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## ***Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?***

By Gëzim Alpion

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### **Baffled by enigma of sanctity**

#### **Reviewed by Kathryn Spink**

As an admirer and biographer of Mother Teresa, I count myself among those writers whose 'subjectivist' approach to their subject Gëzim Alpion seeks to redress by his own objectivity. The primary purpose of Alpion, a lecturer in sociology and media studies at Birmingham University, is to explore Mother Teresa's initiation into, attitude towards and relationship with celebrity culture, fame and the media.

Alpion holds Mother Teresa to be 'apparently' personally responsible for initiating the 'myth' of her 'sainted status'. According to him, many factors have contrived to ensure that her reputation for sanctity has flourished in India and spread across 'secular' and 'rational' Western Europe. Among these factors are her claim to have had calls from God to become a nun in 1922 and then to leave the Loreto convent in Calcutta in 1948 to serve the poor while living among them;

her perception of what Alpin calls 'a string of coincidences' as divine providence; and her failure to refute suggestions that she was a saint (asserting instead that we are all called to sainthood). To these may be added an Indian cultural readiness to see those who devote themselves to others as saints, the usefulness to its politicians of a foreign, Catholic saint in highlighting India's post-independence secularism and separation from Pakistan, and the curiously uncritical efforts of Mother Teresa's champions – most famously among them the British journalist and broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge.

It is undoubtedly also true that as Mother Teresa rose to fame there were those who had vested interests in promoting and censoring her public image. Albanian-born Alpin is particularly interesting when explaining how, after receiving the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize, Mother Teresa became subject to both the Albanian media's eagerness to hail her as a patriot and the Macedonians' attempts to 'usurp' her in the months prior to her beatification in 2003.

More controversial are the claims about the extent to which Mother Teresa controlled her own publicity. She declined to be interviewed by Datta-Ray, a journalist notoriously critical of her for, as he saw it, using Calcutta's dying as stepping stones in her ambition for sainthood. Alpin writes of Datta-Ray's bitterness at her refusal. Reinforced by Bob Geldof's claim that she was a 'deft manipulator of the media', this suggests to him that she exercised a sophisticated control over what was said or written about her. Bengali Dr Aroup Chatterjee saw her as the perfect tool of the white 'enemies' of Calcutta but for Alpin this argument fails to recognise that Mother Teresa was not 'a simpleton saint'; in fact she was capable of both media and political manipulation.

Alpin, however, uses sources he himself acknowledges as unreliable and infers too much from too little evidence. He writes that Mother Teresa insisted on collaborating with many of her biographers. I was involved with her for 17 years (although I was not the 'close friend' that Alpin claims) and I never knew her actively to involve herself in any book about her or her work. Had Mother Teresa spent all the time that Alpin suggests she did interfering in the 'vast literature' about her, she would have had none for the 'charity work' he commends.

He rightly identifies a lack of information about the former Agnes Bojaxhiu's ethnic background and early years and provides a helpful catalogue of biographical inaccuracies. The reasoning, though, is this: given Mother Teresa's personal involvement in the literature about her, she must have condoned the errors about her early life. Why? Apparently she was reluctant to be critical of Communism and of Albanian leader Enver Hoxha because of her productive friendship with Jyoti Basu, the Indian Communist leader, and because her brother Lazar, as a collaborator with the Second World War Italian Fascists, was potentially an embarrassment to the Vatican; finally it was because neither she nor her background were as 'ordinary' as she encouraged people to believe.

In 1919 the nine-year-old Agnes was sent to fetch a priest for her dying father, Nikollë. She found one on Skopje's station platform. He administered the last rites and was never seen by the family again. 'What did the priest say to the little stranger to comfort her at the train station? Did she ever receive counselling?' wonders Alpion, going on to say that we do not know the answers. Although he has previously stressed the limitations of Dominique Lapierre's film *In the Name of God's Poor*, as a biographical source, he then uses it to support his argument for the impact on his daughter of Nikollë's death; drawing on Marx and Freud, he deduces that Agnes' bond with 'Jesus the divine superstar' resulted from her need for a surrogate father, adding that religious attachment and celebrity worship serve similar psychological needs.

Little account is taken in this book of the religious life, its language, practices and commitment to forgiveness and truth, however subjective. 'Mother Teresa', we are informed, 'was essentially a spiritual human being, and the source of her spirituality came exclusively from the Catholic interpretation of the New Testament endorsed and championed by the Vatican.' Agnes chose Teresa as her religious name. Her emphasis that this was after Thérèse of Lisieux and not what Alpion calls the 'big Teresa' was not, apparently, because she wanted to do small things with great love but because she needed to dissociate herself from Teresa of Avila's experiences of 'mystical marriage' with Christ. 'It appears Agnes' sexual attraction to Father Jesus developed further towards the end of her adolescence' is his speculation.

Having called her 'proud', 'ambitious', with 'such a high opinion of her intellectual and spiritual ability', Alpion eventually acknowledges her lack of egoism, accepting she served 'her divine celebrity with absolute integrity', but discounts Teresa's belief that her personal life was unimportant, and that she was merely the instrument of God.

The reason that she gave for not condemning Hoxha's atheistic government in Albania – consideration for the safety of her family – is grudgingly acknowledged. Asked about persecution in her homeland, Mother Teresa, who rarely saw a newspaper, replied, 'I don't know what to say since I don't know what is happening there.' Alpion dismisses the possibility that this was in fact true. Any reader inclined to the view that Mother Teresa was 'obsessively devoted to a religious superstar' may find this book interesting, but, as Alpion correctly anticipated, it is not one in which I recognise the woman that I knew.

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