
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

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Albanians, both Christian and Muslim, have much to teach the rest of us

Reviewed by Stephen Schwartz

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Mother Teresa was born in the Balkans in 1910, died in India in 1997, and was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2003. She was a unique, global figure in recent religious life, and, as such, defines for many people the mission of the Catholic church. She never produced a work of theological reasoning, or spent much time as a public preacher of her faith. Yet as we approach the tenth anniversary of her death, she is still one of the world's best-known and most admired modern Catholic personalities, for her humility and dedication. Although awarded the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize, she continued her activity as a nun, entirely devoted

until her passing to the order she personally founded, the Missionaries of Charity (known in her native Albanian, by the way, as the Missionaries of Love).

There are many volumes about Mother Teresa, by individuals as prominent in their time as Malcolm Muggeridge, author of *Something Beautiful for God*, which is still in print, and as profound in their enthusiasm as Eileen Egan, poet and social activist, who wrote several books about her. Surprisingly, however, Gëzim Alpion has produced the first account of Mother Teresa to focus mainly on the details of her early and middle life, rather than spiritual inspiration and her later fame. He is an Albanian sociologist, a professor at the University of Birmingham in England, and a critic of the phenomenon of celebrity – certainly a modish topic in academia today. But in its depth, breadth, and seriousness, this volume may stand for some time to come as the single most important biography of Mother Teresa in English.

Mother Teresa was of ethnic Albanian origin, born Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu in the Macedonian city of Skopje in 1910. Perhaps because she became renowned in India, rather than the Balkans, and because Albanians are an isolated nation of which the rest of the world knows little, her childhood has been obscured. Her background as an Albanian Catholic was distinguished by intense ethnic pride and dedication to the church. When she was born, her family were subjects of the Ottoman empire, and the creation of an independent Albania was still two years distant, finally coming about in 1912. While they account for no more than 12 to 15 percent of all Albanians, who are Muslim in their majority, the Albanian Catholics have always been leaders of their nation in education, literature, and politics. Albanians in general represent a valuable example of a people among whom religious differences have remained insignificant.

Agnes Bojaxhiu was, as Professor Alpion shows, a mystical believer by nature. In her childhood and adult years, she experienced frequent divine and saintly encounters, with such personalities as Saint Peter (the latter instance during a fever and accompanying delirium.) Her first call from God to serve the poor came in Skopje in 1922, before she was twelve. At 18, she departed the Balkans for Ireland, where she began training with the Sisters of Loreto. Three

years later, she was in Calcutta, took vows as a nun and began 17 years' service as a teacher in a Catholic girls' school.

In 1946, she underwent her subsequent call from God, commanding her to leave the convent school – which she did in 1948 – and to care for the masses of poor, sick, abandoned, and despised in the byways of the great Indian city. She referred to this divine message as 'the call within the call'. She was granted permission to form her Missionaries in 1950, and fulfilled her work without great publicity, until the British Broadcasting Corporation and Muggeridge came to her in 1969. The rest is commonly known. The '60s, with the illusory claim for radical redemption of society's victims, needed her example of selfless, non-political compassion. She eventually traveled the world many times to support her order, which established new hospices, orphanages, and similar institutions.

But her prestige would also make her family's ethnic identity a matter of competing claims. The Balkan sensibility has predictably interfered with the biographical works on Mother Teresa by writers unfamiliar with the region. Chroniclers offer differing quotes, some of which indicate that she preferred to speak a Slavic idiom, and Slav Macedonians treat her as one of their own. Her fellow-Albanians point to writings and statements demonstrating that she kept a command of her birth language even after years in India.

As described by Professor Alpion – in specific circumstances missing from most of the literature about her – her vision of helping the poor and the drive to establish her Missionaries emerged from surroundings replete with social deprivation and tumult. Certainly, for her to be Albanian in the early 20th century fostered a heightened awareness of conflict between national groups; bloody attacks on her people did not begin with the Kosovo war of 1998-99, but had occurred for hundreds of years. The experience that led her to form the Missionaries, according to the author, was the horrifying 'Day of the Great Killing', on August 16, 1946, when violence exploded in Calcutta between Muslims and Hindus. The arc of her life would be marked by the similar cruelties inflicted, thanks to intolerance and fear, in her native Balkan land and in the Indian subcontinent.

Professor Alpion, as a properly modern scholar, tends to a psychiatric view of Mother's sublime spiritual experiences, pointing to illness in childhood as well as later in life as putative sources of such episodes. He might have been served by a closer examination of the literature of sacred ecstasy; he repeats the common assumption that in all religions, 'mental anguish and poor health frequently seemed to have paved the way for "revelations"'. Nevertheless, he goes on to quote Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which the apostle recognizes and distinguishes between the varieties of spiritual gifts with which an individual may be endowed, from wisdom through healing to inspired speech (tongues).

Still, the life of little Agnes Bojaxhiu was unquestionably harsh, physically and psychologically. She was frequently sick, including with the malaria that was then endemic in the southern Balkans, and suffered from a club foot. Her own mother was constantly worried that her daughter would not survive. Like other bed-ridden and sheltered children, Agnes Bojaxhiu was early attracted to literature, both secular and religious. She wrote poems and expressed the desire to become an author.

Fortunately, Professor Alpion, in his search for a fuller portrait of Mother Teresa, turned to a person who was among those closest to her and wrote the most authoritatively about her. That is Dom Lush Gjergji, a remarkable priest, teacher, and author from Kosovo, who met with her some 50 times. Indeed, it is one of the many virtues of this book that it introduces to the non-Albanian reader the research – although still dismayingly limited – of Lush Gjergji, whom I am proud to call my friend.

Lush Gjergji has traveled through the Albanian-speaking lands collecting interviews and reminiscences from those who knew Agnes Bojaxhiu as a child. As Professor Alpion indicates, 'Gjergji was able to shed some light for the first time on the nun's health, dreams, ambitions, frustrations, and talents as a little girl and as a young woman.' A diary kept in his youth by a male friend, Lorenc Antoni, a composer from Kosovo, and read by Gjergji, included many comments on Agnes, her love of reading, and her excitement about writing. She communicated to Antoni her decision to become a nun, which led to her

departure from Macedonia for Ireland. Gjergji also interviewed Mother Teresa's brother Lazar, who lived in Italy.

Lush Gjergji describes the early environment of Agnes Bojaxhiu as one filled with a spirit of Albanian patriotism. The city in which she was born, Skopje, had long been a cosmopolitan meeting place for several communities. In addition to Albanians – Catholics, Orthodox, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Sufis – as well as Macedonian Orthodox Christians and Slav Muslims, it included Turks, Serbs, Vlachs (a small, pastoral ethnic group speaking a Latinic language related to Romanian), Greeks, Roma or Gypsies, Catholic Slavs, and Sephardic Jews (the latter group were destined to be wiped out in the Nazi Holocaust). Agnes Bojaxhiu had non-Albanian friends and, as was later demonstrated by her, learned to speak Serbian.

Agnes' father, Nikollë Bojaxhiu, was a highly charismatic figure; Professor Alpion observes, in a comment that could apply to many public personalities, that 'the global celebrity was the daughter of a local celebrity'. Her father was a leading businessman, investing in construction and a food company; he was then the only Catholic member of the Skopje city council, an artist, a traveler, and, in the memory of his neighbors, a model spouse and parent. He built Skopje 's first theatre, and helped pay for the construction of a railroad into Kosovo. He was also extremely generous in his financial support for the church and for leading Albanian Catholic intellectuals.

Nikollë Bojaxhiu was 'good-looking, brash, eloquent, a daredevil, and a steadfast friend,' Professor Alpion writes. 'You had status in Skopje if you were a friend or were seen in the company of Nikollë Bojaxhiu... Mother Teresa... would always keep in mind what he told [her and her brother] repeatedly when they were small: "Never forget whose children you are!"' Yet this ideal paterfamilias died suddenly in 1919, at 45, when his daughter was still a child and three years before she experienced her first call to aid the poor. His death was felt throughout the city and his funeral, with the different clergy of the town in attendance, was long-remembered.

Her path from the tormented Balkans to the brutalized Indian subcontinent may have assured that Mother Teresa would be especially sensitive to human

suffering. But if one is compelled to choose a psychological rather than a spiritual explanation for the turn of Agnes Bojaxhiu to her commitment as a nun, and her great achievements for faith, it is doubtless equally easy to see a transmutation of her earthly father's advice. She learned, and never forgot, that she was a child of God. And her simple personality seems to have reflected this throughout her life; she remained a wondering, curious and uncomplicated person in her quest to attain and fulfill a divine purpose.

Professor Alpion's encyclopedic narrative addresses many more issues about Mother Teresa, including certain reproaches and issues of her exploitation by others. But a great value of this book is that he has provided us with the fullest portrait yet of her native culture and her maturation, which is obviously necessary in fully understanding her. I have observed and admired Mother Teresa and her Missionaries for many years, but in reading this volume I was reminded, for the first time, of a Balkan archetype: that of the spiritual Albanian woman – regardless of religion. As Professor Alpion demonstrates, the Albanians, both Christian and Muslim, have much to teach the rest of us.

*(This volume, which at the time of review was available only in the U.S. as a hardback for more than \$100, is worth purchasing online as a British paperback.)

*Erratum: *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* is available not only in hardback in the USA. There is also a paperback edition available for \$26.95 from Routledge New York.