

Mother Teresa – Saint or Spinner?

Mother Teresa was a powerful propaganda machine and PR guru who manipulated the media to mould her public image – according to new research from the University of Birmingham, issued exactly one year after the iconic nun's beatification in Rome.

In a highly complimentary but equally robust new examination of the Catholic nun, entitled: *Biased Media Discourses: The Case of Mother Teresa*, Film and Media Studies lecturer, Dr Gëzim Alpion, examines the role of the media (Catholic, Indian, Western, Balkan) in creating and sustaining the Mother Teresa 'myth'. The study also looks at the media-celebrity culture relationship, and at ethnicity, regional politics, race, nationalism and patriotism.

Dr Alpion, of the University's Sociology, has already written and published widely on Mother Teresa's relationship with the media. He argues: *'Mother Teresa is one of the most publicised figures of the 20th century. But there could have been no Mother Teresa without the media. Her myth was carefully crafted over the years by the Roman Catholic Church, numerous Indian governments and several White House administrations. In this international image-making process, however, Mother Teresa was hardly passive. She always had a say in what should and should not be said about her.'*

Mother Teresa was an Albanian nun and Nobel Peace Prize winner who died in 1997. She was revered by many around the world as a living saint for her work with the sick and poor. This research is designed to give an informed and impartial account of the complex give-and-take relationship this international media icon had with the mass media. In his study, Dr Alpion, who was born in Albania, focuses on various aspects of Mother Teresa's international iconic image, including the media's refusal to recognise her Balkan roots, and her successful endeavours to generate millions of dollars of US funding, allegedly still

unaccounted for. Dr Alpion also explores some of the reasons why, in spite of her being a 'white Western catholic female', she was supported virtually by all Indian governments after 1950 – despite the fact that only two per cent of Indians are Catholic.

Dr Alpion continues: *'The study highlights her growing ability as a PR expert and examines why and how an unpretentious tiny Catholic nun became so popular with the Indian and the world media and assesses the interest those behind the all-powerful propaganda machine had in her image and work.'*

Dr Alpion's interest in fellow humanist Mother Teresa began in 1991. Since then he has published widely on the subject and he has given lectures across the globe. While his recent academic research examines the Mother Teresa 'myth', Dr Alpion remains an avid supporter of the famous Catholic icon.

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For further information on the news release and/or the research please contact Anna Dingley, Press Officer, on 0121 415 8134/07769952763, email a.j.dingley@bham.ac.uk

Notes to Editors

Mother Teresa was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 19 October 2003 in St Peter's Square, Rome. Beatification means she may now be publicly venerated. For actual sainthood, proof of at least two miracles is required.

Dr Gëzim Alpion is a lecturer in Film and Media Studies in the Department of Sociology at the University of Birmingham. Currently lecturing on Film Studies, Dr Alpion is also a Research Fellow in Cultural Studies and an Honorary Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham.

Dr Alpion has been invited to give talks and lectures on Anglo-American Literary and Media Studies and his publications at the Universities of London, Nottingham, Huddersfield, Birmingham, Prishtina (Kosova), and Kingston, and in Dortmund (Germany).

Dr Alpion is a versatile and prolific academic, writer, playwright, reviewer, journalist, and a media, political and culture analyst. Thus far his work has appeared in many academic journals, newspapers and magazines in the UK, Europe, the USA and the Middle East His play *Vouchers* (2001), the book *Foreigner Complex: Essays and Fiction About Egypt* (2002), and his talks and lectures have been widely reviewed and publicised in the British and European press. In his hard-hitting tragedy *Vouchers*, Dr Alpion tackles the emotive issue of refugees and asylum seekers in Britain. The collection of essays and short stories *Foreigner Complex* reveals Dr Alpion's fascination for all things Egyptian, inspired by seven years of study at Cairo University. In his new play *If Only the Dead Could Listen*, Dr Alpion turns his attention once more to the treatment of asylum seekers in Britain. The play is expected to be staged in Birmingham by Dreamscape Theatre Company in 2005. In addition to his current research on media representation of Mother Teresa, Dr Alpion is also researching the role of the British press in the rather belated raise of celebrity culture in Great Britain, and the treatment of overseas academics in British universities.