Rugova mentions security considerations but it is a well-known fact that the major threat to Rugova are not the Serbs but rival Albanian organizations with whose leaders he will agree to meet only in the presence of internationals and in the presence of strong police security of UNMIK special forces. However, Thaci and Haradinaj apparently would hardly wish to remove Rugova from the scene because his image, created during the 1990s, presently represents one of their aces for gaining independence. The real confrontation between adherents of rival political parties would ensue only after the proclamation of an independent state, if and when this ever occurs, and expulsion of the remaining Serbs.

Ultimately, we can conclude that this interview is yet another in a series of Rugova's collection of lies whose goal at any price is to cover up the tragedy of Kosovo reality and hide the existence of open ethnic discrimination and violence against non-Albanians and Orthodox Christian monuments. If the Vatican shows readiness to give the blessing to the new Kosovo Albanian regime which tries to wash its biography using a noble name of Mother Theresa without insisting on rebuilding of destroyed Serb churches and better treatment of Orthodox Christians that would seriously damage the improving Orthodox-Roman Catholic relations.

To what extent tolerating the destruction of churches, the desecration of Serb Christian cemeteries and silent acquiescence to the expulsion of the Serbian population in
Kosovo and Metohija has even the remotest connection with the ideals of Mother Theresa every reader can judge for himself. Again, beside his photos of the Pope and Mother Theresa and his rhetoric Mr. Rugova has to show concrete political actions and responsibility for the population who is he supposed to represent.

Commentary
Father Sava Janjic
ERP KIM Info Service, Gracanica

Attached is a complete translation of the interview appearing in Corriere della Sera. For our readers who understand Italian we are enclosing at the bottom the original transcript from the newspapers

CORRIERE DELLA SERRA
Thursday, 27 November 2003
RELIGION, Page 015

"The Gandhi of the Balkans" emphasizes his priority is true tolerance between the different confessions in the Serbian province with an Albanian majority population

Kosovo: Rugova "converts" - A liking for Christianity"

"The first faith practiced by the Albanian people. The mosques came later"

PRISTINA (Kosovo) – President Rugova, is it true that you have converted to Christianity?

A smile, a long silence. Ibrahim Rugova is, after all, the head of a "multiethnic" state, with 90 percent Muslims, supported by monies also coming from many Islamic countries. The one-time student of Roland Barthes knows to weigh his words: "Let's say this. Today I have a liking for Christian and Western education."

Can you call what you are now doing a spiritual growth?

"Our education is of Western orientation. And even historically, the first faith practiced by the Albanian people has been Christianity. The mosques and the rest came later. As early as the Illyrians, the Romans in this region there were already the buds of Christianity. Under the Osmanlis [Ottoman Turks], a part of this population was forcibly converted to Islam. This occurred after Skanderbeg and his resistance to the invasion of the Turks."

A return to the roots...

"There was a very deep penetration by Islam and it can be discerned to this day in the names and the customs of our people. Christians and Muslims have been integrated into one harmonious whole. The only one premise of our existence is mutual tolerance. Without it, we would vanish: we Kosovars, but also the Albanians and the Macedonians. Therefore, today, in this climate, everyone can choose the religion, the tradition that better represents him."

But you are the president of the Kosovo...
"My cultural and spiritual interests are completely personal. Do you see this picture? (he points to an oil painting, a portrait on a green background, the work of a Kosovo painter) It's a portrait of Peter Bogdani. He was a great bishop in Kosovo in the 16th century who fought against the Islamic conquest of this region. An extraordinary figure, very relevant for anyone who wants to understand this age of confrontation between civilizations."

**When will you be christened?**

Other smile: "We'll see... Now my goal is first and foremost political: I want to achieve true tolerance between Christians and Muslims."

Rugova stopped on the streets of Pristina. For a year already there have been rumors regarding the conversion of the "Gandhi of the Balkans", the disputed historical head of the Kosovar leadership, but he still remains strong with a political majority. An Italian priest has followed this spiritual journey since 1999, the time of Rugova's Roman exile, when the country was "Serbicized" by Milosevic's troops and bombed by NATO. "Did he convert?" The priest tried to evade the question we asked of his a few months ago. "I don't know if it is expedient to say. In any case, you should ask him." And that is what we did: On a November morning, the president of the Kosovo, instead of evading the question, rose from his luxurious seat on the first floor of a building in the hills of Pristina and accompanied us to the nearby room to the model of a cathedral the color of alabaster. "This is my dream: a mausoleum for Mother Theresa of Calcutta, a great Christian and a great Albanian. It was designed by two Italian architects, Bruno Valente and Giuseppe Durastanti. I have been to the Vatican. I have also shown the plan to your minister Buttiglione."

**But couldn't the money be used for more urgent things?**

"The project will be financed by individual donations. In any case, we need these symbols. And the sum of money earmarked for the church will not make such a difference in the economy of the country."

**What country? You are talking of independence, the Americans have fixed a date (2005) but Kosovo still depends on Belgrade, at least formally...**

"We will be independent before 2005. It is a realistic hypothesis."

**But the war in 1999 was waged, it is said, for an multiethnic Kosovo: Muslim Albanians next to Christian Serbs. And instead everything here is Albanized. Do you think that Europe can accept a Kosovo without Serbs?**

"This will become a multiethnic society, like Europe. It is true that the first impression is that the signs, the monuments, the language are Albanian but that is only because the majority of the population is already Albanian. After the war, the size of the Serbian, Turkish, Bosnian and Roman minorities have been reduced. That does not mean that there will be no room for them."

**A minimum of room: The Serbs are being shot at. And how many times have you personally visited the minorities?**

"I have done so a number of times. But I am limited in my official trips by security considerations."

"But you favor the return of Serbs to areas such as Pec, controlled by Italian"
soldiers, where cohabitation appears to be impossible?

"Yes. They are already seven thousand returnees. But it depends on individual choice, not on the propaganda of Belgrade that only creates destabilization."

You were the only one who attended the first talks between the Albanians and Serbs in Vienna in 1999. The leaders of the former KLA refused.

"I was there as the president of Kosovo. I ascertained that the others were hesitant. But this is part of the normal dialectics in a democracy."

It is true that Belgrade is ready to surrender Kosovo in exchange for two billion dollars and rapid ascension to the EU?

"Speculation. I don't know anything about it. For us, the price we paid was the war. If the Serbs want to join the European Union, that's their problem."

The Hague tribunal is investigating not only crimes committed by Milosevic but also by current Kosovo leader, starting with Thaci and Cheku. Will you hand them over?

"The mandate of Carla del Ponte includes all of the Balkans, and also the West. Like all countries, we intend to cooperate. However, if there are arrests to be made, that's not our job; it fall under the jurisdiction of the UN, which is presently administering this region.

This part of the Balkans (Kosovo, Albania, Macedonian, Montenegro) is a quadrilateral of the crime. Europe is concerned about trafficking of drugs, weapons, human beings. How do you plan to reassure it?

"The problem is the freedom of movement in the area. Now it is limited if you are a normal person; if you are a criminal it is unlimited. Something does not work in the controls. The UN and European organizations must understand that borders must be protected in a different way, without blocking those who want to acquire wealth legally. For example, I would like to see a big highway from Pristina to Drac so that goods can get to the Adriatic without having to go through the mountains, which are ruled by criminals. But it is a difficult project to push through."

How long should the international presence in Kosovo last?

"The UN mission is already transferring many powers to our institutions. As far as NATO is concerned, the bases will stay. The future of independent Kosovo is connected to its joining NATO."

But what will this independent Kosovo be like? Which flag will have? And will its borders be the same as today? The Albanians from southern Serbia would want to annex themselves to you, in the public square of Pristina there was a demand to annex Kosovo to Albania...

"The flag is already ready (Rugova shows one in the room, next to the Albanian one). The Shiptar eagle in a red circle on a blue background, the color of our sky, of European tolerance. There is also an inscription of "Dardania", the ancient name of the Kosovo, and a six-pointed star, that of Skanderbeg. The borders? Not, they are inviolable. If we touched them, conflicts throughout the Balkans would be resumed."

And the flag will wave on the cathedral of Mother Teresa?
"It is too early to say. The land is ready, the cornerstone has already been laid. In 2004 the work should begin. We are hurrying to complete it."

*Why?*

"I have asked the Pope to come to inaugurate it".

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Francesco Battistini

**Corriere della sera**

**Kosovo, Rugova, si «converte»**

«Simpatia per il cristianesimo»

«È stata la prima fede del nostro popolo. Le moschee sono venute dopo»

Dal nostro inviato

**PRISTINA (Kosovo) -** Presidente Rugova, è vero che si è convertito al cristianesimo?

Un sorriso, un lungo silenzio. Ibrahim Rugova è pur sempre il capo d’uno Stato «multietnico» al 90 per cento musulmano, sostenuto dai soldi (anche) di molti Paesi islamici. L’antico allievo di Roland Barthes sa pesare le parole: «Diciamo così: oggi nutro una certa simpatia nei confronti dell’educazione cristiana e occidentale».

Possiamo chiamarlo un percorso spirituale, quello che sta compiendo?

«La nostra educazione di provenienza è occidentale. E anche storicamente, la prima fede praticata dal popolo albanese è stata il cristianesimo. Le moschee e il resto sono arrivati dopo. Già con gli Illiri, coi Romani ci furono in questa terra fermenti di cristianesimo. E invece, con gli Ottomani, una parte di
questa popolazione è stata portata all'Islam con la violenza. Questo è accaduto anche dopo Skanderbeg e la sua resistenza all'invasione dei Turchi».

Un ritorno alle radici...

«C'è stata una penetrazione musulmana molto profonda e questa, ancora oggi, si traduce nei nomi e nei costumi del nostro popolo. Crisitani e musulmani si sono integrati con una certa armonia. L'unico presupposto della nostra esistenza è la tolleranza reciproca. Senza questa, saremmo scomparsi: noi kosovari, ma anche gli albanesi e i macedoni. Così oggi, in questo clima, ciascuno di noi può scegliere la religione, la tradizione che meglio lo rappresenta».

Lei però è il presidente del Kosovo...

«Il mio è un interesse culturale e spirituale del tutto personale. Vede quel quadro? (indica l'olio d'un ritratto su sfondo verde, opera d'un pittore kosovaro) È un ritratto di Pjeter Bogdani. Fu un grande vescovo del Kosovo, nel '600 combatté la penetrazione islamica in questa terra. Una figura straordinaria, molto attuale per chi vuole capire queste epoche di confronto tra civiltà».

Quando si farà battezzare?

Altro sorriso: «Si vedrà... Ora il mio obbiettivo è soprattutto politico: voglio mirare a una vera tolleranza fra cristiani e musulmani».


Ma quei soldi non si potrebbero usare per cose più urgenti?

«Il progetto sarà finanziato con le donazioni individuali. In ogni caso, a noi servono questi simboli. E non è con la somma destinata a una chiesa che si cambia l'economia di un Paese».

Quale Paese? Lei parla d'indipendenza e gli americani hanno addirittura fissato una data (il 2005), ma il Kosovo dipende ancora da Belgrado, almeno formalmente...

«Saremo indipendenti prima del 2005. È un'ipotesi realistica».

Però la guerra del '99 fu fatta, si disse, per un Kosovo multietnico: albanesi musulmani vicino a serbi cristiani. Qui invece è tutto albanesizzato. Pensa che l'Europa possa accettare un Kosovo senza serbi?

«Questa diventerà una società multietnica, come l'Europa. È vero: il primo impatto è che i cartelli, i monumenti, la parlata sono albanesi, ma solo perché la maggioranza della popolazione è ormai albanese. Dopo la guerra, le minoranze serbe, turche, bosniache, rom sono diminuite. Questo non significa che per loro non ci sarà spazio».

Uno spazio minimo: i serbi vengono presi a fucilate. E anche lei, quante volte ha incontrato le minoranze?

«Talvolta l'ho fatto. Però sono tenuto a limitare le mie uscite ufficiali per motivi di sicurezza».

Ma lei è favorevole al ritorno dei serbi in zone come Peja, controllate dai militari italiani, dove la convivenza appare impossibile?

«Si. Ne sono già tornati settemila. Questo però dipende dalle scelte individuali, non dalla propaganda di Belgrado che crea solo destabilizzazione». 
A Vienna, ai primi colloqui tra albanesi e serbi dal '99, c'era soltanto lei. I grandi capi del vecchio Esercito di liberazione del Kosovo, l'Uck, hanno disertato. «Io ero là come presidente del Kosovo. Ho constatato che altri hanno esitato. Ma questo fa parte della normale dialettica in una democrazia».

È vero che Belgrado è disposta a cedere il Kosovo in cambio di 2 miliardi di dollari e di una scorciatoia per la Ue?

«Illazioni. Non ne so niente. Per noi, il prezzo pagato è stata la guerra. Poi, se i serbi vogliono entrare nell'Unione europea, sono affari loro».

Il Tribunale dell'Aja sta indagando su crimini commessi non solo da Milosevic, ma anche dagli attuali leader kosovari, Thaci e Agim Ceku in testa. Glieli consegnereste?

«Il mandato di Carla Del Ponte si estende a tutti i Balcani e anche all'Occidente. Come tutti i Paesi, noi siamo tenuti a collaborare. Ma se si tratta di eseguire arresti, questo non è compito nostro: è nelle competenze dell'Onu, che per il momento amministra questa regione».

Questa parte di Balcani (Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro) è un quadrilatero del crimine. L'Europa è preoccupata da tanti traffici di droga, d'armi, d'esseri umani. Come pensa di rassicurarla?

«Il problema è la libera circolazione nell'area. Ora è limitata, se sei una persona pert bene, mentre è indisturbata se sei un criminale. Qualcosa non funziona nei controlli. L'Onu, le organizzazioni europee devono capire che i confini vanno guardati in un altro modo, non bloccando chi vuole produrre ricchezza lecita. Ad esempio, io vorrei una grande autostrada da Pristina a Durazzo, per consentire alle merci di arrivare all'Adriatico senza inerpicarsi sulle montagne, dove sono i contrabbandieri a fare le regole. Ma è un progetto difficile da far passare».

Quanto deve durare la presenza internazionale in Kosovo?

«La missione Onu sta già trasferendo molti poteri alle nostre autorità. Quanto alla Nato, le basi resteranno. Il futuro del Kosovo indipendente è legato al suo ingresso nella Nato».

Ma come sarà, questo Kosovo indipendente? Che bandiera avrà? E i confini saranno quelli di adesso? Gli albanesi della Serbia meridionale vorrebbero anettersi a voi, la piazza di Pristina chiede l'annessione a Tirana...

«La bandiera è già pronta (Rugova ne mostra una nella sala, vicina a quella albanese). L'aquila schipetara in un cerchio rosso su sfondo blu, che è il colore del nostro cielo, della tolleranza e dell'Europa. Ci sono anche la scritta "Dardania", antico nome del Kosovo, e una stella a sei punte, quella di Skanderbeg. I confini? No, sono intoccabili. Se li toccassimo, si riaprirebbero contenziosi in tutti i Balcani».

La bandiera sventolerà sulla cattedrale di Madre Teresa?

«È presto per dirlo. Il terreno c'è, la prima pietra della chiesa è già stata posata. Nel 2004 cominceranno i lavori. Abbiamo fretta di finirla».

Perché?

«Ho chiesto al Papa di venire a inaugurarla».

Francesco Battistini

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*I*
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