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

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

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

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

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

MercatorNet

Melbourne, Australia

Monday, 26 February 2007

http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/trashing_the_icon_of_altruism/

Trashing the icon of altruism

A new book puts the boot into Mother Teresa of Calcutta and treats her as a sanctimonious celebrity.

By Sheila Liaugminas

Even in a culture suspicious of sanctity it is jarring to hear someone question the ulterior motives of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The very thought is just...odd. But that's the basis and the bulk of a new book about her, *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?*, by an Albanian academic living in England. And it begs the question, is there a necessary tension?

Seems it is an either/or proposition for some cultural cynics. Stuart Derbyshire builds a bandwagon for them all in his review of Alpion's book on *Spiked* provocatively titled 'Mother Teresa and the "me, me, me" culture'. The

two of them taken together make an interesting study in the expression of a guilty conscience.

Derbyshire refers to Mother Teresa as 'arguably the most famous religious icon of the late twentieth century', and then tips the hat to Alphonso's book for being 'unique' in locating her appeal 'within today's broader celebrity culture', which itself has become a religion. 'Mother Teresa was the ultimate religious celebrity of the modern era.'

What's the point? What does Mother Teresa's fame and popularity have to do with her, personally? That disconnect pervades the skewed reasoning of both book and review. 'Unlike the many saints recognised by the Catholic Church, Mother Teresa's apparent sanctity took root and flourished during her lifetime,' writes Derbyshire, of Alphonso's biography.

Not true. A great many saints were recognised, even revered, in their own time. Augustine was hugely popular in North Africa. St Benedict could not keep followers away, and people flocked to St John Vianney constantly to hear him preach. Padre Pio's worldwide following was even more radical and intense, during his lifetime.

And that's the point of departure for these modern day critics of modern day saints. Extreme holiness is radical, and that's about the only form of extremism not tolerated by modern man. Alphonso claimed Mother Teresa's beatification within six years of her death was due as much to her stardom as her sanctity. But that betrays an ignorance of the Catholic Church's respect for the *sensus fidelium* as a good indicator that a person is recognized for holiness by contemporaries, as happened with John Paul II.

In fact, it's harder than being recognised posthumously. From her earliest days, Indian society saw Mother Teresa as an other-worldly servant of diseased, poverty-ravaged street and gutter dwellers. And to correct the Alphonso/Derbyshire assessment, Mother Teresa was not so much the highlight of a 'new, tolerant and welcoming India' as she was the trailblazer who ushered in a new radical charity. Hers was not only tolerance, but love for the poor. And her 'usefulness to political campaigns', to which Alphonso and Derbyshire cynically refer, followed from *that*.

The world became aware of this little servant nun in the back streets of Calcutta through famed British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, and these writers question his motives, too. 'Muggeridge was originally sceptical towards Mother Teresa, yet when he returned from filming he was zealous in his promotion of her...' That's a turning point most serious writers would investigate. What changed this veteran professional's mind? They think Muggeridge was perhaps 'under her spell'. And worse, 'he was, at least partly, playing the role he'd been handed by Mother Teresa herself... to maintain her saintly image', so they both would be famous.

This is pure, tendentious speculation.

Blurring the sacred into the profane seems like a consequence of the celebrity culture that expects full access to the famous. 'Like other celebrities, Mother Teresa was remarkably keen to keep her private life private...' But she was not like other celebrities. She was a professed religious nun, and her private life was the interior life of the spirit.

That desire for detachment is not so much foreign to the writers as it is repulsive. They are acutely uncomfortable with humility.

A holy person with radical detachment from the world pricks our conscience, especially as materialism and consumerism dominate more cultures. Yet, the world embraces holy radicals and propels them to fame for doing what we all should be doing but cannot... and then questions their motives, to reconcile themselves. George Orwell wrestled with his own examination of conscience – and an earlier icon – in his essay 'Reflections on Gandhi':

In this yogi-ridden age, it is too readily assumed that 'non-attachment' is not only better than a full acceptance of earthly life, but that the ordinary man only rejects it because it is too difficult: in other words, that the average human being is a failed saint. It is doubtful whether this is true. Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings.

If one could follow it to its psychological roots, one would, I believe, find that the main motive for 'non-attachment' is a desire to escape from the pain of living, and above all from love, which, sexual or non-sexual, is hard work. But it is not necessary here to argue whether the other-worldly or the humanistic ideal is 'higher'. The point is that they are incompatible.

They are perfectly compatible in the life of Mother Teresa, whose life of hard work became other-worldly in its love for the poor humanity she served.

Alpion and Derbyshire conclude that since her early life was shattered by the death of her father, she retreated into the 'religious certainty' of Christ as a father-figure 'who would never abandon her'. This is freewheeling psychoanalysis. '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.'

How about CNN's Anderson Cooper, who dealt with the grief of losing two family members by throwing himself into gritty, destitute and violence-ridden locations worldwide to cover pain and suffering and thus, come to terms with his own? He is celebrated for that.

Altruism for its own sake is practically inconceivable to modern man. It is conveniently suspect in a religious icon who is given the podium at the United Nations, the platform in front of several American presidents and the world stage after winning the Nobel Peace Prize and embraces the opportunity to decry abortion and defend the sanctity and dignity of all human life.

These critics wonder 'what made her tick', as if it were not self-evident. Orwell wondered the same about Gandhi:

Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent, but the tests that have to be applied to them are not, of course, the same in all cases. In Gandhi's case the questions one feels inclined to ask are: to what extent was Gandhi moved by vanity – by the consciousness of himself as a humble, naked old man, sitting on a praying mat and shaking empires by sheer spiritual power – and to what extent did he compromise

his own principles by entering politics, which of their nature are inseparable from coercion and fraud? To give a definite answer one would have to study Gandhi's acts and writings in immense detail, for his whole life was a sort of pilgrimage in which every act was significant.

No amount of detail is necessary for a life of utter simplicity. Every leper she picked off the street was more significant than even world leaders could see. One of them asked how she could ever measure success in combating poverty and disease in the world by picking up one dying person at a time on the streets of India. Her response was that God didn't ask us to be successful, only faithful.

She also said this: 'We, the unwilling, led by the unknowing, are doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much, for so long, with so little, we are now qualified to do anything with nothing.'

However Mother Teresa became famous, it's what she did with the fame that matters. Now *that* would make a great book.

Sheila Liaugminas is an Emmy Award winning journalist who reported for *Time* magazine for more than 20 years. Until recently, she hosted the popular national radio shows *The Right Questions and Issues* and *Answers on Relevant Radio*. She blogs at InforumBlog.com.