Encounters with Civilizations:
From Alexander the Great to Mother Teresa

By Gëzim Alpion

Albanian Journal of Politics

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This book is a selection of thirteen texts written by Dr Gëzim Alpion between 1993 and 2007. The essays deal with history, culture, the media, social issues and politics. Each text is prompted by Dr Alpion's ongoing reflection on the problems people experience in their encounters with civilizations different from theirs. Thus, these texts pertain to philosophy. For, the subject of 'civilization' involves a consideration of the ultimate issues of life. Such a reflection is welcome anytime anywhere.

The sub-title of the book may surprise: Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), one of the greatest conquerors in the history of humankind, and Mother Teresa (1910-1997), the saintly humanitarian nun of Kolkata. Do they have anything in common? There are many similarities, with as many differences. First, Alexander the Great conquered lands and nations. Through her love, expressed in service, Mother Teresa conquered the hearts of people the world over, across continents, races, religions and cultures. Second, both Alexander and Mother Teresa were from Macedonia. Ethnically both were Albanians, although neither actually lived in what is today Albania. Third, both of them went to India – Alexander in 326 BC, Mother Teresa in 1929 – and both have left their mark there.

Alexander the Great contributed to India's name through the Greek language. For, the term 'India' comes from the Sanskrit *sindhu*, the river. The Persians changed *sindhu* into *hindu*, and the Greeks dropped the 'h'. Thus from *sindhu* eventually came the word 'India', which is now embedded in the Indian Constitution as one of the two names of India, the other name being *Bharat*.

Yet, Alexander the Great left the country soon after his arrival. On the other hand, Mother Teresa made India her home and became an Indian citizen. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979, and India's highest civilian award, the *Bharat Ratna* (the Gem of India) in 1980. She was made an Honorary Citizen of the United States in 1996 (one of only six). Upon her death in 1997, India gave her a state funeral similar to that given to Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Indian Nation. In 2001, the Indian filmmaker Amar Kr. Bhattacharya entitled his documentary film on Mother Teresa as *Mother of the Century*.

One more aspect of the subtitle calls for explanation: the subtitle is not complete. It should read, 'From Alexander the Great to Mother Teresa…and to you, gentle reader'. The encounters with civilizations continue today. And Dr Alpion's writings, dealing with both past and present encounters with civilizations, cultures and human communities, constitute an excellent pedagogy for our time. They provide models to emulate; they analyze the difficulties one is likely to face; they are an irresistible call to commitment and action. One may not always agree with Dr Alpion's opinions, but one can never discard them. One is challenged, whatever the place one happens to live in.

As clearly appears from this book's table of contents, Dr Alpion deals with a variety of subjects. Moreover, he is equally at ease and successful as a playwright, a storyteller, a journalist and a scholar. Dr Alpion is not just a media scholar; he is first a media person. The essays of this selection, organized in four parts, are vibrant with the life, diversity and appeal of present day media.

Part One: Albania. 'An interview with the ghost of Mohammed Ali, former ruler of Egypt' (1993) introduces a theme that runs through the entire collection of Dr Alpion's texts: the Albanians living outside the Balkans, and their relationship with the ethnic group they belong to as well as with the people they have come to live with. Here is the astounding relationship of the Albanian Mohammed Ali (1769-1848) with the Egyptians he ruled from 1805 to 1848. The second essay of this part, 'Kosova – a corner of Europe still waiting for peace' (2003), deals with the political situation in this Albanian region, and how that situation affects the difficult relationships between the Albanians and the Serbs.

Part Two: Egypt. Dr Alpion's seven-year stay in Egypt helped him understand the social evolution of the Egyptians over the

centuries, namely, the feeling of 'inferiority' that has been instilled by different conquerors of Egypt on its inhabitants. With at least one exception, Mohammed Ali. That feeling of 'inferiority' and its devastating consequences is what Dr Alpion discusses in 'Foreigner complex' (1993). The three other articles of this part – 'Egyptian coffee shops' (1994), 'The Bride of *Hapi* – female sacrifice and cosmic order*'* (1993) and 'A parade of porters' (1993) – deal with specific aspects of the Egyptian culture. Indian readers will easily note cultural similarities between Egypt and India.

Part Three: United Kingdom. In this part is reproduced Scene 4 of Dr Alpion's play *If Only the Dead Could Listen*, which, sponsored by Arts Council England, was first performed by the Dreamscape Theatre Company at the MAC Theater, Birmingham, UK, in February 2006. The premiere was such an astounding success that shortly afterwards Dr Alpion and Marcus Fernando, the Sri Lankan-British Director, received invitations from several national theatres in the Balkans to tour the region. Theater made it possible for Dr Alpion to express his thoughts more forcefully than in an academic essay. The drama depicts the 'foreigner complex' as experienced by Albanians – from Albania and Kosova – who seek refuge in the United Kingdom. The two complementary essays on the images of Albania and the Albanians a) in English literature from Edith Durham's *High Albania* to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potte*r (2002), and b) in the British Press in the new millennium (2005) are two perfect examples of what in literary circles is called 'imagology'. These images have a deep effect on the identity of the people concerned, and at times result in a foreigner complex.

Part Four: India. Part four begins with a short piece, entitled 'Oh! not Calcutta!' (2003), about Mother Teresa's supposed negative impact on the image of Calcutta. Calcutta (now Kolkata) has long been

famous, if at times out of unthinking playfulness. Dr Alpion's masterly essay 'Media and celebrity culture – subjectivist, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to Mother Teresa's celebrity status' will greatly contribute to develop an academic approach of the media phenomenon called Mother Teresa. Dr Alpion shows, among other things, the influence of Mother Teresa's Albanian roots on her ministry among the poor. Then, as a secular thinker and media expert, he discusses how Mother Teresa became a media icon in the context of the contemporary lust for fame and cult of celebrities.

The last part of this anthology, captioned 'Envoi', comprises a single essay by Dr Alpion, and earnestly entreats the reader to say 'No' to social closure. In this last essay, Dr Alpion offers an *exposé* of social closure in Western academia. Scholars are at the forefront of any successful encounter with civilizations, that is, if they are not socially excluded. But the fact is, as Dr Alpion clearly shows, many foreign scholars in the West are subjected to what Max Weber called 'social closure'. Here Dr Alpion draws from his own experience, as well as from the experience of a large number of scholars who have been subjected to social exclusion. Although the collective testimony of these scholars might create dismay, Dr Alpion trustfully affirms that to build a caring society no one should be treated as a disposable object.