
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

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The late Mother Teresa is a lady who by any standards would rank among the most striking personalities the world has ever known. As David Marsh points out, in this superbly researched work of Gëzim Alpion, an Albanian playwright and essayist, her name on entering a Google Search produces well over four million hits. In this book, Alpion attempts what I see as a wholly unbiased approach, dealing equally with both her critics and enthusiasts. He ignores neither the vitriolic broadsides launched against her by well known critics such as Christopher Hitchens, Aroup Chatterjee or Germaine Greer, nor the petty faultfinding of 'insiders' such as former nun Susan Shields. Nevertheless, he insists that Mother Teresa and her work attracted the eye of the public largely due to the media, for her ascent to fame was meticulously contrived and tracked by public relations experts and spokespersons both in the East and in the West.

He points out that in nations around the world numerous political, religious, nationalist, and business groups developed an intentional interest in her, making sure she had all the exposure and media immunity needed in order to serve them and their objectives with no interference. She was used by Indian politicians seeking to evoke love and compassion in the hearts of their countrymen, and by those wishing to remove the caste system. Mother Teresa in course of time became aware that she was being thus manipulated, but she did not mind as long as the mounting hype she received helped her to realize her main object in life, which was essentially to serve the poorest of the poor. She is in truth one of the most written about and publicized women in modern times, and with the exception of Pope John Paul II she was possibly the most celebrated religious superstar in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Yet, even assuming Mother Teresa's saintly nature was a matter of dispute, her commitment to her vocation and to the poor was without doubt exemplary. With her lifetime pledge to serve the poorest of the poor in a predominantly non-Christian country like India, she succeeded in proving to a money-oriented and largely cynical West that religion can be a means to advance people's material and spiritual wellbeing, and that rather than divide, faith can be used as a medium to unite communities, across cultural, ethnic, religious, economic, and political segregations.

However, what Alphonso never fails to emphasize is the fact that regardless of her undeniably pure intentions, the forgiving nun had some of the 'most intolerant and unforgiving supporters and opponents'. He insists that her Indian critics in particular who tended to view her as virtually a diabolical figure, would be able to weigh her work much more objectively and perhaps even begin to esteem her a little, if they did not let national pride get in the way. According to him, whatever failings she might have had, Mother Teresa loved India as no other country in the world, including her native Albania.

Alphonso deals extensively with Mother Teresa's relationship to the citizens of the Balkan states, and regrets the fact that despite her having proclaimed peace, understanding, tolerance and forgiveness throughout the world, she yet failed to inject some neighborly spirit into her own native Balkans. The fact that she

decided to be buried in India and not in Kosova or Skopje was a shrewdly calculated move on her part, indicating that she had no intention of becoming another bone of contention for the Albanians, Serbs, and Macedonian Slavs after her death. He devotes several pages to what he sees as inaccuracies and prejudicial remarks in the works of other biographers of Mother Teresa (though he defends Lush Gjergji), and asserts that Balkan biographers in general need to be free of their biases towards ethnic or religious 'rivals', and include in their works information about Mother Teresa or members of her family that might appear controversial. Besides being a most precious asset of the Roman Catholic Church in the twentieth century, she is also the best advocate of peace, understanding and tolerance to have arisen, from the troubled, discordant, and intolerant region of the Balkans in modern times.

Alpion is of the view that it was for certain cogent reasons that she was relatively tight-lipped about her early life and about certain members of her family, and here it was not her own reputation that she was worried about. As far as she was concerned her image and identity were inseparably linked to those of the Roman Catholic Church, and so she was willing to do almost anything to avoid causing problems to the Holy See. In his words, 'Mother Teresa was first and foremost a very devout and loyal Roman Catholic nun'. She even went to the extent of destroying certain documents that might have been a cause of embarrassment for others, and she did this not so much to protect herself or any particular individual, but the image of Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church.

Also, her disinclination to publicly censure the political turmoil in Albania, was very likely due to her knowledge of the fact that her brother Lazar was a fascist spy and a member of Mussolini's army. Her devotion to the poor too was not the sole reason for the empathy shown her by the press. She handled the media and her recognition so well and for so long, because she had been initiated into superstar culture early in life. Her father was a well-known local figure, and after his death she sought to replace him with the divine father figure of god. She was on the whole an average nun with her share of doubts, ambitions, frustrations, and 'weaknesses' that are generally not associated with saints, and

yet to serve her god she was brave enough to challenge everyone and make unbridled use of the publicity she received.

After Germaine Greer, Christopher Hitchens, and Susan Shields this book of Alpion's feels like a whiff of delightfully fresh air. It is the work an open and dedicated scholar, who despite his reverence for the nun has yet striven to be as unbiased as possible, never letting his emotions get in the way. I would have no hesitation at all in recommending this book to everyone.