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

By Gëzim Alpion

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### **Reviewed by Dr Margaret Nutting Ralph**

In the introduction to his book, *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?*, Gëzim Alpion states that his purpose in writing this book is neither to 'glorify nor condemn Mother Teresa. The main purpose of the book is to explore the nun's initiation into, attitude towards and relationship with celebrity culture, fame and the media' (p. xvii). In the course of pursuing this interest, Alpion gives us a thorough and well researched look into Mother Teresa's life, including her early years in Skopje, her time with the Loreto order, her painful departure to spearhead the founding of a new order, the Missionaries of Charity, and her rise to world-wide celebrity.

As I read *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?*, I was constantly reminded of a truth I learned while pursuing a Ph.D. in English Literature: 'Criticism is about the critic.' Alpion's statements and judgments about Mother Teresa are, of course, a reflection of Alpion's own interests and presumptions. Alpion is a Lecturer in Sociology and Media Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK. Based on his interests he addresses such questions as: How was Mother Teresa used by her biographers? How was she used by the Albanians? How was she used by the Vatican? In turn, how did Mother Teresa use each of these groups to achieve her own ends? Is Mother Teresa more saint or celebrity?

My reactions to Alpion's statements are, of course, a reflection of my own interests and presumptions. I am the Director of a Masters Degree Program for Roman Catholics at Lexington Theological Seminary. I found myself constantly resisting what I took to be Alpion's presumptions: Mother Teresa must be saint or celebrity, not both saint and celebrity. Mother Teresa's deep sense of call was due more to psychological than to spiritual realities. The fact that Mother Teresa was a savvy woman who succeeded in using the media might be seen as detracting from her saintliness. I found myself constantly asking, 'Why not both saint and celebrity?'

Perhaps in an attempt to be faithful to his goal of not glorifying or condemning Mother Teresa, Alpion appeared to me to have some difficulty dealing with Mother Teresa's claims about her spiritual experiences. Were these experiences due simply to Mother Teresa's psychology? Were her experiences real? That is, is there a God on the other side of such an experience, calling an individual by name to do God's work? My own conviction is that there is. Alpion seems to reserve judgment on such a question.

An example of Al pion's approach is seen in Chapter 5, entitled 'Jesus, the divine superstar.' As Al pion explains, 'This chapter highlights the impact her celebrity father had on Mother Teresa and her family. Of particular interest in this part of the book is the attempt to establish a connection between the death of Mother Teresa's father and her inclination to replace him with a heavenly father figure' (p. 157). Al pion explains his own approach as follows: 'As someone who stands between the rationalists and the spiritualists, in this part of the book I will attempt to demonstrate that the two approaches need not be completely antagonistic, and that the mystery of faith can be explained rationally just as there are things about faith that are perhaps beyond our perceptive abilities' (p. 159). I immediately find myself asking, 'How can a person who suspends judgment in regard to the objective reality of Mother Teresa's religious experiences address the question of her saintliness?'

Al pion seems to have a reader such as myself in my mind when he adds, 'It is not my intention to trivialize something that was of such vital importance to Mother Teresa, and that remains so to millions of Christians and followers of other faiths' (p. 159).

While Al pion reserves judgment on the objective reality of these experiences, he acknowledges that the experiences were absolutely crucial to understanding Mother Teresa's choices and motives. As he brings his chapter on 'Jesus the divine superstar' to a close Al pion states: 'Mother Teresa's attachment to Christ may have been indeed "bizarre" or "controversial", as some of her statements seem to indicate. As far as she was concerned, however, there was nothing bizarre or controversial in how she felt about Jesus. She was so immersed in him that she was prepared to face any challenge to serve

him fully. She had sacrificed herself to please no person, no institution, no government and no particular country' (p. 182).

Mother Teresa's call to give her life to God by serving the poor of Calcutta, and her constant 'Yes,' in response to that call, do not seem 'bizarre' or 'controversial' to me at all. Indeed, accepting the reality of Mother Teresa's call and her desire to model herself on Jesus Christ is the key to understanding the many 'mysteries' about Mother Teresa's reactions to the events in her life that Alphonso explores.

Several chapters of *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* read like a mystery book. As Alphonso writes about Mother Teresa's early years, about which she rarely spoke, he explores such questions as: Why was Mother Teresa so reticent about talking about her first eighteen years in Skopje? Was her father, an Albanian patriot, poisoned for political motives by the Serbs? Was her brother a collaborator with the Italian fascists?

As Alphonso writes about Mother Teresa's break from the Loreto order he ponders: Why would Mother Teresa destroy her diaries from this crucial period of her life? Did she do this to hide her own faults? Did she want to avoid embarrassing others? While examining Mother Teresa's extraordinary celebrity Alphonso asks: What role did Mother Teresa herself play in her celebrity?

As Alphonso explores these questions he remains true to his promise neither to glorify nor condemn Mother Teresa. For instance, his comment regarding her interest in the media is: 'Sister Teresa, obviously, did pay attention to the media even before the official inauguration of her order of the Missionaries of Charity in 1950, but not because she was publicity hungry. As she explains to some biographers, she used publicity "for the love of Jesus." ..."[t]he press makes people aware of the poor, and that is worth any sacrifice on my

part” (p.221)... ‘Mother Teresa viewed the media and anyone that took an interest in her work as useful tools that enabled her to accomplish better and to a larger scale her lifetime and unconditional devotion to Jesus’ (p. 234).

While Alpion never fully embraces the religious context to explain a phenomenon like Mother Teresa, I can’t but conclude that after all of his careful research and reasoned probing, Alpion was personally touched by this great woman. In his ‘Conclusion’ Alpion says, ‘I also hope that Mother Teresa, who could forgive everyone, has forgiven me for writing about those aspects of her life she obviously wanted to remain unpublicized when she was alive and perhaps forever. I have the distinct feeling, however, that she would not have bothered about this book even if it came out when she was alive. This would have been hardly surprising; after all, this self-made woman always thought and acted otherly. For someone obsessively devoted to a religious superstar like Jesus, she could have even seen this ‘controversial’ book as “something beautiful for God”’ (p. 235).

I doubt if any forgiveness is necessary. In *Mother Teresa: Saint of Celebrity?* Alpion does ask some controversial questions. However, his answers are fair and reasoned from his point of view. True, Alpion neither glorifies nor condemns Mother Teresa. Neither does he come to any conclusions that will dismay or offend a person like myself who thinks that Mother Teresa is both saint and celebrity.

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