
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

Routledge: London and New York, 2007, xx, pb & hb, 284 pp

ISBN 10: 0-415-39246-2 (hbk)

ISBN 10: 0-415-39247-0 (pbk)

ISBN 10: 0-203-08751-8 (ebk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-39246-4 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-39247-1 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-203-08751-0 (ebk)

Paperback: List Price £16.99; \$26.95

Hardback: List Price £65.99; \$110.00

Simultaneously published in the UK, the USA and Canada

Light Magazine

London, UK

Issue 5, Winter 2006, p. 22

The wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove

Reviewed by John Hodgson

For Gëzim Alpion, Mother Teresa was 'with the exception of Pope John Paul II, certainly the most famous religious celebrity of our time'. To anyone who saw the two together processing in the Popemobile through the streets of Tirana in 1993, it was quite clear who upstaged whom, and also who it was that the Albanian crowds had turned out to see.

Mother Teresa's Albianity has been little studied, and less understood, and Alpion delves deeply into her Balkan roots, and also analyses the iconic value she has come to possess for Albanians in particular.

For the Albanians of Kosova, Mother Teresa became a powerful symbolic figure during the long years of peaceful resistance to the Milošević occupation. At a time when Serbian propaganda strove to portray the Albanians as innately violent, as terrorists, and Islamic or Marxist-Leninist extremists, here was a Catholic woman of peace, of

international renown, a symbol who could not only improve the Albanians' reputation, but also restore their morale and confidence in their own reserves of human goodness.

Mother Teresa was appropriated to Albanian patriotic causes regardless of the fact that she herself wore her Albanian identity very lightly. Indeed, she went to some lengths to downplay, if not conceal her ethnic origins. But there are surely quite plain reasons why her ethnic identity became less and less important to her.

Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu was born in Skopje in the last years of the Ottoman Empire, a member of a Catholic minority within an Albanian minority in a complex multiethnic society whose structure defied conventional national description. In her early life, she no doubt experienced centuries-old traditions of tolerance and coexistence, but also prejudice and strife. Edith Durham, travelling through Macedonia in 1904, six years before Mother Teresa's birth, was astonished at the virulence of anti-Catholic feeling. An Orthodox priest, wishing to find common ground with his visitor from England, remarked: 'We both dislike the Pope.' Mother Teresa learned early the limitations of identity politics. Her early religious reading was largely in Croatian. Her vocation inevitably took her away from her family, and in her case also from her native country. She became an Indian citizen, and adopted many Indian ways. More importantly, her life story illustrates the limitations of the patriotic agenda. She acquired a certain non-specific universality. She used her Albanianess sparingly, and for specific purposes.

Her first visit to Albania was in 1989, when Ramiz Alia's ailing communist state was sending out the most tentative feelers towards change. Her unlikely hostess was the fearsome Nexhmije Hoxha, Enver Hoxha's widow, in her capacity as chairman of the Democratic Front, the communist-backed mass organisation purporting to unite all Albanians 'regardless of region, religion, and conviction'. This organisation was in a sense responsible for the nation's religious life, meaning in practical terms its abolition. Mrs Hoxha smugly announced that the Albanians did not give much thought to God: 'We rather love our country.' Mother Teresa replied: 'If people love one another, they will love their country more' – words of luminous simplicity, the like of which had not been printed in the newspaper *Bashkimi* for decades.

Mother Teresa was criticised abroad for laying flowers on Enver Hoxha's grave, and indeed has come under fire for hobnobbing with dictators and dubious characters generally. In fact, she appears to have had the ability that Quakers prize of seeing 'that of God' in every individual. 'If I judge, I cannot love,' she said. She had the ability to draw good out of the most unlikely people: a dodgy politician with a guilty conscience

might give to the poor too. In ruthless dictators with fatuous personality cults, she may have seen lost children of God with a longing to be loved.

In Albania, Mother Teresa soon achieved her purpose, which was to open one of her houses. In the devastated, skeletal Tirana of 1991, I remember an Albanian sister, surrounded by chaotic bales of donated clothing, lamenting: 'Everything is left to spontaneity. But Mother says spontaneity is a gift from God.'

Bob Geldof found in Mother Teresa 'as deft a manipulator of the media as any high-powered American PR expert'. In this country, [United Kingdom] she first became famous through the efforts of the world-weary journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, who after a lifetime's career as hard-boiled cynic, satirist, and MI6 agent, found his way to religion through Mother Teresa, while also denouncing on late-night television the evils of what was then known as 'the permissive society', and in particular the general availability of contraception. Alpin interestingly describes the relationship between the patronising Muggeridge and the cautious nun, who suspected that the journalist was exploiting her for his own purposes. It was Mother Teresa who survived the encounter with her dignity intact and her reputation enhanced.

Alpin is a sociologist, and writes illuminatingly about different forms of 'celebrity discourse', but he is less comfortable with the more elusive notion of saintliness. How can such a quality be assessed? The Vatican has its own procedures, and Mother Teresa is well on the way to being fast-tracked through them. She herself no doubt pondered deeply the mixed biblical messages on earthly fame, which include letting your light shine forth among men, and not putting your light under a bushel, but also letting not the left hand know what the right hand doeth. Alpin has been to Calcutta, and writes with respect of Mother Teresa's work to alleviate the most extreme human misery. But missing from his book are the voices of the innumerable obscure human beings to whom Mother Teresa brought life and hope. These are the people who were at the centre of her love and work. When she said, 'I would rather wash lepers than be interviewed by the press,' she meant it. It was a message that journalists, in their way, loved to hear. But Alpin has written an absorbing analysis what this nun has meant to the world, and particularly to the Albanians – material any traveller may reflect upon, flying on the red eye into Mother Teresa International.