
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

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New book demolishes Mother Teresa's 'divine call' myth'

C. M. Paul

KOLKATA, West Bengal (SAR NEWS) — 'Mother Teresa was dramatically influenced by events during her formative years, rather than the self-proclaimed "call from God",' claims a new book published by Routledge. The book launch will take place at the University College London, October 31.

University of Birmingham Sociology and Media Studies lecturer Dr Gëzim Alpion has written the first academic book to examine the first eighteen years of the life of this religious celebrity, looking into the real motives behind an Albanian teenager's chosen path into a life dedicated to religion.

In *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* Dr Alpion goes skillfully beneath the surface of history to uncover one of the twentieth century's greatest enigmas.

The purpose of writing the book was 'to get to know the woman behind the many Mother Teresas we have been presented with over several decades', says Dr Alpion.

Alpion argues that the death of her adored 'celebrity' father at the age of nine had a very real and profound effect on Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu (Mother Teresa's original name). This turning point in Mother Teresa's life determined her career choice and the motives of her charity work.

He further reveals how Mother Teresa was a consummate 'manipulator' of the media. He draws parallels with and highlights the differences between the nun's devotion to Jesus and our own obsession with celebrity culture, concluding that 'celebrity culture is the modern form of religion'.

Mother Teresa was one of the most prominent religious figures of the twentieth century. During her lifetime as well as posthumously, the figure, work and legacy of Mother Teresa generated a huge level of interest and heated debate. The question remains to be answered: 'Did the media use Mother Teresa or did she use the media?'

Drawing on new research into Mother Teresa's early years, Dr Gëzim Alpion charts the rise to fame of this pioneering religious personality, investigating the transformation of an exemplary nun into a media and humanitarian icon. He explores the significance of Mother Teresa to the mass media, to celebrity culture, to the Church and to various political and national groups.

Another fascinating section explores the ways different vested interests have sought to appropriate her after her death, and also examines Mother Teresa's own attitude to her childhood and to conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the book – a totally unbiased account which is both an admiration and critical appreciation of Mother Teresa – Dr Alpion identifies some of the difficulties and obstacles she encountered in the late 1940s as she prepared to set up her congregation of the Missionaries of Charity.

He argues that: 'It took the Church quite a while to understand that the visionary Mother Teresa was the perfect "ambassadors" in the right place, at the right time. Mother Teresa "secularised" missionary work in post-independence

India thus giving Christianity a new lease of life in this predominantly Hindu country.'

Dr Alpion spent almost four years travelling, doing research into and lecturing worldwide on Mother Teresa, including Kolkata. The earlier works of this versatile academic, writer, playwright, essayist and journalist include *Vouchers* (2001), *Foreigner Complex* (2002), *If Only the Dead Could Listen* (2006), *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* (2006). Currently he is working on *Encounters with Civilisations* due for release in 2007. END