
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

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T.S. Eliot, Mother Teresa, and the Children of Darkness

By The Rev Richard John Neuhaus

Whatever the merits or demerits of Craig Raine's new biography, *T.S. Eliot*, and Terry Eagleton thinks the latter far outweigh the former, it does raise once again the question of Eliot's alleged misogyny and anti-Semitism. Eagleton thinks that question is settled, and not in Eliot's favor. I'm not so sure, although I agree with Eagleton that Raine's effort to exculpate Eliot on all scores is quite unnecessary. Eliot's stature as one of the truly great poets of the modern era is beyond reasonable dispute. And Eagleton is surely right that Eliot would have frowned a supercilious frown at Raine's attempts to reveal the 'meaning' of his poems. Eagleton writes:

Raine, then, is certain that he has the 'meaning' of *The Waste Land* under his belt. He does not understand that Eliot's poetry is not a question of meaning in the first place. The meaning of a poem for Eliot was a fairly trifling matter. It was, he once remarked, like the piece of meat which the burglar throws to the guard dog to keep him occupied. In true symbolist fashion, Eliot was interested in what a poem did, not in what it said – in the resonance of the signifier, the echoes of its archetypes, the ghostly associations haunting its grains and textures, the stealthy, subliminal workings of its unconscious. Meaning was for the birds, or perhaps for the petit bourgeoisie. Eliot was a primitivist as well as a sophisticate, a writer who made guerrilla raids on the collective unconscious. For all his intellectualism, he was averse to rationality. Meaning in his poetry is like the mysterious figure who walks beside you in *The Waste Land*, vanishing when you look at it straight. When Raine enquires of a couple of lines in one of Eliot's poems whether we are supposed to be in a brothel, the only answer which would be true to Eliot's own aesthetic is that we are in a poem.

How fiercely the children of darkness rage against the light of holiness. Christopher Hitchens has additional company in the effort to trash the icon who is Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The British edition of *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* by Gëzim Alpion is reviewed by Stuart Derbyshire, a psychologist at the University of Birmingham.

The subtitle assumes that she is one or the other, saint or celebrity. Another way of saying, as Alpion says repeatedly, that she protected her privacy and carefully polished her 'image' is to say that she subordinated person to her message and work. In short, she did exactly what celebrities do not do. A great deal is now known about the price of that disciplined subordination. See, for instance, Carol Zaleski's 'Mother Teresa's Dark Night of the Soul', in the May 2003 issue of *First Things*. But, no matter what she did or didn't do, the debunkers of sanctity will have it their way. For instance, Derbyshire writes that her apparent devotion was a sublimation of her sorrow over the death of her father when she

was a child. 'Her devotion to Jesus was a personal attempt to deal with grief, and her dedication to the poor of Calcutta part of her effort towards self-salvation. Similar to many celebrity figures, it was all about me, me, me. This puts her work into a whole new and rather less flattering light.'

My, my, my. One had not noticed that so many celebrity figures devote their lives to serving the poorest of the poor in loving response to God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. That, by the grace of God, grief may have been the instrument by which Mother Teresa sought refuge in Christ is apparently beyond the psychological imagination of Professor Derbyshire. Which, of course, is understandable if one assumes that there is no Christ in whom to find refuge.

The vulgarity of the debunking projects of such as Alphonso, Derbyshire, and Hitchens is worthy of note. Driving their projects, however, is a more noteworthy and hardly concealed desperation to discredit the human capacity for moral and spiritual greatness by which our own inadequate lives are judged. 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.' The light continues to shine in the lives of the saints, and the darkness will never, never, ever overcome it. Although it will surely keep on trying.

Then there is this from 'The Public Square' in the forthcoming issue of *First Things*:

Many years ago, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. It was an always necessary caution against the moral arrogance of assuming that all the right and all the truth is on our side of whatever conflict in which we are engaged. A reader came across a recent statement by a Notre Dame law professor who reproached pro-lifers for claiming that they represent the forces of light against the pro-abortion forces of darkness. So our reader did a little research and discovered this quote: 'Three years ago, in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* 492 U.S. 490 (1989), four Members of this Court appeared poised to 'cas[t] into *darkness* the hopes and visions of every woman in this country' who had come to believe that the Constitution guaranteed her the right to

reproductive choice. *Id.*, at 557 (Blackmun, J., dissenting). All that remained between the promise of *Roe* and the darkness of the plurality was a single, *flickering flame*. Decisions since *Webster* gave little reason to hope that this *flame* would cast much *light*. See, e.g., *Ohio v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health*, 497 U.S. 502, 524 (1990) (Blackmun, J., dissenting). But now, just when so many expected the *darkness* to fall, the *flame* has grown *bright*. . . . I fear [however] for the *darkness* as four Justices anxiously await the single vote necessary to extinguish the *light*.' [Emphasis added.]

That is heavy-duty language indeed. You may well ask who was the author of Manichean mindset who wrote the above. It was, of course, Justice Harry Blackmun, author of the *Roe v. Wade* majority decision, writing (and quoting himself) in the 1992 case of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. That having been duly noted, I have little doubt that the more than forty million children in this country who were not permitted to see the light would have little doubt, if they had a say in the matter, about who are the children of light in the battle over abortion.