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

By Gëzim Alpion

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### **Famous by her own design**

**Mother Teresa knew what she was about, Lavinia Byrne learns Work in progress**

### **Reviewed Dr Lavinia Byrne**

GËZIM ALPION is Lecturer in Sociology and Media Studies at the University of Birmingham; so his take on the story of Mother Teresa is an outsider's. This engaging book raises as many questions as it answers. His intention is to explore whether or not Mother Teresa engaged with the media and manipulated it, so as to become both the author of, and chief player in, the way her story was told.

The famous Albanian nun's life corresponded with a turbulent period in the history of her own country and in that of her adopted country, India. She first set up her Missionaries of Charity, the order she founded in the late 1940s, just after the Partition. Yet her work for the poorest of the poor was pursued with apolitical determination.

Alpion finds this intriguing, especially since he spends much of the book proving that Mother Teresa's father, an Albanian patriot, was probably murdered for his activities when the young Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu was nine. Her brother first served in the army of the ill-fated King Zog, and then joined Mussolini's Fascist forces in Italy. But, if she came from a political family and heard political debate at home, Mother Teresa came to deal with it in her own way. Her strategy was to ignore it in the name of Christ, of the needy to whom she ministered, and the Roman Catholic Church to which she gave unswerving loyalty.

Alpion unpacks the full historical background in meticulous detail. His book is annotated with 24 pages of footnotes and a wide-ranging bibliography. The result is intriguing, if a little unsatisfactory. His thesis is original: Mother Teresa knew well what she was about.

She was not from a peasant family, as has frequently been alleged. She suffered because of the snobbishness of the sisters of Loreto in Calcutta when she first sought to go outside the enclosure and find out what was going on around her. Her success and subsequent 'fame' were of her own making, and she was far brighter than she made out.

She destroyed the diaries she had written while leaving the Loreto convent and setting up her own Order, as well as anything else that would have enabled the history of the Missionaries of Charity to be written and studied. Her reasons? Probably to do with protecting the Church's reputation in post-Partition India. 'By "secularising" missionary work, Mother Teresa presented Christianity as a faith that could still play a role and have a future in the new India.' That, in essence, is why the Vatican supported her to the hilt.

Alpion argues that while she 'hated the media *per se*...she never ceased using every medium of mass communication. In her own words: "the press make people aware of the poor and that is worth any sacrifice on my part."'

So there was sacrifice involved in her quest for fame, but was her integrity one of the casualties? That is what this book tries to explore — hence its telling subtitle. The author concludes: 'The Roman Catholic nun is a good example of how a rebel, an outsider and a revolutionary ends up joining the establishment while keeping all the time the mantle of the servant of the poor.'

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Dr Lavinia Byrne is a writer and broadcaster, and is a former nun.

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