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Gëzim Alpion, *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 284, £16.99, ISBN 978-0-415-39247-1 (pbk).

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Mother Teresa is one of the world's best known religious figures. Millions have been touched, moved and challenged by her powerful ministry with the poorest of the poor in the back streets of Calcutta. Born in Albania in 1910, her unique ministry has become paradigmatic of a selfless life lived with and for the poor. The religious power of her life is testified to in her beatification by Pope John Paul II in 2003 just six years after her death in India in 1997. Hers is truly a heroic story, or so it seems, but Gëzim Alpion sees things differently. Alpion argues that in order to understand Mother Teresa one needs to understand the ways in which her life and ministry are indebted to the power of 'modern celebrity culture'. Her lasting significance can only be understood in relation to the mass media, celebrity culture, the church and the various political groups that were central to her rise to fame.

Alpion argues that from the late 1940s when she was about to set up her Missionaries of Charity, the Indian media took an interest in

Mother Teresa, using her to offer the world a positive perspective on the country following separation from Pakistan in 1947. From there she gradually became a media celebrity in India and on into the rest of the world. Rather than her story being one of humble commitment to the poor, her 'rise to prominence was carefully engineered and monitored by public relations experts and spin doctors both in the east and in the West' (p. x). Mother Theresa was no passive onlooker in this process. She was a key figure in promoting her religious cause, although arguably, not herself. As her celebrity status grew various political, religious and business persons and organizations began to develop an interest in her and 'used' her for various causes; such as President Regan's campaign to end abortion in the United States. Mother Teresa became an outspoken advocate for forgiveness and social justice, intervening in a number of high profile world situations; maintaining her high media profile became a vital dimension of her religious calling.

One of the most interesting and controversial suggestions in Alpion's book is his assertion that the motivation for Mother Teresa's entry into Christian mission was not a divinely given burden for the poor (although she may have believed this to be the case), but rather a grief response to the death of her father Nikollë Bojaxhiu. Bojaxhiu died in mysterious circumstances aged 45. Mother Teresa (then known by her Christian name of Agnes) was nine years old. Alpion suggests that it was this event rather than her Christian upbringing as a child or special divine calling as an adult that took her down the path that led her to become the celebrity figure of Mother Teresa. Agnes, unable to come to terms with the loss of her father, turned to the figure of Jesus as a divine surrogate father; a protective figure who would never leave

her. Alpion interprets her strong feelings towards and constant reference to Jesus within this psychoanalytical frame; the implication being that her devotion to Jesus was primarily therapeutic rather than spiritual and that her dedication to the poor in Calcutta could be viewed in a not dissimilar way. This being so, as with all celebrities, there was much more 'self' in the ministry of Mother Teresa than is normally assumed.

The book offers an interesting and different perspective on Mother Teresa. As a bibliography and original thesis this book is well worth the read. While there is much to commend it, one has to question the self-proclaimed neutrality of the author's approach. His statement that he 'stands between the rationalists and the spiritualists' (p. 159) in the discussion over Mother Teresa's life stands in rather odd tension with the general rationalist thrust of the book and the statement in the preceding paragraph that: 'It is worth noting that the 'rational' approach to religion has not diminished our apparently pathological drive to have faith in something otherworldly' (p. 158). Alpion's uncritical Freudian assumption that religion is pathology and that grief is a mode of neurosis that can be treated with the opiate of religion (p. 167) is more than a little reductionist. No real attention is paid to the internal meanings of faith within the Catholic community or the possibility that such belief in transcendence might be more than mere imagination. This, I suspect, will make the book a difficult read for people who claim religious faith to be more than psychological or social construction; for those who do not consider such commitments important, the book offers a challenging perspective that is worthy of consideration.