

BOOK REVIEW

MOTHER TERESA. SAINT OR CELEBRITY?

By Gezim Alpion, 284 pp.

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The late Mother Teresa is a lady who by any standards would rank among the most striking personalities the world has ever known. As David Marsh points out in this superbly researched work of Gezim Alpion an Albanian playwright and essayist, her name on entering a Google Search produces well over four million hits. In this book, Alpion attempts what I see as a wholly unbiased approach, dealing equally with both her critics and enthusiasts. He ignores neither the vitriolic broadsides launched against her by well known critics such as Christopher Hitchens, Aroup Chatterjee or Germaine Greer, nor the petty faultfinding of 'insiders' such as former nun Susan Shields. Nevertheless, he insists that Mother Teresa and her work attracted the eye of the public largely due to the media, for her ascent to fame was meticulously contrived and tracked by public relations experts and spokespersons both in the East and in the West.

He points out that in nations around the world numerous political, religious, nationalist, and business groups developed an intentional interest in her, making sure she had all the exposure and media immunity needed in order to serve them and their objectives with no interference. She was used by Indian politicians seeking to evoke love and compassion in the hearts of their countrymen, and by those wishing to remove the caste system. Mother Teresa in course of time became aware that she was being thus manipulated, but she did not mind as long as the mounting hype she received helped her to realize

her main object in life, which was essentially to serve the poorest of the poor. She is in truth one of the most written about and publicized women in modern times, and with the exception of Pope John Paul II she was possibly the most celebrated religious superstar in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Yet, even assuming Mother Teresa's saintly nature was a matter of dispute, her commitment to her vocation and to the poor was without doubt exemplary. With her lifetime pledge to serve the poorest of the poor in a predominantly non-Christian country like India, she succeeded in proving to a money-oriented and largely cynical West that religion can be a means to advance people's material and spiritual wellbeing, and that rather than divide, faith can be used as a medium to unite communities, across cultural, ethnic, religious, economic, and political segregations.

However, what Alphonse never fails to emphasize is the fact that regardless of her undeniably pure intentions, the forgiving nun had some of the "most intolerant and unforgiving supporters and opponents." He insists that her Indian critics in particular who tended to view her as virtually a diabolical figure, would be able to weigh her work much more objectively and perhaps even begin to esteem her a little, if they did not let national pride get in the way. According to him, whatever failings she might have had, Mother Teresa loved India as no other country in the world, including her native Albania.

Alphonse deals extensively with Mother Teresa's relationship to the citizens of the Balkan states, and regrets the fact that despite her having proclaimed peace, understanding, tolerance and forgiveness throughout the world, she yet failed to inject some neighborly spirit into her own native Balkans. The fact that she decided to be buried in India and not in Kosova or Skopje was a shrewdly calculated move on her part, indicating that she had no intention of becoming another bone of contention for the Albanians, Serbs, and Macedonian Slavs after her death. He devotes several pages to what he sees as inaccuracies and

prejudicial remarks in the works of other biographers of Mother Teresa (though he defends Lush Gjergji), and asserts that Balkan biographers in general need to be free of their biases towards ethnic or religious “rivals,” and include in their works information about Mother Teresa or members of her family that might appear controversial. Besides being a most precious asset of the Roman Catholic Church in the twentieth century, she is also the best advocate of peace, understanding and tolerance to have arisen, from the troubled, discordant, and intolerant region of the Balkans in modern times.

Alpion is of the view that it was for certain cogent reasons that she was relatively tight-lipped about her early life and about certain members of her family, and here it was not her own reputation that she was worried about. As far as she was concerned her image and identity were inseparably linked to those of the Roman Catholic Church, and so she was willing to do almost anything to avoid causing problems to the Holy See. In his words, “Mother Teresa was first and foremost a very devout and loyal Roman Catholic nun.” She even went to the extent of destroying certain documents that might have been a cause of embarrassment for others, and she did this not so much to protect herself or any particular individual, but the image of Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church.

Also, her disinclination to publicly censure the political turmoil in Albania, was very likely due to her knowledge of the fact that her brother Lazar was a fascist spy and a member of Mussolini’s army. Her devotion to the poor too was not the sole reason for the empathy shown her by the press. She handled the media and her recognition so well and for so long, because she had been initiated into superstar culture early in life. Her father was a well-known local figure, and after his death she sought to replace him with the divine father figure of god. She was on the whole an average nun with her share of doubts, ambitions, frustrations, and ‘weaknesses’ that are generally not associated with saints, and yet to serve her god she was brave enough

to challenge everyone and make unbridled use of the publicity she received.

After Germaine Greer, Christopher Hitchens, and Susan Shields this book of Alpión's feels like a whiff of delightfully fresh air. It is the work an open and dedicated scholar, who despite his reverence for the nun has yet striven to be as unbiased as possible, never letting his emotions get in the way. I would have no hesitation at all in recommending this book to everyone.

要約

マザー・テレサは世界でもっとも有名な女性の一人だろう。ゲジム・アルピオンは、この本で彼女の批判者と信奉者のことを書いている。マザー・テレサという一人の女性とその活動が有名になったことの原因として、アルピオンはメディアの役割を指摘する。

世界中のさまざまな人々—政治家、宗教家、経済人、ナショナリストなどが、各々の利益からマザー・テレサに関心を持っていた。インドでは、国民からの支持を得たい政治家やカースト制度に批判的な人たちが、彼女に熱い眼差しを送った。彼女は自分が利用されていることを無論よく分かっていたが、まったく気にとめなかった。インドという非キリスト教世界で、もっとも貧しい人びとに奉仕するためにその一生を捧げたマザー・テレサは、信仰の力で人間を救うことができること、そして文化、民族、政治、経済などによって分断されている人びとを結束する力が宗教にはあることを、その生き方をもって拝金主義とシニシズムが蔓延した西欧社会に示した。

マザー・テレサには、支持者、批判者ともに、さまざまな人びとがいた。インド人としてのプライドから彼女を痛烈に非難した者もいた。しかしマザー・テレサは母国のアルバニアを含めて、世界のどの国よりもインドを愛していた。だからこそ、死後はインドで埋葬されることを望んだのである。アルバニア、セルビア、マケドニアのどの国も自国に彼女が埋葬されることを希望しており、余計な問題を引き起こしたくないという配慮もあっただろう。その生き方をして寛容さと相互理解の大切さを世界に広めた

マザー・テレサは、バルカン現代史の生んだ、類まれな平和の擁護者であった。

またマザー・テレサは、自らの幼少時代や家族のことについては、進んで語ろうとしなかった。しかしそれは自分の名声を守りたかったからではなく、カトリック教会への配慮からであった。彼女はとても敬虔な修道女であったから、キリスト教とカトリック教会のイメージを守ることに特に関心を遣っていた。アルバニアの政治的情勢について公的な場で語ろうとしなかったのも、弟のラザルがファシストのスパイであり、ムッソリーニの軍部に関係していたため、そのことで問題が起きることを危惧したからであった。

父親を深く愛していたマザー・テレサは、その死後は神を自らの父として愛した。野心や不安、不満や弱さを持った普通の女性であったが、神に仕えることでは、誰にも負けぬ気概にあふれていた。

