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## ***Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?***

By Gëzim Alpion

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## ***It-Torċa***

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## **Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?**

### **By Victor Vella**

For many of us Mother Teresa is a saint. Certainly, it was no surprise that she was beatified. Still not many know about her childhood, her family, her father, her brother and the experiences she went through before she became famous. Dr Gëzim Alpion, of the Department of Sociology at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, sheds new light on this historic person in his book *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* which took him several years to complete.

*It-Torċa* spoke with Dr Gëzim Alpion, an Albanian like Mother Teresa, on his new book and arguments that are not free of controversy. The book mentions that Mother Teresa's father Nikollë Bojaxhiu died at the age of 45 in mysterious

circumstances. He was a patriot and fought for Albania's independence. This is why he was poisoned.

At that time Mother Teresa, originally named Agnes, was 9 years old. Agnes fought with all her might to come to terms with this loss. Dr Alpion argues that the loss gradually turned Agnes into Mother Teresa. Agnes apparently could not accept the loss of her father. According to Dr Alpion, this is the reason why she turned to Jesus who she believed would never abandon her. This explains why she remained a profoundly spiritual person to the end of her life.

*It-Torça* asked Dr Alpion if he thinks that Mother Teresa was aware that, what she called 'the call from God', was in fact the effect of the tragic death of her father when she was a child. To which the Albanian sociologist replied: 'I have no doubt that Mother Teresa genuinely believed that she received the two calls from God, one in 1922, at the age of 12, to become a nun, and the other, also known as a 'call within a call', in 1946, at the age of 36, to leave the Loreto order. Mother Teresa does not seem to have been aware of how much her childhood tragedies affected her; if she was, then she was successful in keeping them secret, in which case she must have suffered enormously not being able to talk about them even to the people she trusted most. Of course, her strong faith helped her to cope. In her situation, people without faith would turn mad.'

Another argument by the author is that to protect her public image Mother Teresa always kept information about her childhood and any controversial aspect about her life away from public scrutiny. According to Alpion: 'Mother Teresa guarded very carefully several things about her early years. The poisoning of her father Nikollë Bojaxhiu by the Serbs when she was nine years old, was only one of such secrets. Her father was an ardent Albanian patriot. Mother Teresa kept this political assassination secret as she did not want the Albanians to use her as a national heroine. She did not believe in "patriotism" and "nationalism", as these terms are used by most people. She also did not want the Serbs to accuse her of being a "destabilising" force in the Balkans. More importantly, she did not want to cause yet another strife between the Vatican and the Orthodox Church. Mother Teresa was also keen to keep quiet about her brother's dealings with the fascists. Lazar Bojaxhiu received military training in Italy before WWII broke out; he left

for Italy immediately after the fascist army occupied Albania in 1939. In Italy he enlisted at once in Mussolini's army. Mother Teresa obviously did not want to cause an embarrassment to the Vatican, especially in view of the controversial and much publicised relationship between the Holy See and Hitler and Mussolini.'

Regarding Mother Teresa's decision to destroy the diary and letters she exchanged with several priests and the Archbishop of Calcutta in the late 1940 Dr Alpion said: 'One could argue that Mother Teresa did not want the world to know how dreadfully she was treated at Loreto once she announced that she wanted to leave the order. I must emphasise, however, that Mother Teresa thought very highly of Loreto even after she left them and she did not want to put down the people and the institution that had allegedly made her a "laughing stalk" from September 1946 to 16 August 1948. The fact that Mother Teresa was Albanian could have contributed to the kind of treatment she received at Loreto by the Irish nuns. Had these documents survived, we would have had a better picture of the efforts made by many priests and Indian citizens (Christians and followers of other religions) to help Mother Teresa at the beginning of her work as a lonely nun in the slums of Calcutta. Could it be that Mother Teresa did not want anyone apart from herself to take credit for the Missionaries of Charity she officially set up in 1950? Perhaps, not. On the other hand, Mother Teresa was only human after all'.

### **Media relations**

We reminded Dr Alpion that Mother Teresa always emphasised the significance of loving other people and that she always wanted to help the poor. We also asked him if he did not see this as the reason why she did not want to make public details about her personal life. Dr Alpion's response to this was: 'Maybe, but in my view this was not the only reason'. Dr Alpion argues that Mother Teresa used the media. We asked him how can someone in today's world manipulate the media without money. The nun did not have money; all she could offer was love for the poor. We asked Dr Alpion if his argument about her ability to 'manipulate' the media was rather exaggerated. He replied: 'The word 'manipulation' is unnecessarily overloaded with negative connotations. Mother Teresa and the

media both used and manipulated each other; it was a give-and-take relationship where both parties ended up as winners. Mother Teresa needed the media to serve Jesus better and at a scale she had not imagined when she decided to break up with Loreto. Those who owned the media outlets that took a keen interest in Mother Teresa's work and figure had their own political, religious, nationalistic and economic reasons in turning her into an international media icon.'

Dr Alpion also argues that Mother Teresa was used by the media in the USA as early as the 1950s. *It-Torça* asked him why the Americans took such an early interest in her. Dr Alpion said: 'The American media spotted the Mother Teresa phenomenon before the European media. There are many reasons why the Americans "discovered" and "publicised" the Albanian missionary before the Europeans. When I say "American media" I have in mind mainly the "American Catholic Media". In the twentieth century, America emerged as the world's missionary nation and it was only natural that the news about a lonely unclioistered Catholic nun in Calcutta would soon attract the attention of media outlets in the USA interested in missionary work in a country like India. After she was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1979, Mother Teresa became close to several American presidents and the institutional endorsement she often received from some White House residents was not simply religiously motivated although, as the case with Reagan shows, religion apparently was often a major factor'.

### **Political initiatives**

Mother Teresa's contacts with politicians raised the question whether she was wrong to give her support to Reagan in his fight against abortion, and whether she was right to put flowers on the grave of the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha. This is what Dr Alpion had to say about these two issues: 'With regards to Reagan, Mother Teresa's anti-abortion stance was never her original stance. Abortion became an issue for Mother Teresa only when she was advised to make it her issue. This is seen especially in the sudden condemnation of abortion when she received the Nobel Prize in Oslo in 1979. Was this one of the prices she had to pay for securing the support of people in high places? Perhaps. Again, Mother

Teresa did not mind supporting any cause as long as this helped her serve Jesus more and better. Mother Teresa's intervention when the Bhopal disaster happened is one of the cases when the nun did not mind being involved in sensitive political issues. What the people that suffered from the tragedy wanted to hear most at that time was not talk about forgiveness rather than about compensation for their ruined lives. I believe that Mother Teresa was right to send flowers to the grave of a totalitarian leader like Enver Hoxha at a time when Albania was on the verge of a national disaster. I am not sure Mother Teresa had a choice, though. The green light for Mother Teresa's 1989 visit to Albania was given by Mrs Nexhmije Hoxha, the widow of Enver Hoxha, who could have well insisted that if she was to approve of Mother Teresa's visit, the nun had to honour in public her dead husband. Being a shrewd and practical woman, Mother Teresa agreed to honour a leader who had allegedly refused to allow her mother and sister to leave Albania or allow Mother Teresa visit them before they died in the early 1970s. I personally believe that Mother Teresa's decision to send flowers to Hoxha's grave was a shrewd and well-meaning decision but Mother Teresa's intention to visit Albania at that particular time was orchestrated by the Vatican that decided to use her to intervene in Albania when they believed the moment was right. Before 1989, Mother Teresa had always detached herself from the problems of the Albanian people, whether they lived under a dictator like Hoxha or whether they were treated like second-class citizen, as the case was with the other half of the Albanian nation living in former Yugoslavia'.

Up to now, we have a lot of Mother Teresas. *It-Torça* asked Dr Alpion if he could define who the real Mother Teresa is. Dr Alpion replied: 'My intention in my book is to show that all the Mother Teresas we have been presented with over the last forty years since the first book on her appeared in 1969 are parts of Mother Teresa. She was a complex figure. I do not pretend to have given the "real" Mother Teresa, a mistake often made by her admirers and critics. What I have tried to explain is that to understand Mother Teresa, one has to study thoroughly her early years in Skopje (1910-1928) and the years she spent as a cloistered nun in Calcutta from 1929-1948. It is in these years that one would find the traumas and frustrations that gave rise to the media and charity icon called

Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa was a history-maker and like all history-makers she had an extraordinary life'.

## **Mother Teresa – Qaddisa jew ċelebrità/fittxet il-fama?**

**Nintervistaw lil Dr Gëzim Alpion, awtur tal-ktieb *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity? (Mother Teresa: Qaddisa jew Ċelebrità?)***

### **minn Victor Vella**

Ghal hafna minna meta tisma' l-kliem Mother Teresa, mohhok imur f'xi hadd qaddis. Niftakru f'dik il-persuna li sa ftit tas-snin ilu meta konna nisimghu b'dak li ghamlet u li kienet ghadha qieghda taghmel minkejja l-età taghha, hafna kienu jghidu li kienet qaddisa miexja fl-art.

Zgur li ghal hafna ma kinitx sorpriza li saret beata. Imma hafna minna, nafu kemm nafu dwarha u x'ghamlet, ftit li xejn nafu fuq il-hajja fi tfulitha, min kienet il-familja taghha, min kien missierha u min kien huha, minn x'hiex ghaddiet u kif sehew certi grajjiet. Dr Gëzim Alpion, mill-Fakultà tas-Socjologija fl-Universita ta' Birmingham, f'ricerka li haditlu snin, jitfa' dawl gdid fuq din il-persuna li ghamlet l-istorja.

Ir-ricerka pubblikata fil-ktieb *Mother Teresa? Qaddisa jew Celebrita?* Dr Gëzim Alpion jistharreg fuq dan.

*It-Torċa*, intervistat lil Dr Gëzim Alpion, Albaniz bhal Mother Teresa fuq dan il-ktieb tieghu, u fuq l-argumenti godda li jgib, argumenti li ma naqsux li jqajmu ukoll kontroversji.

Il-ktieb isemmi kif missierha miet ta' 45 sena f'cirkostanzi misterjuzi. Kien patrijott ta' pajjizu u kien qed jiggieled ghall-indipendenza ta' l-Albanija. Miet ivvalenat. Dak iz-zmien Mother Teresa, li isimha kien Agnes kellha 9 snin. Iggieldet kemm setghet biex tikkumbatti din it-telfa. Din it-telfa wasslita biex tkun Mother Teresa. Ma setghetx taccetta t-telfa ta' missierha. Daret lejn Gesù,

bhala l-missier taghha li ma kien se jabbandunaha qatt. Il-pass li ddur għall-ispirtwalita baqa' maghha tul hajjitha kollha. Parti biex tipprotegi l-immagini ta' Mother Teresa u parti biex tipprotegi lill-Agnes mit-tbatija. Il-hajja tat-tfulija dejjem zammitha l-bogħod mill-iskrutinju pubbliku.

## **Dell miii-imghoddi**

*It-Torċa* staqsiet lil Gëzim Alpijon jekk hux qed jahseb li Mother Teresa ma kinitx konxja li dik li hi kienet issejjah "sejha minghand Alla", fil-fatt kienet effett ta' grajjiet li sehew fit-tfulija. Is-Socjologu Albaniz iwiegeb bla tlaqlieq. "M'għandi ebda dubju li Mother Teresa genwinament emmnet li hi kienet irceviet zewg sejhiet minghand Alla. Wahda fis-sena 1922, fl-eta ta' 12-il sena biex issir soru, u sejha ohra fl-1946 fl-eta ta' 36 sena meta telqet mill-ordni ta' Loreto. Mother Teresa ma jidhirx li kienet konxja ta' kemm il-grajjiet ta' tfulitha affettwaha. Jekk kienet konxja, hi rnexxielha zzommmhom sigriet b'success, u għalhekk ifisser li batiet hafna li ma tkellmitx dwarhom anki mal-persuni li kienet tafda l-aktar. Bla dubju ta' xejn li l-fidi kbira li kellha għenuha biex tkompli miexja. Persuna ohra bla fidi kienet tispicca tiggennen".

Punt li jsemmi l-ktieb u li ftit li xejn smajna fuqu hu kif il-hajja privata u ta' tfulija taghha ftit li xejn issem mew kemm fl-intervisti u dokumentarji li saru. Il-ktieb jgħid li Mother Teresa zammet l-aspetti kontroversjali ta' hajjitha 'l bogħod mid-diskussjoni pubblika. Isemmi kif ittri kontroversjali li kienet bagħtet, kienet qerdithom. Staqsejn għalfejn jahseb li seh dan?

Sostna li "Mother Teresa jidher li qagħdet attenta biex izzomm mistura tliet cirkostanzi importanti li sehew fil-bidu tal-hajja taghha. L-ewwel grajja hu l-avvenament ta' missierha Nikolle Bojaxhiu mis-Serbi. Missierha kien patrijott Albaniz. Hi zammet dan l-assassinju politiku sigriet. Ma riditx li l-Albanizi juzawha bhala l-eroj nazzjonali. Hi ma kinitx temmen f'patrijottizmu u nazzjonalizmu. Ma riditx lanqas li s-Serbi jakkuzawha li kienet forza li tnaqqas l-istabbilita fil-Balkani. Aktar importanti minnhekk hi ma riditx tohloq inkwiet għid bejn il-Vatikan u l-Knisja Ortodossa. Punt iehor li riedet izzomm mistur kien ir-relazzjoni ta' huha ma l-armata ta' Mussolini. Lazar Bojaxhia, kien ircieva tahrig militari fl-Italja qabel it-tieni gwerra dinjija. Hu telaq mill-Albanija lejn l-Italja, immedjatament wara l-

okkupazzjoni Taljana fis-sena 1939. Fl-Italja hu nghanad ma' l-armata ta' Mussolini. Mother Teresa ma riditx tikkawza sitwazzjoni mbarazzanti ghall-Vatikan, b'mod partikolari tar-relazzjoni li kienet inghatat pubblicita u qajmet kontroversja bejn il-Vatikan, Hitler u Mussolini" jghid Dr Gëzim Al pion.

Il-Professor mill-Universita ta' Birmingham ikompli jghid lil it-Torca li "hemm diversi ragunijiet ghaliex Mother Teresa ddecidiet li teqred djarju u ittri li hi kienet baghtet lil ghadd ta' qassin fosthom lill-Arcisqof ta' Calcutta, lejn l-ahhar tas-snin erbgħin (1940's). Jista' jigi argumentat li hi ma riditx li d-dinja tkun taf kemm hi kienet trattatha hazin mill-Ordni ta' Loreto. Irrid nenfasizza li Mother Teresa baqghet tahseb fl-ordni ta' Loreto, anke meta telqithom u ma riditx li twaqqaq' il-moral tal-persuni u l-istituzzjoni, li hu allegat li kienu jghaddu z-zmien biha bejn Settembru tas-sena 1946 u Awissu tas-sena 1948. Il-fatt li Mother Teresa kienet Albaniza seta kkontribwixxa ghal dan it-trattament mis-sorijiet Irlandizi. Kieku l-ittri u d-djarji ma nqerdux, kieku ghandna stampa ferm ahjar ta' l-isforzi li saru minn qassisin u cittadini Indjani, kemm kristjani kif ukoll ta' religjonijiet ohrajn, biex jghinu lil Mother Teresa fil-bidu tax-xogħol tagħha bhala soru fis-slums ta' Calcutta. Nistaqsi hu possibbli li Mother Teresa ma riedet lil hadd, apparti lilha nfisha, li jjeħu kredtu għall-Ordni Missjunarji tal-karita li hi waqqfet fl-1950? Aktarx li le. Mill-banda l-ohra, Mother Teresa kienet umana ukoll" jghid Gezim Al pion.

## **Relazzjon mal-medja**

Imma din is-soru mhux dejjem ippriedkat l-imhabba għall-proxxmu u dejjem riedet tara kif se tghin lill-proxxmu. Ma tahsibx li dan seta' wassal biex hi ma tagħtix kaz li tagħti dettalji fuq hajjitha u tfulitha. Dr Gëzim iwegibna li "jista' jkun hekk, biss fl-opinjoni tiegħi din m'hix l-unika raguni".

Jargumenta li Mother Teresa immanipulat il-medja. Imma illum kif tista' timmanipula l-medja jekk mhux bil-flus. Din is-soru flus ma kellhiex, imhabba biss kienet toffri. Staqsejn jekk ihossx li l-argument tal-manipulazzjoni tal-medja hux esagerat.

Gëzim Al pion wiegeb għal dan billi qal li "l-kelma manipulazzjoni hafna drabi tintrabat ma' xi haga negattiv. Kemm Mother Teresa u kemm il-medja uzat lil

xulxin u mmanipulaw lil xulxin. Kienet sitwazzjoni ta' hokkli dahri ha nhokklok tieghek. Minn din is-sitwazzjoni iz-zewg nahat kienu se johorgu rebbihin. Mother Teresa kellha bzonn il-mejda biex isservi lil Gesù ahjar u fuq skala li hi qatt ma mmaginat, b'mod partikolari meta nfirdet mill-Odni ta' Loretu. Dawk li kellhom f'idejhom stazzjonijiet tal-medja u li hadu interess fix-xoghol ta' Mother Teresa kellhom ir-ragunijiet politici, religjuzi, nazzjonalistici u ekonomici ghaliex bidlu lil Mother Teresa b'ikona tal-medja internazzjonali".

Dr Alpion ma jjeqafx hawn u jargument li din is-soru kienet uzata mill-medja Kattolika fl-Istati Uniti fl-ahhar tas-sena 1950. Imma ghaliex jargumenta hekk? Is-socjolgu ta' l-Universita ta' Birmingham enfazizza li "l-medja fl-Istati Uniti indunat bil-fenomena Mother Teresa qabel il-medja Ewropea. Hemm hafna ragunijiet ghaliex l-Amerikani skoprew u taw pubblicita lil din is-soru qabel l-Ewropej. Meta nghid medja Amerikana, f'mohhi ghandi l-medja Kattolika Amerikana. Fis-seklu ghoxrin, l-Amerika kienet titqies bhala n-nazzjon tal-missjunarji u ghalhekk kien naturali li soru Kattolika wahidha f'Calcutta kienet se tattira attenzjoni. Wara li nghatat il-Premju nobel fl-1979, Mother Teresa kellha kuntatti mill-qrib ma ghadd ta' Presidenti ta' l-Istati Uniti u l-ghajnuna li kienet tircievi minghandhom mhux dejjem kellhom biss mottiv religjuż, Fhalkemm fil-kaz ma Reagan juri li r-religjon kienet fattur principali.

## **Impenn politiku**

Il-kuntatti ma' politici tqajjem il-mistoqsija jekk Mother Teresa zbaljatx li tat l-appogg lil Ronald Reagan biex jiggleled l-abort, u meta poggiet fjuri fuq il-qabar tad-dittatur Albaniz Enver Hoxha.

Ghal din il-mistoqsija, Dr Gëzim Alpion jghid li "fejn jidhol Ronald Reagan, il-pozizzjoni li hadet Mother Teresa ma kinitx taghha mill-bidu. L-abort sar kwistjoni ghal Mother Teresa, meta hi nghatat parir biex din il-kwistjoni tehodha f'idejha u taghmilha taghha ukoll. Dan jidher bic-car meta hi f'daqqa wahda kkundannat l-abort fil-prezentazzjoni tal-Premju nobel f'Oslo ta' l-1979. Forsi dan kien parti mill-prezz li kellha thallas talli appoggjat politici f'postijiet gholja? Jista' jkun. Ghal darba ohra, Mother Teresa ma ddejgqitx tappoggja kull kawza basta din kienet twassalha biex isservi aktar u ahjar lil :esù. Fuq id-dizastru ta' Bhopal, l-

intervent ta' Mother Teresa sar fi zmien meta din is-soru ma ddejqitx tinvolvi ruhha fi kwistjonijiet politici sensittivi. Dak li riedu jisimghu dawk milquta mit-tragedja dakinhar, ma kienx dak li jahfru lil min kien responsabbli, izda kumpens ghall-hajjiet rovinati. Nahseb ukoll li Mother Teresa ghamlet sew li poggiet fjuri fuq il-qabar tad-dittatur Enver Hoxha. Dan sar fi zmien meta l-Albanija kienet qrib dizastru nazzjonali. M'iniex cert, kemm Mother Teresa kellha aktar ghazliet. L-accettazzjoni biex Mother Teresa zzur l-Albanija fis-sena 1989 kienet inghatat minn Nexhmije Hoxha, l-arma ta' Enver. Nahseb li din insistiet li kif hi se tapprova l-zjara, is-soru kellha tonora fil-pubbliku lil zewgha. Bhala mara prattika, Mother Teresa accettat li tonora mexxej, li allegatament ma halliex lil ommha u lil ohtha jitolqu mill-Albanija, jew li ma halliex lil Mother Teresa zzurhom qabel mietu fil-bidu tas-snin sebghin. Id-decizjoni li tpoggi l-fjuri kienet tajba, ghalkemm trid izzomm f'mohhok li d-decizjoni li Mother Teresa zzur l-Albanija f'dak iz-zmien kienet orkestrata mill-Vatikan, li ddecieda li juzaha biex jintervjeni fl-Albanija fi zmien li huma qisuh bhala adattat. Qabel is-sena 1989, Mother Teresa dejjem zammet 'il boghod mill-problemi ta' l-Albanizi kemm jekk kienu taht dittatur bhal Hoxha, u kemm jekk kienu trattati bhala cittadini tat-tieni klassi. L-istess kaz kien mat-tieni nofs tan-nazzjon Albaniz li kien jghix f'dik li kienet il-Jugoslavja." Jghid l-awtur tal-ktieb *Mother Teresa – Qaddisa jew Celebrita?*

Quddiem il-fatti li jizvela mir-ricerka li ghamel u li sa issa kienu ghadhom mistura staqsejna lil Dr Alpion, min hi Mother Teresa. Dan ghaliex sa issa gejna prezentati b'ghadd ta' Mother Teresas, kollha differenti, bl-ahhar angolu jkun il-ktieb ta' Dr Alpion.

Is-socjolgu minn Birmingham jghid lit-Torca li "l-ahjar risposta li nista naghti hi li l-intenzjoni tieghi mill-bidu nett kienet li nuri li l-Mother Teresa li gew prezentati lilna fl-ahhar 40 sena, huma kollha parti minn Mother Teresa. Hi kienet figura kumplessa. Jien ma nippretendix li fil-ktieb tieghi qieghed naghti l-veru Mother Teresa, zball li jaghmlu hafna kritici u ammiraturi taghha. Dak li ppruvajt nispjega jien kien dak li biex tifhem lil Mother Teresa, wiehed irid jistudja l-ewwel snin taghha fi Skopje bejn l-1910 u l-1928 u s-snin li ghamlet bhala soru f'Calcutta ma' Ordni ta' Loreto bejn l-1929 u l-1948. Hu f'dawn is-snin li wiehed jista' jsib it-trawmi u l-frustrazzjonijiet li wasslu biex Mother Teresa kienet ikona

tal-medja u tal-karita. Mother Teresa ghamlet l-istorja u bhal kull min kien parti mill-istorja, hi kellha hajja straordinarja" jtemm jghid Dr Alpion.