

## Mother Teresa. the Saint and her nation

Gëzim Alpion Bloomsbury, New Delhi, London, Oxford, New York, Sydney,  
2020, 284 pp., £85 (hardback), ISBN: 978-93-89165-05-0

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Mother Teresa. the Saint and her nation**, Gëzim Alpion Bloomsbury, New Delhi, London, Oxford, New York, Sydney, 2020, 284 pp., £85 (hardback), ISBN: 978-93-89165-05-0

Gëzim Alpion's impressively rich study of Mother Teresa takes a somewhat surprising approach as it discusses the saint primarily in absentia: only in the last chapters does the saint from Kolkata take the central stage. In the first part of the book, the focus is primarily on the Albanian people and on the family of Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, as she was known in her youth. This original tactic offers the reader a layered picture of the Nobel Prize winner. The chapters skilfully avoid a reductionist view and Mother Teresa's actions are never presented solely as a result of her family background or Albanian history. On the contrary, by exploring this background the readers gather information that helps them to better understand some of Mother Teresa's actions and stances. As a spiritual hero as well as a celebrity, so Alpion writes, she is 'a product of a complex chain of personal, intranational, national and international circumstances' (p.1).

Covering centuries of Albanian history the book discusses the early introduction (and successes) of Christianity in these regions up until the twenty-first century not unproblematic relationship between the Holy See and Albanian Catholics. In the first part, Alpion sketches in broad strokes, yet with an eye for details, Albanian history from Illyrian antiquity until the postmodern era. In the second part, he uses the information he provided in the previous chapters as his canvas to paint the portraits of different generations of Mother Teresa's immediate family. He thereby reflects on their impact on her decision to enter the religious life and choice of ministry. To do so he does not merely stick to written or oral sources, but explores material remnants (the family home that was destroyed by the Serbs, 'obliterating an object associated with the ancestors of the rising star of Roman Catholicism', p.99), visual sources (the movie whose costumes and settings ignored her Albanian and Catholic background) and even the names of the family members (Gonxhe/'Rosebud', an Albanian name as a reference to the patriotic fervour of that time, p.74). In the third part, he addresses Mother Teresa's relations with the Holy See and the Albanian nation.

As a reader we learn to nuance the view of Albanians as exclusively 'Muslim' as we hear about their Illyrian roots and struggles under the Ottoman Empire and Communist regime. Christianity survived in spite of attempts of eradication by Slavic and Ottoman invaders) and that was, according to Alpion, thanks to 'the determination of ordinary Albanians to preserve their ancient faith and the dedication of their compatriots who had entered the religious life' (p.46). Throughout the book, the readers follow Catholic Albanians to Kosovo, Macedonia and Egypt and are introduced to their relaxed, no-nonsense, pragmatic attitude towards religion (p.71: 'Like most of their countrymen, whether they adhere to Orthodox Christianity or Islam, the Catholic faithful amongst Albanians have never prioritised their religious identity over their national identity'; p.206: 'no faith has ever been their *raison d'être* or their main identity marker').

Alpion uncovers parts of Mother Teresa's life that have hitherto remained unknown (e.g. by tracing the story of her niece Filomena, identifying her paternal grandfather, and describing the blood feud that one of her ancestors might have been involved in). He reflects on the reasons on why some elements might have been filtered out of the

public image of the saint ('efforts to "sanitise" and "protect" her image' p.99) and discusses the various causes for which Mother Teresa (involuntarily) has been used. He relates for instance how the efforts to enhance her and her family's 'patriotic credentials' began after she received the Nobel Prize for Peace (1979) and have continued ever since. In his opinion, the aim behind the attempts, was 'to present Mother Teresa as an Albanian heroine who hailed from a progeny that had consistently sacrificed themselves for faith and country' (p.90). At the same time, 'efforts intensified to deny her Albanian ancestry altogether and present her as mainly a Slav' (p.119). Mother Teresa herself, so Alpion informs us, 'ceased to see herself in ethno-racial terms once she put on the nun's habit' (p.183). Neither her decision to enter a religious life, nor her resolution to found the Missionaries of Charity were 'inspired by any intention to serve her fellow Albanians who, incidentally, needed as much help as they could get in the wake of the Second World War' (p.186). This no-comment attitude, and her refusal to converse in Albanian, might have something to do with her linking the sudden death of her father Nikollë in 1919 to his activities as an advocate of the Albanian national cause and mother tongue (p.170).

'(H)istory-makers like Mother Teresa do not come from nowhere' so Alpion emphasises (p.205). As his book shows, there is much to be gained by going beyond the personal experiences and circumstances. The description of centuries of Albanian history and diving into the family background helped to generate a more complex picture than the 'sanitised' saintly image of Mother Teresa. A family-tree and map with the most important places would have helped the reader in keeping an overview, but these are minor omissions to an otherwise astoundingly rich book.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Tine Van Osselaer* is associate professor in the history of spirituality, devotion and mysticism at the Ruusbroec Institute. Her research focuses on religion and gender, religion and medicine, the history of emotions and, more recently, the mediatisation of religion and the history of pain. She was the principal investigator of "Between saints and celebrities. The devotion and promotion of stigmatics in Europe, c.1800-1950" (ERC Starting Grant) and currently supervises projects on Catholic perceptions of pain (FWO/FWF) and on the religious lives of corpses (FWO/SNF).

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