Cecilie Endresen aims to answer one of the most important, if often misunderstood, aspects of contemporary Albanian life: “what the nation means to the people who in their vocation represent exactly what the Albanians have been urged to disregard: religion” (p. 1). Indeed, religion remains one of the most hotly contested issues in Albania, a fact which comes to be reflected in the highly politicized “official” historiography in this small but increasingly important country in the Balkans. Endresen’s greatest contribution here may be said to be her deft unpacking of the different competing narratives as expressed by the country’s contemporary religious elite.

The book is divided into three sections followed by an epilogue summarising the chapters and the book as a whole. The first offers a brilliant exposition of the state of the field, the subjects of the research and also introduces the author’s methodology and theoretical framework. Particularly useful here is the introduction to Albanian historiography in the section “Identities in context”. Here, we are led through the murky world of Albanian historiography as the author relies on the state of the art research in the field to untangle the myriad of ways the “Albanian nation” has come to be presented by both those involved in nation-building and scholars who have written about it. This section will be particularly useful as an introduction both to those interested in Albanian studies more generally, as well as containing enough nuance to invite the expert reader to refresh their own knowledge of the topic. To my knowledge, this provides one of the most comprehensive and accurate introductions in the English language to the prevailing narratives on Albanian identity and religion from the 19th century until our present era.

Section two of the book provides the empirical data, gleaned via 27 formal interviews with clerics from four of the country’s main religious groups: the Muslim community, the Bektashis, and the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Their views are organized and explored around a few interesting themes, such as religious tolerance, salvation and theological differences, religious diversity in practice and political issues. The data reveals that, contrary to the oft-repeated and publicly declared idea that there are no tensions among religious communities in Albania, there is indeed a fair amount of competition and blame apportioned among rival communities who accuse one another of undermining the idea of tolerance and harmony in the country.
Section three is a systematic analysis of key myths of Albanian nationalism as understood by these clerics. These centre on the role of religion in politics, the idea of a unique national community and how the clerics envisage a future in Europe etc., with the resulting analysis revealing that not one but several “different religious versions” exist which form part of the core features which distinguish the communities and help to demarcate the barrier between “them and us” (p. 219). In this sense, Endresen fulfils her aim of looking at how ideas of symbolic constructivism can be applied to the study of religion. Albania, with its myriad of religious groups, provides a particularly useful case study which will fascinate sociologists, anthropologists and students of nationalism alike. The book’s strength may be said to be in that it works hard to take the views of religious leaders seriously, while also working hard to probe deep into the reasons for their responses, all with the view of exploring how this fits into the wider construction of a sense of identity and belonging (pp. 32-33).

This sense of belonging, however, is contingent on the political reality which doubtless comes to affect religious leaders and their responses. With this in mind—and although alluded to at times in the book—the reader could have benefited from a deeper and perhaps candid account of the political context surrounding many of the imams’ responses to questions. Between 2001 and 2005, when the research for the book was conducted, the Bush administration’s construction of a “war on terror” which saw the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and many other excesses, came to affect Albania in a particularly meaningful way. Dozens of Gulf-funded Muslim charities were closed and Muslim religious schools had their funding cut as the political elite in the country began to eschew links to the Middle East and declared their unwavering support for the US-led “war on terror”. Imams in Albania were also forced to adopt a more defensive posture vis-à-vis any manifestation of religious practices deemed “foreign”. This issue is linked also to a phenomenon which other scholars—many far less sophisticated (though perhaps more renowned) than Endresen—are often guilty of presenting uncritically: the phenomenon of “Wahhabism” and “Salafism” in the Balkans. A few parts where this is mentioned (pp. 139, 195 and 197) may raise some eyebrows (references to Islamophobia as an “Islamist” fear, for example [see p. 197]), though this should certainly not detract from an otherwise overall sensitive portrayal of the topic at hand. Moreover, Endresen’s more recent research on the issue of conservative Salafi groups in Albania (chapter in the forthcoming Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity, 2015) shows a deeper and greater appreciation for the nuances surrounding such issues. In short, a deeper discussion about the context of the early 2000s and the impact this may have had