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

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

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

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

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

American Communication Journal

A publication of the American Communication Association

Vol. 10, Issue 1, Spring 2008

http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol10/01_Spring/reviews/williams.php

Book Review

Reviewed by Marvin Williams

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Alpion's examination of Mother Teresa's celebrity is a case study of corporate identity management in today's global media environment. His weaving of primary texts into the setting of this character piece creates a comprehensive cross-cultural examination that has the potential to become a new archetypal work of this mercurial personality. The central topics addressed around Mother Teresa's celebrity, including the media pieces that help create and sustain it, are treated in a threefold stratum.

First, the issue of Nationalism around Mother Teresa's heritage is a point of major contestation. That she considers Calcutta home, while addressing her Albanian heritage, becomes a polemical issue for Alpion when placed in a chronological framework to the texts that have come to represent her life. Alpion see these disparities as a conflict between East versus West media perspectives. Subsequently, he redresses this argument using earlier texts about the nun.

Alpion approaches the Nationalism issue with two contrasting texts, Christopher Hitchens' "The Ghoul of Calcutta" as the foundation article that became the model for Mother Teresa's subsequent textual critics and the subject titled work of Lush Gjergji. These pieces placed in stark contrast, set the early battleground for subsequent discourse from what heritage (i.e. Albanian, Serb, Balkan, or Macedonian Slav) she should claim to where she would identify as her final home.

As Hitchens' exertions become rework-able ammunition for critics, heretofore afraid to speak out in any epistemological analyzation, Alpion also shows how the western expectation of detail by those Gjergji interviewed is on many levels unreasonable. This western treatment of Mother Teresa's texts carries over into the second environment. The second setting throughout the text is the self-manifestation that leads to the seemingly selective manner in which details of Mother Teresa's life is revealed. Her very measured, and fluid, release of information including how she spoke of home or family was such a point of contestation that it overshadowed what Mother Teresa identified as her own heritage. Though in this new century of expanded media, with multiple consumer constructed media outlets; it may not seem so strange that there are inconsistencies in any icons

story, in *Saint* it is the source of, and reasoning behind, this global image management that Alphonso addresses.

Mother Teresa's manipulation and control of the information released about her was as questionable as the timing that surrounded it. Alphonso's assertion that there seemed to be layers of politicized corporate distancing that accompanied those who interviewed or worked with Mother Teresa is supported by those who have written the few approved text on the nun.

Lastly, there is the iconoclastic position her image seems to hold. That Mother Teresa's position on any subject would be heard and considered across religions, faiths and cultures alike, gave her a heightened social value unmatched by the Pope or even the other seemingly neutral icons she shared the world stage with, including Princess Diana. It was as if she was not Catholic but some transcendent faith that allowed dissimilar ideologies to, at least on the surface, agree to consider a position outside their purview. The positional neutrality that Mother Teresa brought to the world's political scene, Alphonso holds as the lasting brilliance of her ability to manipulate the media machine around her.

Mother Theresa's celebrity, as other religious or faith based icons, as constituted is a selective mark for subjectivists and deconstructionist alike. One of the differences that marks these revered figures separate from their secular peers is the lack of knowledge about their private lives. That someone could be so celebrated, and have so much of their private life unknown, is extremely odd in today's time where extreme celebrity serves as such a valuable commodity. Compounded with the

pervasiveness of those that profit from the sell of celebrity texts (i.e. stories, pictures, books, magazines, etc..) as well as the instantaneous awareness, serving as information or news, of the celebrated, the very idea of private has become selective.

Though Alpion's provocative title may lead one to think there is some other deceptive construct behind the image of Mother Teresa, he never devalues her work and cleverly manages to keep the woman and the image separate.