

# *The Guardian*

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## **Work in progress**

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### **Sinners and winners**

#### **A new study goes back to Mother Teresa's roots**

By Chris Arnot

As a one-time student of James Joyce and DH Lawrence, Dr Gëzim Alpion has long been aware of the value of self-imposed exile. "If you distance yourself from your country of origin, you become rootless, but you also begin to have a much clearer view of the place and its problems," he says.

He left his native Albania in 1985, moving from the University of Tirana to the University of Cairo. Going from a communist country to a more spiritual place had a profound effect on the young academic. "I had no background in religion, yet it was vital that I started to understand it, as somebody who was interested in English literature, Joyce in particular."

It was while gaining an appreciation of Joyce's Catholicism that Alpion became increasingly aware of one of the great icons of the 20th century – a diminutive nun who hailed, originally, from his own homeland.

"There's no point in denying that the Albanian aspect of Mother Teresa's life was important to me," he says. Distance from his native land had given him the perspective to begin another critical appreciation – of his own culture. The western media, he believes, has painted a partial and distorted image of Europe's poorest country and of the woman who left there in 1928, aged 18, to begin a journey that would take her to celebrity status in the slums of Calcutta.

Next year, two decades after the start of his own journey from Albania to Egypt and from Egypt to the UK, Alpion will publish *Mother Teresa, the Media and the Sainthood*. He did not stop moving once he reached the UK, passing through Durham, Huddersfield and Sheffield before settling at the University of Birmingham.

In the process he has also moved his main sphere of interest from literature (although he is still a playwright, essayist and reviewer) to sociology.

He describes his book as a critique rather than a biography. And he is critical not so much of Mother Teresa as of the hundreds of biographers who, he believes, have misrepresented her. Chief among these are polemicists such as Christopher Hitchens and Malcolm Muggeridge.

It was Muggeridge who brought Mother Teresa to the world's attention in 1968 when his documentary about her work in Calcutta elicited £20,000 in donations from viewers. "It certainly struck a chord," Alpion admits. But he thinks Muggeridge failed to understand the woman herself.

To see her as a sort of social worker dedicated to improving the lot of the poor is very simplistic, he says. "She was, first and last, a committed nun. Christians are more interested in saving souls than saving bodies. That's what people like Hitchens don't understand. He accuses her of giving money

to the Vatican that was collected for the poor. He doesn't seem to understand that her greatest devotion was to the Vatican. He's coming at it from the perspective of the atheist fundamentalist."

Alpion describes himself as a rational spiritualist. "There are things beyond our knowledge. I believe there is a meaning to life, but I don't pretend to know about the afterlife."

Mother Teresa had no such doubts. "She believed she was going straight to heaven," says Alpion.

He has been back home to the Balkans to search for a perspective on her life. "She came from a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural city and, without that, she would never have become the woman she was. Those first 18 years were vital. That's another thing I learned from studying Joyce and Lawrence."

*Mother Teresa, the Media and Sainthood* will be published by Routledge next year