
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

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Mother Teresa, not Diana, first saint of the celebrity age

Reviewed by Rashmee Roshan Lall

Foreign Editor, *Times of India* London Correspondent

LONDON: Mother Teresa, not Princess Diana, was the first saint of the celebrity age, according to a new book on the diminutive nun.

In an attempt to re-define the world's idea of the 20th-century icon, *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?*, sociologist Dr Gëzim Alpion says Mother Teresa's image was a creature she allowed to come to being by using media attention to further her cause.

Alpion, who shares the nun's Albanian origins, lays bare the astonishing decision she made to invite the world's media into her life, in stark contrast to other missionaries and people in public life.

Pointing out that 'any internet search engine confirms the assertion (she) was a media celebrity', the book lists 4,470,000 Google hits from a search for Mother Teresa. In contrast, Diana gets 4,250,000 Google hits, Hitler 4,090,000, David Beckham 5,150,000 and God gets 168,000,000.

The book, just published by Routledge in India, says that much of the world's fascination with the tiny nun was part of her extraordinary use of media attention, so much so that she successfully got the Vatican to recognise her mission as a new order in the shortest time ever.

Alpion, a lecturer at Birmingham university, says that the Missionaries of Charity have always been the only Catholic order to be independent of Vatican funding, right from the start and Mother's success in attracting private donations was at least partly because she masterminded her image at the hands of the media, the Indian government and, much later, the Vatican.

Offering a canny view into the nun's skills with the press, Alpion adds hitherto little-known insight into Mother Teresa's remarkable embrace of Indian garb and Indian citizenship, both of which helped her to establish her Catholic order in Indian minds as completely indigenous. She was able to woo novices directly from India at a rate unknown for any other Catholic order, the book says, adding that this was a recipe for success unsought by any missionary in India.

The book, originally published in London is expected to renew the debate over Mother Teresa's work and motivation in half-a-century of caring for the destitute and dispossessed in India.