

Mother Teresa: the saint and her nation

by Gëzim Alpion, Oxford, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 296 pp., 16\$ (ppk),
ISBN: 9789389165067

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To cite this article: Bonita Aleaz (2023): Mother Teresa: the saint and her nation, Politics, Religion & Ideology, DOI: [10.1080/21567689.2023.2242674](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2023.2242674)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2023.2242674>



Published online: 09 Aug 2023.



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BOOK REVIEW

Mother Teresa: the saint and her nation, by Gëzim Alpion, Oxford, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 296 pp., 16\$ (ppk), ISBN: 9789389165067

Thirteen years after the publication of his first book on the Saint of Calcutta, *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* Gëzim Alpion sees the need for this second major publication on the same subject, *Mother Teresa the Saint and Her Nation*. What becomes so compelling to bog a sociologist all his life, to devote almost his entire academic career in trying to piece together the different facets in the life of the saint? As is unfolded piece by piece, through chapter by chapter, through veritable transformation of the author from sociologist to ethnographer to historian to almost an investigator, there is much more than the hitherto visible impellent, a 'spiritual call' that led to the donning of a habit by Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (pre-Mother Teresa). The meticulous unravelling of this dense milieu forms the subject of research.

There are 15 chapters in the book under review, divided into three parts. The author goes to great lengths in the first part labelled very appropriately 'Who are Mother Teresa's Albanians?', for the first time to bring to the fore the small Albanian nation's ethno-biography. Seated in the highly volatile region of the Balkans, the very turbulent expansionist policies of the dominant powers in the region overtime affected political stability, development or even homogeneous emergence of the different communities inhabiting Albania. The oppression was fed by religious chauvinism, obvious intent being to dismember the Albanians since the allegation was they were a purely Islamic population, in contrast to the dominant Christianity of the Balkan countries.

As a counterpoint, almost as if in defiance of its oppressed history, Albania's very illustrious past is very painstakingly traced. Few may be aware that the ancient Illyria and modern Albania bear common roots. Stalwarts such as Alexander the Great, even Napoleon Bonaparte had Illyrian roots. Yet Albania suffered waves of agony; the long Ottoman domination left deep etches in its spiritual identity. Yet, once again there is sufficient documentary evidence, even in the New Testament, to show the Illyrian region had been exposed to the apostles during the time of Christianity's first footfall in Europe. Illyria's cosmopolitan attributes did not present any structured religiosity in the public space but allowed all religions to flourish simultaneously. However, as recorded history shows, this very aspect, the free progression of Christianity was deliberately violated and sought to be obfuscated by pre-Christian Rome.

Alpion's attempt to go into these lengths to establish certain historical facts of the region are quite obviously to point to the pre-existing Christian milieu that influenced the growing Agnes. He strongly wishes to establish that it had never been an anti-Christian region as had been propagated by Rome, the Ottoman empire and later, the Serbs and other Europeans. It was a persecuted cosmopolitan nation where, among the different flanks of Christianity, the Catholics were the most persecuted.

How religion and politics combined to pave the way for a unique blend of Albanian nationalism is elaborated in Part Two. It traces Mother Teresa's years at her home in Skopje, and her relationship with her family. This part is indeed a veritable story of Mother Teresa's paternal and maternal relations, their successes, failures, marriages, child-birth and bereavements. The intricate weaving together of the political history of the region with the extended family's progression is adroitly presented. The Mother's paternal

relations were politically influential; her father along with other relations was staunch nationalists.


Yet, did such influences transform Mother Teresa into an adroit politician who could effectively manage both the Vatican and her relations with Albania quite effectively? Quite subtly, the question is entered into in the third section, *Mother Teresa's Relation with the Holy See and the Albanian Nation*. This section is dense with facts and historical events. I would glean the following three points that emerge out of the four chapters in this section. First, Mother Teresa perhaps derived her sagacity and pragmatism from her nation itself; that country imbued with these characteristics never allowed a fetishism to emerge over its religious identities. So also Mother Teresa, religion was her personal belief system, not a public attribute to be propagated. Second, Europe is incomplete without Illyrian identity; so it is not only Rome or Athens which should be accoladed as the pillars of European progress since ancient times, but the Illyrian identity as well. Third, Mother Teresa never acknowledged any public role on her part as a mediator between the Vatican and the government of Albania. Therefore, what her exact role was in the demise of communism in that nation remains quite unclear. Rather she was seen as a prospective elevator of the impoverished nation's travails.

One cannot help but conclude that this is as much a book that tries to piece together the prominent spokes that went into the wheel propelling the Saint's journey forward but it is also a meticulous unsheathing of her nation's history. While reading the book the question is bound to creep up, is this a Mother Teresa-centric work or is it an Albania-centred one? Whose nationalism shines through with greater force? Is it not so much Mother Teresa, who appears as a staunch nationalist or the author himself? Running through the work is a valiant attempt to regain for Albania its ancient lineage and thus undo much of the false propaganda that impelled atrocities on the tiny, beleaguered nation.

The work has a fascinating story line, furbished with facts accumulated through painstaking research. However, it is not an easy work to review, primarily due to the density and complexity of material it deals with. The private and the public interweave at innumerable junctures, not only in the life of the nation but in that of the saint as well. It is this enigmatic interface that accompanied the making of the Saint that Alphonse perhaps wished to uncoil through the reams of history, ethnicity, geo-politics and the sociology of religion. A good read indeed.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2023.2242674>

