
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

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Spotlight: An Adroit Saleswoman

One must ungrudgingly give it to Gëzim that this has been a work of monumental proportions involving great dexterity. He uses celebrity discourse as an analytical tool and aims it for all and sundry.

Reviewed by Dr Bonita Aleaz

Reading the book puts one into a quandary at the outset itself. On the one hand Gëzim's book follows a long line of critical writings on Mother Teresa, which has bogged the nun living or dead. On the other, one cannot fail to enter into uncomfortable dilemmas because lexicons give a pejorative connotation to the word 'celebrity', when contrasted with fame. Moreover, the author's use of a question mark in the title adds on to the confusion.

Fame, as Joseph Epstein in *The Culture of Celebrity* says, is something one earns, through talent or achievement of one kind or another – while celebrity is something one cultivates or, possibly, has thrust upon one. The two are not, of course, entirely exclusive. One can be immensely talented and full of achievement and yet wish to broadcast one's fame further through the careful cultivation of celebrity; and one can have the thinnest of achievements and be talentless and yet be made to seem otherwise through the mechanics and dynamics of celebrity-creation. The varied accounts on Mother Teresa take positions that encompass both these definitions and thus do not elucidate the puzzle surrounding the saint. The book under review tries to unravel the enigma.

The writings on Mother Teresa so far can be categorized in terms of the structuralist stance or the subjectivist approach of the authors. Among the former one distinguishes among others the media people who floated the 'conspiracy' theories, they include the vehement media critic, Christopher Hitchens, the theologian Dr Ken Matto, the Indian physician Aroup (sic) Chatterji and the feminist Germaine Greer. None find any good in the more than sixty years of work done

by the nun in India. Their main argument is 'well-known people are manufactured and expected to serve the powers that make them famous'. Mother Teresa thus legitimized the exploitation of the poor, and in this way perpetuated third world humiliation. An important newspaper editor from West Bengal even analysed her endeavours were solely meant for personal salvation. Greer, quite in character, actually found anti-feminist strains in Mother Teresa's work. Much of these 'structuralist' versions are based on half-truths, absence of data about her formative years and even personal grudges about the city, which she helped sustain/malign?

Gëzim shows the subjectivists on the other hand had a totally different objective. 'It was an excellent advertisement for the new India and her leaders whose pride in their country did not turn them into blinkered nationalists eager to shun any good foreign influence that could help them in their efforts to set the country on the course of economic and social progress and emancipation.' (p. 15) The nun was lucky, indeed to start her philanthropic mission when the country and the region of her interest were both governed by 'open-minded leaders ...with an internationalist vision.'

Subsequently the easy access she had to Jyoti Basu, during his long tenure as Chief Minister, inevitably added to the relative ease of her multifarious concerns in West Bengal. *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* moves away from both stances indicated and emphasizes her childhood and adolescence at Skopje, Albania. Most chroniclers have not given any credence to this phase at all, 'to know the human being behind the many Mother Teresas that have been presented over the years', yet, it is of critical importance. Gëzim's primary hypothesis ably substantiated by facts is to show the significance of ethnic roots in the life of the Mother; also, it allows the correction of gross

inaccuracies surrounding her early years. It becomes important, since her very religiosity and subsequent display of 'saintliness' may be attributed to the specific Albanian characteristics of highlighting family; devotion; community orientation, patriotism, all that created the tensile strength she exuded throughout. Her own uncommunicativeness about this most determinative stage of her life may be attributed to the fact that a person donning the habit is 'born anew', abjuring the old.

She came from a close-knit family, and quite contrary to knowledge thus far, a family which was both economically and socially well-grounded in Albania. Her father Nikollë, a fierce nationalist, was murdered for the cause of Albanian reunification. Subsequently her brother's escape from the country and entrenchment with the Italian army; her mother and sister's confinement within the country are the threads, which woven together form the narrative widely missed by the nun's chroniclers so far. Unless these parts of her life are focused upon, the enigma surrounding her actions remain undisclosed. The loss of the male parent and her mother's subsequent intense religiosity affected the nine-year-old Agnes deeply. It was at this juncture that the strength of her religious beliefs, aligned with the desperate need for a male support creates the illusion of the alternate (divine) parent whose command she obeys; this symbolism was internalized early in life and stayed intact throughout. Gëzim uses the Freudian analogy of the role of illusion to explicate his assumptions.

For those unacquainted with the Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu (pre Mother Teresa) literature, it comes as a shock to learn the extent of political intrigue surrounding the nun. These were multitudinous ranging from her nationality, the Balkan imbroglio, her political connections, and her Vatican links. The Balkan appropriation of the

nun coincided with her winning the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979, which exacerbated with her beatification. The Slavs, the Croats, the Serbs, the Vlachs, the Macedonian Slavs, apart from the actual claimants, the Albanians, all claimed her. The respective positions are elucidated through parallel narrations about the regions. This provides additional historical detail about the strife-torn regions.

Mother Teresa's reticence about her own Albanian origins or about the political situation in Albania adds to her enigma. However, there are certain unsavoury truths behind these. Enver Hoxha, the Albanian dictator, never allowed her into the country. She could do so only after his demise. Despite the knowledge that ethnic strife in her country had reached astounding proportions, Mother Teresa never broke her silence over these issues. This demeanour does not match her frequent public missives regarding the Middle East, events in India itself, or even her strong opinions on various issues to the American President. These were invariably related to distressful conditions. The Balkan reticence may be attributed to shrewd reasoning, her family's welfare was at stake and secondly, the epithet 'Albanian national' was certainly more confining compared to a humanist with universal concerns for the poor. The saint was essentially 'without a nation', Mother Teresa would aver with such descriptions, but this is strongly refuted by Gëzim. Her Albanian roots were visible in more occasions than one; in her conversations she never denounced it.

The Mother's relationship with the Catholic Church while at Loreto, and the subsequent liaison she developed with the Vatican have become, perhaps issues that have maligned her the most. One can imagine the fracas within the Roman Catholic Church in India, when a young nun decides to leave, since its environment was not sufficiently oriented towards the poor. The pre-independence era was

inopportune for the church to draw attention to itself. However, the adamancy of the nun prevailed and did not win her many friends within the church community.

The Mother's relationship with the Vatican inspires awe, as to the extent of influence wielded by the diminutive nun. Gëzim unflinchingly ascribes, that despite her philanthropism, she was definitely 'used' by the Vatican to stem the progress of communism in her own country as also in other communist strongholds. These facts are uncovered with meticulous detail. Mother Teresa was inevitably the product of the media of both the Eastern and the Western variants; that she colluded with these efforts is well known. She was an adroit saleswoman, as she blatantly proclaimed; her work should be propagated with greater intensity, since it was meant for the poor.

One must ungrudgingly give it to Gëzim that this has been a work of monumental proportions involving great dexterity. He uses celebrity discourse as an analytical tool and aims it for all and sundry. All methodological exclusivity has been abjured, allowing the multihued disciplines to coalesce as needed in the research. It certainly is not a recapitulation of the oft-recounted philanthropism of Mother Teresa; rather the humaneness that lay underneath has been shorn of its external trappings.

She was not above intrigue, conflict or the possibilities for self-aggrandizement. Yet, above it all arose her deep-seated belief in her calling, in selfless service to the poor. Gëzim's work has received both accolades as well as opprobrium worldwide, to date at least fifty reviews in English and other European languages have appeared and he has been focused on the small screen as well.

All this makes the book compulsory reading.

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