

Alpion, Gëzim, *Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her Nation* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. xi–208, \$28, ISBN 9789389165043 (hardcover).

By blood and origin, I am all Albanian. My citizenship is Indian.
I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world.
As to my heart, I belong entirely to the heart of Jesus.

In profiles of Mother Teresa, attention falls almost invariably upon the last four of these self-descriptors. However, her inclusion of her ‘blood and origin’, particularly as emphasized with the descriptor ‘all’, is the focus of Gëzim Alpion’s *Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her Nation*. His thesis is that her life and mission are inextricably connected to the history and heritage of the Albanian nation and people, embodying the ‘cultural and spiritual DNA’ of her homeland (p. 3). Indeed, the book could reasonably be described as a focused study of the history and heritage of Albania, with the life of Mother Teresa as the most prominent example of an Albanian legacy. A fellow Albanian and the unofficial ‘founder of Mother Teresa Studies’, Alpion undertakes a thorough exploration of the life of Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, set within the context of the history of the Albanian nation and people. Drawing our awareness to these ‘sociological fossils’, Alpion reminding the reader that ‘history-makers like Mother Teresa do not come from nowhere’ (p. 205). Mother Teresa is ‘a classic case of a set of complex circumstances and influences about one’s nation and family circle plays an important role in turning an “ordinary” human being into an extraordinary personality’ (p. 208).

Alpion structures the content around the perceived gaps in her biographies. Part I (‘Who are Mother Teresa’s Albanians?’) charts the history of the religious and political heritage of Albania. Alpion chronicles the political and ethnic persecution of the Albanian people at the hands of the Ottoman Empire: the litany of abuse includes the systematic repression of Albanian Catholicism, pressured conversions to Orthodox and Islam, and the ‘iconoclastic’ posture to all things Albanian. After their fall, the persecution of Albanians continued at the hands of Greek, Turkish, and Yugoslavian regimes. Alpion then traces the history of Albanian Christianity, through its Illyrian and apostolic origins and eventually into Catholicism. The importance of the Albanian language to their Catholic life – in written publications, catechetical classes, and modes of liturgy – endured constant attack, both from outside forces and from the Vatican’s ‘benign neglect’ of the Albanian Catholics. Alpion then employs the ‘onomastic’ (the study of proper names) perspective to highlight the relationship between Mother Teresa’s national identity and faith: despite the fact that

her baptismal name was Agnes, she was known throughout Skopje as Gonxhe, a name she associated with her beloved father (p. 74).

Part II is concerned with the 'History from Below, Mother Teresa's Albanian Roots and Skopje Years'. It explores the formative aspects of Mother Teresa's background and genealogy. Tracing the narratives of her paternal and maternal relations, Alpion explores both the successes and failures of Gonxhe's family of origin, considering their effect on the sensitive young girl and their impact on her choice of vocation. Alpion considers the two most important aspects of Albanian's Catholic identity – their national self-awareness and their deeply faithful devotion – that is, a devotion that stopped short of fervour and intolerance. He notes that as 'innate pragmatists,' Albanians 'never prioritized their religious identity over their national identity' (p. 71), a position which also arose from their 'painful experiences with creeds and religious institutions' (p. 207). These factors, Alpion contends, underscore both the personal and the cultural facets of Mother Teresa's identity, and largely effect two of the distinctives of her spiritual journey: a lifelong struggle with spiritual 'darkness' (p. 185) and an exceptional connection to people of different faith traditions (p. 208).

Part III deals with 'Mother Teresa's Relations with the Holy See and the Albanian Nation'. It employs two lenses to appreciate her 'personality, work, and legacy' through her ministry: these lenses are her relationship to the Vatican, and her relationship to her birthplace of Albania. With its complicated posture toward the church in Albania, the Vatican significantly influenced the nun's own ambivalent posture towards her homeland. This ambivalence and progressive alienation also arose from the significant losses she experienced in her youth, perhaps especially the death of her father at the hands of political enemies. Upon taking holy orders, her hope for a community that transcended national allegiances was shaken by the discrimination and prejudice she faced by her Irish superiors in Calcutta (Kolkata). Her subsequent decision to found the Missionaries of Charity placed her outside the strict hierarchies of the Catholic Church. Yet despite her own experience of discrimination, she remained largely detached from Albania itself through the remainder of her life, her compassionate heart seemingly indifferent to Albania's suffering under Communist regime.

It may seem surprising at first glance that a book on Mother Teresa should find its way into a journal on public theology. The tendency is often to see her in the mode of a religious visionary committed to charitable works of mercy in a land far distant from the homeland that Alpion presents us with here. And yet it is clear that her concern for the poor and the global presence and reputation acquired render her as one of most significant public figures embodying

the Christian life throughout the twentieth century. Alpion describes the cultural and political formative influences that led to what has been described elsewhere as a rather pragmatic political spirituality that played itself out through ‘topics’ like poverty, love, giving, peace, sacrifice, and responsibility, (Iuliu-Marius Morariu, ‘Aspects of Political Theology in the Spiritual Autobiography of Mother Teresa of Calcutta’, *HTS Theological Studies*, 76:1, 2020, 1–5).

This fascinating volume will be most appealing to someone conversant in Mother Teresa’s studies, as it presumes a basic familiarity with the subject’s work and person. Without this ready familiarity, the reader may struggle to absorb the author’s intended connections. To be sure, the book is fascinating in its own right, particularly the historical chapters in the first two sections. Yet it is not the brevity of the chapters that focus primarily on Mother Teresa that led to the vague sense of incompleteness and ambiguity of purpose. The sociological artifacts he unearths would have broader impact if Alpion had drawn more obvious connections between them and the public figure to which they relate. Similarly, in seeking to unpack the ‘spiritual aridity’ and ‘spiritual darkness’ that plagued Mother Teresa throughout her life, he clearly outlines ‘a host of lifelong influences ... that are not all spiritual in nature’ (p. 205) yet fails to unpack the resulting spiritual darkness.

An important function of such works is humanizing our heroes, be they ‘saints’ or ‘archetypes’ of the strength of the Balkan people. In this endeavour Alpion is successful. Neither biography nor hagiography, his latest contribution is a window on her journey from Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu to the personality, and the person, she became.

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