
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

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It takes one to know one

By Primrose Peacock

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In his preface, Professor David Marsh states that prior to this work 519 books about Mother Teresa have been produced and 40 books of her speeches/thoughts. He queries as to whether there is room for another?

By observing the cover of this book it was obvious to me that the answer to Professor Marsh was likely to be 'Yes'. Why? Mother Teresa was an Albanian. So is the author, although he left his homeland some years ago. That should not however detract from an in built advantage in his favour. Not only is he fluent in the Albanian language, has the ability to communicate directly with his countrymen but has an understanding (as had Mother Teresa) of Albanian thought processes albeit hard to define.

This work is neither hagiography nor criticism but an academic study with an emphasis on the first half of the subject's life. It is set out as a series of linked

academic papers divided into sections preceded by an introduction. In such a work there is perhaps bound to be some repetition for the nature of such is 'To say what one is going to say, say it, and then say what one has said'.

Dr Alpion is to be congratulated on both the depth of his research spread over several years, and the balanced way he sets out his facts. To use an Albanian phrase 'He takes opinions'. Other writers are quoted frequently to either support or disprove statements. Their material is analysed and dissected meticulously. Their errors are exposed. Poor old Malcolm Muggeridge gets a rough ride: 'Muggeridge became one of the first biographers to install the neon lighting above the nun's head' (!) (p. 125). Anne Sebba, although not a perfect biographer, is handled more gently and quoted frequently. Ample background information is included for non Albanologists.

Nothing of consequence in pursuit of examining the facts and opinions the author presents to his readers is omitted. Only one or two fairly minor non-typographical errors are exposed. For example when dealing with the death of Mother Teresa's father Nikollë Bojaxhiu, Alpion confuses a 'vicar' with a priest. There is a minor query as to whether Mother Teresa took or sent flowers to the grave of Enver Hoxha in 1989. Alpion is shrewd enough to understand that during the Communist regime in Albania certain matters were somewhat opaque. When he cannot find an answer to some part of his investigation he says so.

The main thrust of this carefully argued work is two fold. Firstly, it concentrates on the loss of her father when a child becoming the mainspring driving the rest of Mother Teresa's life with 'Jesus' as a parental and marital substitute. Secondly, it shows with considerable clarity how Mother Teresa used and was used by politicians, governments, the church, her admirers and a few detractors to achieve her objectives in what I consider was the result of her Albanian psyche. It is a clever book, providing a great deal of original and new thought on the subject but it is not a book to skim through in a couple of hours.

In his conclusion the author states his reasons for writing the book and concludes by saying:

I also intended to introduce readers not exclusively to the missionary called Mother Teresa or to the woman originally named Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu. I wanted to unveil the extent to which the nun and the woman were both at harmony and at odds with each other (p. 232).

I personally feel he has largely succeeded.

**Friends of Albania* is an information network and service in English for anyone interested in Albania.

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