

BESA Journal

Truro, Cornwall, UK, ISSN 1366-8536, Autumn 2003, Vol. 7,
No. 2, pp. 28-30

Mother Teresa and the Balkans DNA Politics

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Pigeonholing and stereotyping the ‘other’ is common practice in the Western media and academia. The ‘other’ for us in the West, especially for the British, is a category including almost any ‘foreigner’ who is seen as a ‘stranger’ because of skin colour, country of origin, native language, dress, culture or religion.

The country of origin certainly reveals a lot about anyone who is not a ‘native’ here. It is wrong, however, to judge or ‘assess’ people simply and purely on these grounds. As a ‘foreigner’ myself, so far I do not know of any fellow ‘alien’ in the UK who has not been a victim of pigeonholing. And I am not talking only about ordinary people like myself.

Mother Teresa is a telling example of how even the good and the great are hardly immune from stereotyping. Throughout her lifetime as a celebrity and after her

death, she generated huge publicity as few people in the twentieth century. She is probably one of the most written about woman and the interest in her life and work does not seem to wane.

Initially, I was 'introduced' to Mother Teresa at the Indian Culture Centre in downtown Cairo in 1986 when I started reading about Buddhism and other Asian religions. Fourteen years later, I am still interested in her life and work but not necessarily for the same reasons.

That Mother Teresa is of Albanian origin is still significant to me, but the significance is hardly of the same nature as it was before. The 'new' significance of Mother Teresa's 'nationality' and 'roots' is the subject of my current lengthy study on her, a study which I began especially after the recent 'unholy' row between the Macedonians and Albanians about her 'daughtership'.

Whether or not Mother Teresa is an Albanian or a Macedonian daughter is of no relevance to me. If Albanians think they are entitled to take pride in Mother Teresa, so are the Macedonians, the Indians, the Catholics and secular people like myself. The attachment of the Albanians and Macedonians to the figure of Mother Teresa, however, has all the disturbing signs of a calculated 'business'.

Different people are attached to Mother Teresa for different purposes. Mother Teresa continues to 'serve' some circles after her demise as much as when she was alive. In the Balkans, hardly a region with a praiseworthy record for human rights, Mother Teresa seems to be considered a good PR to further the cause of different political and religious groups both in Macedonia and Albania.

The Albanians and the Macedonians continue to shower 'their' world famous daughter with praise and prizes as no other modern figure in their history. This is a

sickening race that seems to have no end and which, I believe, no party will eventually win. What is interesting about this campaign is that neither the Albanians nor the Macedonians present any strong evidence to prove that Mother Teresa would have liked this kind of contest or that she would have preferred to belong exclusively to one of the two warring parties. The Albanian and Macedonian literature on Mother Teresa is devotional at best and hypothetical at worst.

The hullabaloo of the Albanians and the Macedonians about Mother Teresa is too loud not to be heard by Western biographers of the Balkan saint. But while most of them pay no heed to the Macedonians' claim that Mother Teresa is Macedonian, many are those who are eager to comment on the fuss made by the Albanians, especially after her first visit to Albania in 1989. 'Within a year of her visit,' notes Emma Johnson, 'she had become a national hero in Albania, praised by both Christians and Muslims, and was featured on Albanian postage stamps and in its history books' (2003, 98).

The excessive veneration the Albanians have been showing for Mother Teresa in the last two decades has been noted particularly by Christopher Hitchens, an English journalist based in Washington. In the 1994 Channel 4 controversial programme *Hell's Angel* and in his image-smearing book *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, which appeared in the following year, Hitchens attacks Mother Teresa for being, among other things, a friend of dictators, a proselytizer, and Calcutta's image wrecker.

Christopher Hitchens is by no means the most objective journalist in the world and his motives for attacking Mother Teresa are hardly without blemish. His style is often pretentious and he spares no insults to anyone with whom he happens to disagree.

Hitchens's argument is often flawed and at times ridiculous, especially when he hints directly or indirectly at Mother Teresa's involvement in the cause for 'Greater Albania'. 'Agnes Bojaxhiu,' claims Hitchens, conveniently using Mother Teresa's original name, 'knows perfectly well that....she is a fund-raising icon for clerical nationalists in the Balkans' (1995, 98).

Considering that Hitchens earns his living in the United States also as a lecturer, one would imagine that he is aware of how important it is to base an argument on hard evidence. The only proof he offers to implicate Mother Teresa in the Albanian nationalists' cause is laughable. 'In Tetova', he notes, 'the Albanian centre of Western Macedonia, and in Kosovo too, local zealots speak of Greater Albania as the response to greater Serbia, and they flourish their pictures of Mother Teresa' (Ibid. 84.). Hitchens even insinuates that the fact that Mother Teresa paid homage on and placed a wreath by the grave of Enver Hoxha in 1989 proves that 'An Albanian Catholic nationalist...might, on 'patriotic' questions, still feel loyal to an ostensibly materialist Communist regime' (Ibid. 82).

Hitchens apparently comes to the ingenious conclusion that the saintly Mother Teresa did commit the dreadful sin of 'patriotism' simply because she was the daughter of Nikollë Bojaxhiu, an ardent Albanian patriot. Like thousands of Albanians before, during and after the two Balkan wars, Mother Teresa's father was a witness and a victim of the Serb and other Slav ultranationalists' hatred for the Albanians and anything Albanian. Hitchens considers the Albanians' struggle for survival as something of a trifle and their aspiration for freedom and dignity as nothing more than an adventure.

In spite of her patriotic background, Mother Teresa was not an Albanian patriot; not the kind of patriot that Hitchens has in mind, anyway. Mother Teresa would

stress throughout her life that her Missionaries of Charities had nothing to do with politics. The fact of the matter is that she was hardly uninvolved politically. Her interventions in countries like Yemen and Beirut or her involvement during the Bhopal tragedy reveal that Mother Teresa was a religious as well as a political force. Never in her life as a missionary, however, did Mother Teresa publicly raise her voice to protest when her fellow Albanians in Kosova and Macedonia were treated as second-hand citizens.

If Mother Teresa was an Albanian patriot, then the Balkans can do with a breed of patriots like her. The people in the Balkans need a Mother Teresa to preach exclusively to them that all of them – Albanians, Serbs, Macedonians, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Slovenes, Croats, Romanians, Bulgarians, Greeks and Turks – are ‘children of God’.

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