
***Encounters with Civilizations:
From Alexander the Great to Mother Teresa***

By Gëzim Alpion

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Gëzim Alpion is an Albanian Lecturer in Sociology and Media Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK. His book consists of a wide range of original essays, written and published between 1993 and 2007, relating to Albanian concerns, and personalities (some not widely explored elsewhere), in the countries with which he is familiar: Albania, Egypt, the UK and India.

In his Foreword to Alpion's book, Gaston Roberge explains how the wide variety of essays have been categorized, firstly concerning Albanians living outside the Balkans with the second section focusing on Alpion's seven-year stay in Egypt. The third part features Alpion's

successful career in the UK and his development of 'imagology'. Finally, with India as the title of Part Four, much of the text relates to Mother Teresa, both as controversial figure and as possible saint.

In a brief article 'Kosova — a corner of Europe still waiting for peace' (2003), Alpion remarks on the curious fact that all signs at Prishtina's airport are in English, regardless of the languages of the inhabitants of Kosova.

Under the chapter title 'Foreigner Complex' the author explains how great the effect of the Roman Empire on Egypt was, in diminishing the pride of its people in their extraordinary cultural achievements over previous centuries. However, Egypt stuck to its law forbidding Jews and Christians from serving in its army, right up to 1952. Alpion explores, through fictional dialogue, possible questions that might have been put to Mohammed Ali, a 19th century Albanian ruler of Egypt. He also describes something of the rule of this Albanian leader, and his poisoning of 470 'cruel, turbulent' Mamluks at a banquet in 1811. Ali employed French archaeologists to unearth much of Pharaonic civilisation, but deplored the plundering of Egypt's antiquities for Parisian museums. Alpion praises Anwar Sadat's attempts to find a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, remarking on the strong opposition which brought about Sadat's assassination in 1981.

An unusual topic for academic writing is Alpion's 'Egyptian Coffee Shops'. It may be a truism to comment that there have always been drinks vendors in markets, but Alpion elaborates on the substances which were sold, noting that wine and beer were extremely important in Ancient Egypt. Seshu, the god of wine was worshipped throughout the land. Coffee, although not grown in Egypt at the time, but imported from India, became very popular under Mohammed Ali; and

coffee shops became the centre of public thought, debate and social life. Alpión describes three different types of coffee shop, attracting different sections of the population. He concludes by noting that coffee shops no longer have such political importance and that their greatest popularity is now seen at times of international football matches.

The Bride of Hapi, traditionally was the most beautiful woman of each year, given in sacrifice to Hapi, who was both god and goddess depicted as: 'a voracious bridegroom ... a bloated hermaphrodite with a pregnant belly'. The belief was that by making the annual sacrifice of drowning the beautiful bride in the Nile, Hapi would be sufficiently appeased to prevent terrible flooding for another year. Although Christianity was already widespread in Egypt by the first century AD, it was not until the 4th century that questions concerning the annual sacrifice took any effect. Thus the tradition died for many centuries, until national pride in Egypt's rich cultural heritage in the 19th century called back to activity something of the ancient tradition. However, the ritual now involves the bridegroom being ceremonially married to a stone doll, dressed as a bride. This has now become a five day festival, attended by large crowds.

In 'A Parade of Porters', Alpión describes the change of duties ascribed to porters of living units, from smartly dressed men welcoming to and opening doors for inhabitants and guests, to watchmen of the buildings, working from under dark stairways, keeping up with gossip and rental or sale availabilities. Some house their entire families in a tiny dark room here, others prefer to keep their farming families at a distance.

'If Only the Dead could Listen' is the name of a very successful play which Alpión wrote and staged in Birmingham, UK. The play elucidates the extremely precarious situation of recent Albanian

immigrants in the UK, pointing out the pain which caused them to flee their homelands and the humiliations they are subjected to in a land which they hoped would give them another life chance.

In his chapters on images of Albania and Albanians in English literature and the media, Alpion first likens Albania as the nearest European equivalent to Egypt (both waiting millennia before having the opportunity of self-government, yet having the tenacity to retain their cultures against great odds). Alpion's greatest positive attention is given to Edith Durham (the British travel writer, known to all Albanians and Albanologists), for her depth of understanding. There is discussion about Shakespeare's rather brief references to Albania and Albanians. As far as negative imagery is concerned, Alpion finds many writers to quote, including even J. K. Rowling, whose only references to Albania are very negative, and destructive as Alpion notes in that she is such an extremely popular writer for children, and that their minds can be distorted towards Albania before they even have a chance to hear any other view. He notes that another particularly negative portrayal is that given by Robert Carver in his popular, and light-heartedly written book, *The Accursed Mountains: Journeys in Albania*. Both these books are on sale widely worldwide, the former even in translation into Albanian, and even available at the Mother Teresa Airport (formerly Rinas), Tirana. Alpion also quotes from many journalists who have profited from writing derogatorily, or making fun about Albania as their subject. He notes that Edward Said wrote on the misconception spread through Western writing concerning Arabs, finding that the same is true of writing on Albanians. This is enhanced by Western 'unsavoury opinion of the Balkans', very often in writing by those who have never been in the region. He also finds the terms 'exotic', 'primitive' and 'uncivilized' to be words used too frequently in

the media, sensationalizing newspaper and travel accounts, and he demonstrates biased, even hostile, journalism in the *Financial Times*. The situation is shown to have been at its very worst regarding Albanians in Kosovo in the 1990s when the British press was highly influenced by the Milošević regime.

Alpion looks very insightfully into the ways in which so many, particularly those of religious and political groups and the media, have distorted the life and work of Mother Teresa, not least Malcolm Muggeridge in his 'discovery' of her in 1968. There is a clear explanation of how Muggeridge turned that 'discovery' to his own advantage from which he made his career; less clear is how far Muggeridge was taken in by his own eagerness to believe in the miracles he sought to convey. Alpion can find no fault with Mother Teresa's motives and actions in her help of the poor, and exalts her claim of the equality of all human beings 'we are all children of God'. However, he points out that she would never find fault with poverty and would therefore not look for its root, but rather claimed that the greatest crime in the world was abortion, for which she blamed the would-be mothers, of murder. On this subject there is a chapter specifically devoted to the issue of Mother Teresa's abhorrence for abortion, contributed by Gaston Roberge, suggesting that it was improper for her to have used the Nobel Prize acceptance speech to promote the 'pro-life' stance. Alpion explores at length the many opposing views of Mother Teresa as a celebrity, looking at subjectivist, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to her status as a celebrity. He explains that rather little is known of her childhood, other than that she was quite sickly, and that she had 'revelations' (which some could claim were moments of delirium due to illness). Alpion aims to set out all the possible outlooks on Mother Teresa, to enable

the reader to come to her/his own conclusion. In addition to the adulation and support which Mother Teresa earned through her selfless work, Alpion describes how she was able to influence media as well as many 'friends in high places'. Bob Geldof said of her that she was 'as deft a manipulator of the media as any high powered American PR expert'. Christopher Hitchens was one of the first journalists to present a strong criticism of her, claiming her to be a 'conspiratorial religious figure'. An Indian critic of her is Dr Aroup Chatterjee. Each of these critics wrote whole books on their very negative views of Mother Teresa. Chatterjee even believes the reason that many support Mother Teresa's work is for their strong personal grudges against the city of Calcutta (one of the few places outside the former Soviet Union, where it was still possible to find statues of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin right into the early 1990s) and its people. He considers that Muggeridge and Robert Strange McNamara (the former American Secretary of Defence, who later became President of the World Bank) had too great an influence in securing the Nobel Prize for Mother Teresa in 1979. There are book reviews on two of the very many books written about Mother Teresa.

In a chapter 'Brain Down the Drain', Alpion discusses the sad waste of the talents of émigré Albanians, and others, leaving their countries in the hope of better opportunities, only to find that their qualifications are unappreciated, discounted and their disadvantages as outsiders accumulate and cause depression and hopelessness. He finds that negative media images considerably exacerbate problems for many, by highlighting crimes of the few, without extolling the virtues of the majority. Even where immigrants find some success, especially in academia, they often find they are given less value, this being explained by employers, for example, by the fact that they

never could earn such a good wage in their countries of origin. Al pion finds fault with British politicians who claim that the country needs the resources of young immigrants, yet does appreciate their often strong work ethic and dedication and does little to put in place policies to give these resources a chance to show their potential. In contrast, he claims that the reason why Mesopotamia and Egypt and even the Ottoman Empire, thrived so long, was because of the full use of bright migrants attracted to those advanced civilizations.

In discussing authoritarian regimes, Al pion points out Germany's great loss of talent, by deporting and exterminating Jews. He explains that Eastern Germany's rapid industrialization (to the point where it became the tenth most industrialized country in the world) may be due to their having closed borders, preventing the loss of talent, which, when the Berlin Wall came down, was enticed away by West Germany companies. This may in turn have led other Eastern Europeans falsely to believe there was huge wealth to be gained by migration to the West. He gives statistics for the numbers of Eastern European students who studied abroad, but intended to remain in the West. When laying out the plight of non-Western scholars in the Western world, Al pion also includes artists. When interviewing all these disadvantaged experts, without exception they asked not to be identified, indicating the strength of prejudice from which they all suffer.

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