



Continuum

ISSN: 1030-4312 (Print) 1469-3666 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccon20>

Media and Celebrity Culture—Subjectivist, Structuralist and Post-structuralist Approaches to Mother Teresa's Celebrity Status

Gëzim Alpion

To cite this article: Gëzim Alpion (2006) Media and Celebrity Culture—Subjectivist, Structuralist and Post-structuralist Approaches to Mother Teresa's Celebrity Status, Continuum, 20:4, 541-557, DOI: [10.1080/10304310600988328](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310600988328)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304310600988328>



Published online: 12 Dec 2006.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 405



View related articles [↗](#)

Media and Celebrity Culture— Subjectivist, Structuralist and Post- structuralist Approaches to Mother Teresa's Celebrity Status

Gëzim Alpion

There has never been a society without famous people and, as Thomas Carlyle once put it, '[t]he history of the world is but the biography of great men' (1966, p. 29). In pre-industrialized societies 'fame' was usually inherited, but there were cases when 'commoners' also earned it as a result of achievements and heroic deeds that elevated them above the rest of the populace, thus legitimizing their rise to power and prominence. From the first half of the seventeenth century, the period which saw the emergence of newspapers in some West European countries as a novel means for disseminating the news, and especially after the mid-nineteenth century onwards, thanks to the development of other technologies—dry-plate photography, telephone, phonograph, the roll film, radio, motion pictures, television, the Internet—that facilitated the continuous distribution of information at a much greater speed and to an ever-expanding audience, the notions of 'fame' and 'greatness' underwent significant denotative and connotative changes. Being famous in the industrialized world gradually came to mean mainly being in the public eye. Capitalism produced a new brand of famous people: the celebrity. In his acclaimed 1962 book *The Image: a Guide to Pseudo-events in America*, Daniel J. Boorstin defined the modern hero-celebrity as 'a person who is known for his well-knownness' (p. 57).

In true capitalistic fashion, the media industry manufactures celebrities by the bushel. So much so that it would be no exaggeration if we describe them as

Gëzim Alpion is Lecturer in Sociology and Media Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK. He received a PhD from the University of Birmingham in 1997. His works include *Vouchers* (2001), *Foreigner Complex* (2002), *If Only the Dead Could Listen* (2006), *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* (2006) and *Encounters with Civilizations* (2007). Correspondence to: Gëzim Alpion, Department of Sociology, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK. Email: g.i.alpion@bham.ac.uk

constituting a social class of their own. Andrew Smith goes even further in his article 'All in a good cause?', which appeared in *The Observer* on 27 January 2002. In his view, Live Aid in 1985 demonstrated the truth that 'a new social world had been made, in which there were only two categories of people—the celebrity corps and what Liz Hurley would later notoriously characterize as "civilians", i.e. the rest of us' (p. 45).

In a media-saturated world where the attainment of celebrity status is seen as an end in itself and where, for better or for worse, celebrities are such influential role models for an ever-growing fandom, there is always the danger of either equating fake prominence with genuine greatness or ignoring some of our real heroes. Concentrating on the figure of Mother Teresa, this article identifies some of the approaches and flaws apparent in the contemporary celebrity discourse. Although she was a global 'celebrity', there are very few references in the academic debate about Mother Teresa to the nature of her celebrity status and her relationship with the media. This is even more surprising considering that most Mother Teresa experts approach her more or less in the same way as we would normally approach celebrities from the fields of theatre, cinema, politics, sport, television and music. Mother Teresa is yet another example of the extent to which celebrity culture has permeated every aspect of life. The celebrated nun's relationship with the media also reveals that, like any famous person, religious personalities often employ the press and every other medium of mass communication with dexterity and, at times, unscrupulously, to reach out to their intended audiences.

Mother Teresa was one of the most written about and publicized twentieth-century women. Except for Pope John Paul II, she was arguably also the most advertised religious celebrity of our time. During her lifetime as well as posthumously, Mother Teresa continues to generate a huge level of interest and heated debates from those who either praise or criticize her.

Different people approach Mother Teresa's celebrity status mainly from one of two differing perspectives: subjectivism or structuralism. The subjectivists and the structuralists often adopt a post-structuralist approach, which in itself indicates the complexity of the media icon called Mother Teresa and the 'liquid' nature of the notion of celebrity nowadays.

Subjectivists maintain that talent, which eventually leads to fame, is innate and God-given. In Mother Teresa's case, this attitude is apparent in the numerous books, un/authorized biographies, television programmes, films (documentary, feature and animated), plays, novels, poems, paintings, musicals and sculptures that often bear the signature of her friends, colleagues, admirers and supporters. In the media, this interpretation surfaced when she was first spotted by the Indian Catholic press in Calcutta shortly after she had set up the Missionaries of Charity order in 1950. Referring to this time, the reporter Desmond Doig, an Indian Catholic of Anglo-Irish origin, remembers how he was once advised by a colleague to watch the European nun because 'she's quite extraordinary. She's going to be a saint' (Johnson, 2003, p. 51).

In the first instance, the myth about Mother Teresa's sainted status was apparently started by Mother Teresa herself. She always maintained that she received the first call

from God to serve the poor some time in 1922, before her 12th birthday (Gjergji, 2000, p. 64). A quarter of a century later she claimed she was the recipient of another call, which she would refer to as 'the call within a call'. On 10 September 1946, during a train journey, she professed to have heard God 'calling me. The message was clear. I must leave the convent to help the poor by living among them' (Johnson, 2003, p. 38). This, Mother Teresa believed, 'was an order. To fail it would have been to break the faith' (Spink, 1998, p. 22).

Even when she became world famous, and was aware that her words were likely to be scrutinized by her friends and foes alike, Mother Teresa would not hesitate to express in public her belief that she was somehow in direct contact with God and the ancient Fathers of the Church. One of her preferred parables involving herself was the 'encounter' with Saint Peter at heaven's door. Peter had tried to keep her from going in, saying 'I'm sorry. We have no shacks in heaven.' Upset by the doorman saint's 'irreverence', the saint-to-be had responded: 'Very well! I will fill heaven with the people from the slums of the city, and then you will have no other choice than to let them in' (González-Balado, 1997, p. 87).

Mother Teresa accepts that the holy 'encounter' took place when she was delirious and suffering from very high fever. One does not have to be a psychoanalyst or an atheist to conclude that, like the second call in 1946, her 'audience' with Peter could have been triggered by her poor health and agitated state of mind. Unfortunately, we do not know much about the exact state of her health when she received the first call. Like most of her first 18 years in Skopje, even this life-changing incident remains something of a mystery. What is widely known, though, is that throughout her childhood Mother Teresa was frequently sick.¹ Her poor health was always a major cause for concern for her parents, especially her mother, who thought 'she would lose her because of her fragile health' (Porter, 1986, p. 27). Mother Teresa's health hardly got any better in India. She was often sick, especially in 1946. This is what Sister Marie Thérèse recalls about that year: 'We were careful of her. I don't know whether she realized it, but we were ... When it came to the work and the running around, our Superiors took extra care with her' (Spink, 1998, p. 22). She was apparently so sick that her friends feared she would be stricken with tuberculosis. As a precaution, she was asked to stay in bed for three hours every afternoon. Seeing no improvement, she was directed to go to the hill station of Darjeeling to recuperate. On the way there the sick and tired Mother Teresa allegedly had her second 'encounter' with God.

Seen in the context of the Holy Scriptures, Mother Teresa's paranormal experiences are similar to what many prophets, apostles, disciples and saints before her have apparently gone through. It is not very rare that mental anguish and poor health seem to pave the way to 'revelations'.

Different people approach and interpret 'holiness' in different ways. In the case of devout believers, a person's sanctity is measured not so much by their ability to perform miracles than by their absolute faith in the strange ways in which God works through some chosen individuals. This is one of the key themes in Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed . . . Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit . . . To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (1 Corinthians 12: 1–11)

Those who are not very or at all religious, on the other hand, are eager to find some more down-to-earth explanations about Mother Teresa's 'audiences' with God or the Old Fathers of the Church. Failure to provide some rational explanations has somehow shrouded the nun's figure in mystery in the eyes of many secular beholders who respect her. While Mother Teresa's religious admirers consider her ability for 'paranormal' communication as an undeniable proof of her 'divine' nature, others who are not religious and who do not necessarily object to her work and legacy could well perceive it as evidence of mental disturbance.

My intention here is not to approve or disapprove of the opposing interpretations about Mother Teresa's 'paranormal' abilities. Instead, I intend to offer a middle way which would hopefully be useful to approach her figure and legacy without preconceptions. It is my belief that the more details we know about the personal lives of influential people, especially if they are invested with 'supernatural' powers, the easier it would be to answer some of the puzzling questions about them and human nature in general.

Considering how much Mother Teresa was immersed in literature (secular and religious) from a young age,² her strong ambition to become a writer, and the obvious creative flair she displayed in the poems she wrote in Skopje (Gjergji, 1990, p. 20), and in numerous letters she sent from India to her family and friends in the Balkans from 1929 onwards (Porter, 1986, pp. 35–38, 40–41), it is not difficult to see how the educated, enthusiastic and imaginative young woman, who turned into a devout nun, could at times, especially when she was suffering from recurring bouts of ill health, have blurred reality with fantasy.

A string of coincidences also seem to have strengthened Mother Teresa's conviction in God's intervention to help her in fulfilling her vocation as Jesus' special 'envoy' to alleviate the suffering of the poor. In her speeches, press conferences and books penned by her, or by her admirers on her behalf, she would often mention moments of crises when things had finally turned out to be all right out of the blue. Food, money, clothes and shelter were allegedly made available to Mother Teresa and her sisters and brothers when most needed and least expected. Mother Teresa never saw such occurrences as just coincidences.³ Neither did her supporters and admirers whose numbers grew as a result of her 'divine' powers to seek and always secure God's help.

As the news about Mother Teresa's extraordinary powers to secure God's intervention for the sake of the poor at the 11th hour began to spread, she came to be

seen as the modern personification of a shamanic figure par excellence. Likewise, her unique devotion to *care* for the sick was gradually but steadily perceived and interpreted as a miraculous power to *cure* them. Everything about Catholic saints—clothes, strands of hair, possessions, books, letters, vials of blood—is venerated and cherished dearly by their brethren after their death. In Mother Teresa's case, however, her sanctity took root and flourished during her lifetime. Rich and poor, intellectuals and uneducated people, believers and unbelievers, Catholics and followers of other faiths who had been in contact with her or had only heard about her were gradually falling under her spell.

Following the 1968 BBC interview in London, Mother Teresa's charisma also began to spread across the 'secular' and 'rational' Western Europe. Many people who met her in the late 1960s and early 1970s did not know what to make of her. There were some, however, who had felt spellbound in her presence, and their numbers kept on growing throughout the 1980s and the 1990s.⁴ Stories about Mother Teresa's positive impact on people's lives mushroomed not only among Catholics but also among non-Catholics and the secular minded.⁵ The Mother Teresa 'fan-club', it appears, was and remains a very broad church.

Mother Teresa's opponents, on the other hand, find stories about her 'supernatural' abilities ridiculous and bizarre. They are particularly keen to make fun of the incident involving the controversial BBC journalist Malcolm Muggeridge who in 1969 went to Calcutta to prepare a documentary about Mother Teresa. Referring to the incident in his 1971 book *Something Beautiful for God: Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, Muggeridge explains that filming inside the Home for the Dying proved problematic because the place was dimly lit. Reluctantly, the cameraman Ken Macmillan eventually shot some footage inside. Confident that he would fail to record anything, however, he also shot some footage outside the building.

But the cameraman had obviously worried in vain. Much to his and Muggeridge's surprise, when the film was processed in London, they noticed that 'the part taken inside was bathed in a particularly beautiful soft light, whereas the part taken outside was rather dim and confused' (Muggeridge, 1971, p. 41). Both Muggeridge and Macmillan were delighted with the unexpected result but not for one and the same reason. For Macmillan there was no mystery involved. He had taken delivery of some new film made by Kodak shortly before going to Calcutta. This is Macmillan's reaction to the pleasant surprise:

'That's amazing. That's extraordinary.' And I was going to go on to say, you know, three cheers for Kodak. I did not get a chance to say that though, because Malcolm, sitting in the front row, spun round and said: 'It's divine light! It's Mother Teresa. You'll find that it's divine light, old boy.' And three or four days later I found I was being phoned by journalists from London newspapers who were saying things like: 'We hear you've just come back from India with Malcolm Muggeridge and you were the witness of a miracle.' (Hitchens, 1995, pp. 26–27)

Muggeridge did his best to spread the news about the 'miracle'. He was so eager to tell people about his divine experience that it soon turned almost into an obsession. In his

own words, 'I fear I talked and wrote about it to the point of tedium, and sometimes of irritation' (Muggeridge, 1971, p. 45). But who can blame Muggeridge for being carried away? After all, miracles are not daily occurrences, not even for journalists. And since not many mortals were with him in Calcutta to witness the miraculous event for themselves, Muggeridge naturally saw it as his own sacred duty to describe the paranormal encounter as vividly and accurately as possible to humanity at large:

I myself am absolutely convinced that the technically unaccountable light is, in fact, the Kindly Light [Cardinal] Newman refers to in his well-known exquisite hymn . . . Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying is overflowing with love, as one senses immediately on entering it. This love is luminous, like the haloes artists have seen and made visible round the heads of the saints. I find it not at all surprising that the luminosity should register on a photographic film . . . I am personally persuaded that Ken recorded the first authentic photographic miracle. (Muggeridge, 1971, pp. 41–44)

Muggeridge's interpretation of the 'miracle' and his unashamedly partisan portrayal of Mother Teresa's image and work in his 1969 television documentary, the 1971 book and numerous interviews undoubtedly heightened his 'celebrity' status. His career as a journalist was also given an unexpected boost. This was hardly surprising. After all, Muggeridge had scooped the 'miracle' story of the twentieth century. It is not often that a journalist has the chance to offer his contemporaries the opportunity to see with the naked eye what countless generations hope for in vain for centuries. Not many mortals have been blessed to witness a miracle since Moses parted the Red Sea, Jesus walked on water, and Mohammed ascended to and returned from heaven. Muggeridge must have really felt like the chosen one.

Muggeridge's 'miracle claim' and the noise he made about it caused some embarrassment to the Catholic Church. None the less, the story stuck. Muggeridge the journalist paved the way for the elevation of Mother Teresa to the unique position of a living saint. Four years after the publication of his saint-making book *Something Beautiful for God*, on 29 December 1975 *Time* magazine accompanied Mother Teresa's portrait on the front cover with the caption: 'Messengers of Love and Hope—Living Saints'.

The news about the miracle called Mother Teresa was music to the ears of a largely sceptical but willing-to-be-deceived secular Western audience. It is always good to know that we are not a God-forsaken race, that there is still hope for redemption, that we are looked after by a divine power, that we have the means of finding proof about the existence of our heavenly Father and communicating with him if not on a one-to-one basis then at least through the mediation of a nun called Mother Teresa.

'We need not be theologians,' Daniel J. Boorstin remarked in 1962, 'that we have shifted responsibility for making the world interesting from God to the newspaperman . . . If there were not many intriguing or startling occurrences, it was no fault of the reporter. He could not be expected to report what did not exist' (1992, p. 8). In a way, the newspaperman has been reporting 'what did not exist' since the dawn of the modern press. Reporting the real and the unreal, or what Boorstin calls

'pseudo-events', was a seminal feature of the news industry from the start. Boorstin rightly laments that 'pseudo-events' seem to have taken over, but he apparently did not foresee the extraordinary length some journalists would go to and the sources and the means they would employ to fabricate them. In the case of the 'divine' light recorded in the Home for the Dying, we apparently discovered yet another potential of the media: the ability to produce miraculous pseudo-events. If God was indeed dead, thanks to modern technologies we could reincarnate him, and if he never existed in the first place, we could literally invent him. Apparently, we have not only the mental gift to imagine miracles but also the means to materialize them.

Technology obviously does not necessarily make myths distant and irrelevant. On the contrary, it manufactures them as commodities that are increasingly in demand. As the journalist Christopher Hitchens puts it, 'modern technology and communications have ensured ... that rumour and myth can be transmitted with ever greater speed and efficiency to the eyes and ears of the credulous' (1995, p. 27).

The fact that Mother Teresa herself was instrumental in creating the myth about her 'paranormal' abilities, something she later came to regret,⁶ does not necessarily belittle the significance of her work in Calcutta. Nor does the endorsement of her saint-like status by devout Catholics and 'sensationalist' journalists like Muggeridge make her lifetime devotion to the poor less appealing to millions of people who do not necessarily believe in miracles allegedly recorded by Kodak. If Mother Teresa's saintly nature is a matter for debate, her commitment to her vocation and to the poor remains exemplary if not unique.

This is one of the reasons why the Indian media, both Catholic and non-Catholic, were keen to support and advertise her work from the start. And not only the Indian media. From the 1950s onwards, many leaders in India and West Bengal were eager and willing to fully endorse and sponsor Mother Teresa's charity work. Politicians such as the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, and Indian Prime Ministers like Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi would often employ the Bengali and Indian press to put and keep Mother Teresa constantly in the spotlight. Thanks to numerous Indian leaders' direct interest in her, the Indian political establishment and the Indian media acknowledged Mother Teresa as a 'living saint' before she caught the lenses of the European and American media, even before the miracle-spotter Muggeridge. In July 1962 Mother Teresa made headlines in the Indian press thanks to her good friend Dr Roy. Interviewed on his 80th birthday, Dr Roy surprised his fellow countrymen by the tribute he paid to the Catholic nun. 'As I climbed the steps of the Writers' Building', he told a *Calcutta Statesman* reporter, 'I was thinking of Mother Teresa who devotes her life to the service of the poor.' The same paper commented that 'Dr Roy felt that Mother Teresa was doing magnificent work. She served those who were most miserable and found no place in hospitals, and among them were lepers and cholera patients' (Egan, 1986, p. 359). Asked by a Christian audience in the late 1960s what he thought of Mother Teresa, Dr Zakir Husain, the Muslim president of India, replied: 'In your lexicon I believe this woman is a saint' (Spink, 1998, p. 159). This may explain why the Indians took to their hearts a foreigner

and a Catholic missionary like Mother Teresa. They acknowledged and appreciated from the first her selflessness and devotion to the poor, the orphans, the old and the infirm who had been abandoned by their families and ignored by neighbours.

The Indian political establishment was interested that the 'saintly' Mother Teresa was widely known in Calcutta and throughout India. It was equally important that the news about her spread around the world. The leaders of India had their own agenda in presenting the nun as a 'saint' and they used the media very effectively to achieve their aims. Their efforts were soon to produce dividends. The Catholic nun proved very helpful to them in the wake of independence from Britain and separation from Pakistan in 1947, and the civil war in 1971 that led to the creation of Bangladesh to keep secularism alive and promote India abroad as a tolerant and welcoming nation. Likewise, successive Indian governments, backed by the Indian media, used Mother Teresa to push forward with their progressive reforms to better the lives of millions of citizens traditionally abandoned and shunned by the class-conscious and caste-ridden Indian society. Their message could not have been any clearer: if a white Western woman, a Roman Catholic nun, could show so much love and affection for India's abandoned children, lepers, untouchables, and the dying old, the Indians too were surely capable of finding enough love, compassion and tolerance in their hearts to show the same noble sentiments. After all, Mother Teresa was hardly saying or doing something the Indians themselves had not heard or done before. With her charity work, she was rendering her contribution, small as it was, to keep alive a not much-publicized Calcuttan and Indian tradition furthered by 'home-grown' humanists like the 1913 Nobel Prize laureate for literature Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, another great twentieth-century media icon, and several of her contemporaries such as Pandurang Shashtri Athavale and Acharya Shri Chandananji. In the words of an Indian journalist in the late 1970s, Mother Teresa and her Sisters:

with their serene ways, their saris, their knowledge of local languages ... have come to symbolise not only the best in Christian charity, but also the best in Indian culture and civilisation, from Buddha to Gandhi, the greatest saints, the seers, the great lovers of humanity with boundless compassion and consideration for the underprivileged: what Shakespeare called the 'quality of mercy'. (Spink, 1981, p. 227)

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s Mother Teresa became the personification of human love not only in India but also throughout the world. Millions of people, irrespective of their colour, creed, nationality, social status, political beliefs and financial position, saw in her work the answer to some of their problems. The nun, it appears, came to be regarded as a modern sage who had found a purpose in life which had nothing to do with materialistic values. Through her much-publicized simple life, her strong faith in God, her belief in the goodness of human nature, her humanitarian work and her veneration for life, many people in India and especially in the West apparently 'discovered' a new purpose in life for themselves. In a materialistic world, people apparently believed they had to be grateful to Mother Teresa for showing them a different and equally satisfying way of living. Western individualism and materialism

were single-handedly challenged by a tiny and unpretentious nun who became an idol for the poor as well as for the rich, for believers as well as non-believers.

Mother Teresa was aware that she would never have had such an appeal to so many people without the constant support of her friends in high places and, equally important, if she was not backed all the way by the Indian and the world media. Her relationship with the media, however, has hardly been an uninterrupted long honeymoon. The first criticism about her appeared in the *Boston Globe* on 16 October 1983. Sylvia Whitman, the author of the uncomplimentary feature, had spent a couple of months as a volunteer in Calcutta a year earlier. In her piece, Whitman takes issue, although indirectly, with the way in which the vulnerable people in the care of Mother Teresa and her sisters were treated. The media criticism of Mother Teresa began in earnest, however, only in the early 1990s. In April 1992, for instance, *The Nation* ran Christopher Hitchens's article 'The ghoul of Calcutta', which has set the tone for much of the criticism against the nun ever since.⁷ In addition to reporters like Hitchens, the list of Mother Teresa's opponents includes theologians such as Ken Matto, and academics such as the feminist scholar Germaine Greer. These and other critics of Mother Teresa find absolutely nothing positive in her work in India and throughout the world. Like other fierce adversaries, they also adopt an essentially structuralist approach when assessing the nun's personality, as well as the scope, intentions and the consequences of her work.

Contrary to the subjectivists, the structuralists investigate celebrity 'as the expression of universal structural rules imbedded in culture' (Rojek, 2001, p. 33). To them, celebrities are manufactured and expected to serve the powers that make them famous. In the case of Mother Teresa, her structuralist opponents argue, her role as a fabricated media icon was manifold: to legitimize the exploitation of the poor, spread Christianity in non-Christian lands, preach a fake Gospel, perpetuate the humiliation of Third World countries, present as normal the subjugation of women by men, and help the West to ease its guilty conscience about its colonial legacy in India and other developing countries.

Structuralist interpretations of Mother Teresa's figure are often based on conspiracies. The Washington-based British journalist Christopher Hitchens, for instance, believes that she was essentially a fundraiser for the Vatican. This, he argues, is the reason why she was willing to be seen more often than not in the company of a dictator like 'Baby Doc' Duvalier of Haiti, a disgraced businessman like American Charles Keating, or a shady media mogul like Robert Maxwell. Hitchens is one of the first journalists to express concern, and perhaps not without reasons, about millions of dollars donated to Mother Teresa to help the poor and which allegedly still remain unaccounted for. Hitchens depends for information about Mother Teresa's still untraceable 'hoards of money' mainly on the testimony of Susan Shields, a former member of the Missionaries of Charity order (1995, pp. 43–48).

Hitchens's scathing criticism of Mother Teresa as a conspiratorial religious figure can be matched only with the vitriolic attacks against her by the Indian physician Dr Aroup Chatterjee. Different from Hitchens, Chatterjee occasionally gives Mother

Teresa some credit for her charity work in Calcutta, especially before her first encounter with Muggeridge in 1968. All the same, Chatterjee's well-researched 2003 book *Mother Teresa: the Final Verdict* also abounds in conspiracy theories. Chatterjee argues that those who initially made Mother Teresa a public face in the West were very much part of a carefully crafted conspiracy against India and especially against his native West Bengal and its capital Calcutta. He singles out mainly three chief 'conspirators': the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, the former American Secretary of Defense, who later became President of the World Bank, Robert Strange McNamara, and the French author and scriptwriter Dominique Lapierre.

Chatterjee is adamant that Muggeridge, McNamara and Lapierre bore strong personal grudges against the Calcuttans. In the case of Muggeridge, argues Chatterjee, he disliked the former imperial city for its independence movement, its liberal humanism, its emancipated and proud middle-class women, and its early attachment to Marxism. On a personal level, Muggeridge allegedly despised Calcutta and its people because he could never forgive the sophisticated Bengali intellectuals for patronizing him during the several years he was posted there as a journalist. As for McNamara, Chatterjee insists, the American politician-businessman never forgave the Calcuttans for the massive demonstrations they held in protest at his visit to the city as Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War. The third conspirator, Lapierre, argues Chatterjee, found it impossible to stomach the humiliation he had experienced in Calcutta when he was shooting on location the 'image-smearing' film *City of Joy* in 1991. In the words of the film's producer Jake Eberts, the cast and the crew were faced all the time with 'riots, firebombs, government protests, lawsuits and crowds marching in the streets' (Eberts *et al.*, 1992, p. 20). Calcuttans made it clear to Lapierre and his team that they would not tolerate easily their collective humiliation in the eyes of the world.

If one is to take seriously all the facts recorded by Chatterjee, it is not very difficult to see how an alleged 'MI6 agent' and CIA corroborator like Muggeridge,⁸ a 'war criminal' like McNamara (Chatterjee, 2003, p. 62), and a 'profit-driven' and 'sensationalist' artist like Lapierre were intent on paying the Calcuttans back for the personal insults they had received there. Interestingly enough, notes Chatterjee, all the 'conspirators' were devout or born-again Catholics who apparently had never thought highly of India and the Indians. Moreover, Chatterjee believes that these 'malicious' influential people found in Mother Teresa the ideal person to get even with Calcutta. Chatterjee never accuses Mother Teresa of racism but he is adamant that she was a very useful tool in the hands of these three white Christian 'racists'. In his view, the three of them found in Mother Teresa the ideal 'simpleton' they needed to settle their old scores with the city of Calcutta once and for all.

Chatterjee rightly argues that Muggeridge and McNamara were instrumental in securing the much-coveted Nobel Prize for Mother Teresa in 1979. It is very doubtful she would have ever been awarded the distinguished prize if these two allies had not been able to secure the energetic support of several American senators such as Pete Domenici, Mark O. Hatfield and Hubert Humphrey. By the time these and other

influential political players supported her nomination for the Nobel Prize, initially in 1978 and then again in 1979, they had already been involved in fundraising activities for Mother Teresa. It is interesting to note that it was around this time that Mother Teresa modified her stance on the sensitive issue of abortion to coincide completely with the views of Muggeridge and of his powerful American friends.

What Chatterjee fails to acknowledge, however, is that far from being a 'simpleton saint', Mother Teresa was a very shrewd practical woman. She played the game of her 'conspirator' backers from the fields of the media, politics and film for as long as they helped her to achieve her main goal in life: Mother Teresa went to India to serve Jesus.

Indian intellectuals such as Aroup Chatterjee (2003), Krishna Dutta (2003) and Dhiru Shah (2003), who are critical of Mother Teresa, obviously believe she played a major part in creating and sustaining the unsavoury image of Calcutta in the West. While I do not hold Mother Teresa responsible for Calcutta's negative media coverage, I fully understand Chatterjee's and his fellow Indians' consternation. The depiction of what was once one of the most fascinating cities of India as 'hell on earth' reveals some of the weakest aspects of the Western media: its partiality, sensationalism and tendency for selective information about those 'alien' parts of the world that we often tend to humiliate at worst and patronize at best. Calcutta, Bangladesh, Albania or Columbia become newsworthy in the West mainly for reasons related to floods, famine, epidemics, drugs, human trafficking, economic crises and political unrest (Alpion, 2003, p. 25).

In this context, Chatterjee and other Bengali intellectuals who are critical of Mother Teresa are right to be upset about the constant negative media coverage that their city has been exposed to for so long. What they also should bear in mind, however, is that Mother Teresa did not have any hidden agenda against their city as such. In her interviews, speeches and books she never singled out Calcutta as being the poorest place on earth. Nor did she ever make any disparaging remarks against its people. On the contrary, she always commended them for their religious tolerance and generosity. More importantly, whenever she spoke about the poor of Calcutta she also refereed to the poor in other countries, both in the developed and the undeveloped world.

By the time the world press focused its cameras on Mother Teresa of Calcutta in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, in spite of its unparalleled economic and cultural heritage in India and throughout the British Empire, her adopted city had already been stigmatized in the West. The writings of Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) and Margaret Rumer Godden (1907–1998) represent only a small part of the huge archive of unsympathetic literature about Calcutta. Western reporters have been drawing for decades upon this far from flattering literature to present this part of India as the epitome of poverty and human depravity. The situation has not changed for the better even today and it seems that the tabloidization and degradation of the city of Calcutta and of its proud citizens will continue to go unchecked for quite some time.

One could argue that Calcutta's 'unsavoury' reputation in the West was the price this corner of India and its people had to pay for the headaches they caused the British *sahibs* from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards. Moreover, the

intellectuals of Calcutta apparently did not do themselves a favour in the eyes of the West with their open sympathy for Marxism throughout the twentieth century. While all East European countries have been eager to wipe out any trace of their communist legacy following the domino-effect collapse of their communist governments in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Calcutta is one of the few places outside the former Soviet Union where one can still find statues of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.

Some Indian intellectuals believe that the West would not have been able to demean the city of Calcutta, to the extent that it obviously has, unless Western propaganda had found 'collaborators' and 'conspirators' from within India. The Atlanta-based Indian writer Dhiru Shah, for instance, blames the 'westernised' Indians, some of India's 'Anglo-Americanised', 'self-serving' and 'dishonest' politicians as well as some sections of the Indian press for presenting Mother Teresa as the only person in India who '[was] engaged in caring for the poor and helpless folks' (Shah, 2003). Aroup Chatterjee, however, holds that his native Bengal and Calcutta have been stigmatized by the Indian political establishment and the Indian media because they envy the Bengalis for their pride and achievement.⁹ Chatterjee and other Indian scholars who hold this view are keen to mention the comment made by the Indian nationalist leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale: 'What Bengal thinks today, India will think tomorrow.'

Some of the conspiracy theories involving Western countries, Western media, the Catholic Church, Indian politicians and the Indian media are certainly far-fetched. It is rather absurd to think that Mother Teresa could generate so much support because of a global conspiracy against India, Bengal or Calcutta. The nun was not supported by the capitalist West to spite the Marxists of Calcutta. Mother Teresa was known to have been on good terms with many of the city's communist officials. Nor was she deemed an ideal candidate for the Nobel Prize, as Chatterjee argues, because she was originally from Albania which in the 1960s had officially adopted atheism. The fact of the matter is that, contrary to the version of events presented by the Enver Hoxha regime, throughout the Cold War, Albania on its own was never considered such an important member of the communist bloc to have warranted the West's special attention.¹⁰

Considering the constant attention the Indian and world media paid to Mother Teresa's charity work in Calcutta after she was awarded the much-publicized Nobel Prize in 1979, it was inevitable that the city's image would suffer. This, however, does not justify the predominantly negative picture of Mother Teresa that Chatterjee and other Indian and Western critics of her depict relentlessly in their writings. While the 'divinity' of Mother Teresa is to some extent the outcome of Mother Teresa's own words about herself as well as the end result of the efforts of many people, countries and institutions (political, religious, business, media) that apparently took a lasting and calculated interest in her persona and work, it would be unfair to brush aside as insignificant, and even worse as devious, the almost seven decades of her life she spent trying to help the poorest of the poor in person, through her Sisters, Brothers and Co-workers, or by bringing them to the attention of those who have the power and the resources to do something to alleviate their hardships.

Mother Teresa's devout opponents are inclined to discredit not only her but also anyone who supported her. This is the reason why they dig deep into the personal lives of several of the nun's friends. The numerous derogatory comments that Hitchens and Chatterjee make in their books against Malcolm Muggeridge, Robert S. McNamara, Dominique Lapierre or Ronald Reagan are at times rather too personal and vindictive, and, as is often the case in Hitchens's writings, in bad taste, insulting and even banal. While both critics have raised some serious issues about the motives and nature of Mother Teresa's work in and outside India, their uncompromisingly hostile attitude towards her and those who supported her has undermined considerably the value of their criticism. Likewise, some Indian opponents of the 'Saint of the Gutters', as the Indian press often refers to Mother Teresa, have ended up producing, either on purpose or unwittingly, what one could consider as 'muck-raking' criticism.

The personal attacks mounted on Mother Teresa's supporters are partly related to their allegedly chequered past as well as their not so holy intentions in backing the work of this particular Christian missionary. On the other hand, one could interpret such attacks as an indication of the pent-up frustration and failure of Mother Teresa's committed opponents to uncover something embarrassing and humiliating about the nun herself. The unprecedented media attention Mother Teresa used to generate for almost 50 years in India and throughout the world was bound to expose many personal details about her. In being a celebrity, it was inevitable that her life would become 'public property', that people would want to know as much as possible about the woman behind the nun.

The vast literature on this religious celebrity, however, would disappoint anyone hoping to find there revealing details about the private Mother Teresa. Accounts of her personal life remain rather sketchy even in the best authorized and unauthorized biographies. Both her subjectivist admirers and structuralist opponents have failed so far to produce a complete biography of Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, Mother Teresa's original name. As for those who approach her figure from a post-structuralist position, they too have been unable so far to 'uncover' the woman behind the nun. While Mother Teresa was undoubtedly a 'media star', analysing her life along straightforward post-structuralist lines employed when approaching the life of stars from the field of politics, media, sport, music and cinema remains problematic.

The star discourse emerged for the first time in the United States in the early 1910s when interest in actors went beyond their screen roles. John Belton holds that "[a]ctors develop a persona or portrait of themselves out of the personalities of the various characters they have played over the course of their careers and out of elements of their personal lives that have become public knowledge" (Belton, 2005, p. 98).

With the press becoming ever-more inquisitive and intrusive, many famous actors found it impossible to keep details of their personal lives out of the public gaze. The media played a crucial role in the transformation of actors into stars. As Christine Gledhill notes, '[a]ctors become stars when their off-screen life-styles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in importance' (2003, p. xiv). As the result of the information about the actors' personal lives made public by the media, the attention of

many film fans shifted from the screen characters to the real people who enacted them. This important shift was possible because of the emergence of what Richard deCardova calls, the 'star scandal' discourse (deCardova, 2003).

The unprecedented interest that the public started showing in the stars' intimate lives transformed not only the relationship between actors and their admirers but also redefined the notion of fame for screen actors. The 'star scandal' thus became an irreplaceable stepping stone to fame (or infamy) and celebrity status not only in twentieth-century America and the developed world but also across the developing world.

The 'star scandal' has hardly played any significant role in the celebrity status of Mother Teresa. This does not mean that she was and remains immune from controversial stories. On the contrary, thanks to the relentless efforts of opponents like Hitchens and Chatterjee to reveal the "real" Mother Teresa, the controversial has always been an important part in the often heated debates about her. Claims that Mother Teresa accepted preferential treatment in India and overseas, that she travelled in luxury, that she was treated in expensive clinics and mishandled millions of dollars are a familiar theme in the ever-growing critical literature about her. In spite of such sustained iconoclastic attacks on her figure, during her lifetime and after her death her image has hardly been dented seriously. So far her avowed opponents appear to have been unable to produce the 'killer' evidence that would damage Mother Teresa's reputation irreparably.

The main reason why Mother Teresa has apparently remained immune for so long from the 'star scandal' is because, unlike most stars, she does not seem to have suffered from the tensions resulting from the dichotomy between the *public face* that a celebrity has to constantly promote, and the *private self*, or what Chris Rojek calls the 'veridical self' (2001, p. 11), which the star tries to protect with fanaticism but often without success. In Mother Teresa's case, the private and the personal appear to have been one and the same thing. Although, like any other international 'star', she was constantly under media 'surveillance', throughout her long public life Mother Teresa never had to lash out at any photographer as the actor Johnny Depp did in London in 1999: 'I don't want to be what you want me to be tonight.'

It appears that Mother Teresa was a unique case among numerous twentieth-century celebrities because she could be in public what she was in private. This was quite an achievement for Mother Teresa and for those who supported and promoted her in a world teeming with paparazzi who are always scandal-hunting, thus undermining the careers of all sorts of famous people, including religious celebrities.¹¹

As a seasoned public figure Mother Teresa apparently succeeded where many media stars usually fail. Not only did she seem able to establish very good contacts with journalists, but she also appeared to have cast a spell on them. For her devoted supporters, the media veneration for Mother Teresa was and remains yet another proof of her 'saintliness'. Bob Geldof, however, found 'nothing other-worldly or divine about her' (Gray, 1990, p. 51) when he met her in 1985. If Bob the 'sinner' found anything extraordinary about his 'saintly' fellow charity worker, it was her skilful handling of

the media. She struck him as 'outrageously brilliant' (Gray, 1990, p. 49) for the way she dealt with the journalists: 'She made them laugh and she defined the terms of the questions they could ask her.' 'The way she spoke to the journalists', concluded Geldof, 'showed her to be as deft a manipulator of the media as any high-powered American PR expert' (Gray, 1990, p. 51).

To a large extent, Mother Teresa's good relation with the media and her ability as a 'deft manipulator' were made possible and tolerated mainly because of the high moral ground she occupied as a result of her work and simple preaching for almost 50 years in India and throughout the world. No political, religious and business support would have kept her in the public eye for five successive decades, unless the propaganda machine and the news industry had paid exclusive attention to her humanitarian work. The nun's status as an exemplary media icon is likely to remain secured for as long as the media focus exclusively on her unique selflessness and devotion to 'human debris'. Thanks to the media projection of her persona and work, the celebrity Mother Teresa has entered the consciousness of our age as the epitome of compassion for humanity. Whether or not she deserves this status is something that will continue to divide her admirers and supporters in the years to come. What is certain, however, is that in our sceptical age no one's sanctity can be taken for granted for too long, not even the sanctity of a media untouchable like Mother Teresa.

Notes

- [1] For accounts of Mother Teresa's poor health throughout the period 1910–1928 see Porter (1986), Gjergji (1990, pp. 11, 15), Spink (1998, p. 9), Sebba (1998, p. 17), Gjergji (2000, pp. 47, 54, 70) and Johnson (2003, p. 6).
- [2] For Mother Teresa's interest in reading as a child and as a young woman in Skopje during the period 1910–1928 see Gjergji (1990, pp. 21, 22, 2000, pp. 47, 58, 63).
- [3] For the importance that Mother Teresa and her admirers attached to coincidences see Egan (1986, pp. 362–363), Egan and Egan (1990, pp. 64–65) and Chawla (2002, p. 182).
- [4] While writing this article the author received several e-mails and letters from Catholic and non-Catholic admirers of Mother Teresa professing the huge impact she had apparently made on them when they had first met her. They explained Mother Teresa's charismatic appeal on them with her profound faith which enabled her to help people in a way that others cannot.
- [5] The author's interviews with several individuals who met Mother Teresa in the 1990s. The interviewees, who do not wish to be identified, were contacted between 2003 and 2005.
- [6] In her *Mother Teresa: an Authorised Biography*, referring to Mother Teresa's first call at the age of 12, her trusted biographer Kathryn Spink notes that this was 'an intensely personal experience on which she would not elaborate, other than to say that it did not take the form of any supernatural or prophetic apparition: "It is a private matter. It was not a vision. I've never had a vision"' (1998, p. 8).
- [7] For more information on Christopher Hitchens's critical stance on Mother Teresa see the following interviews he gave to S. Capen (1995) *Worldguide* (Palo Alto, CA), 24 Dec., Available at: <http://www.worldmind.com/Cannon/Culture/Interviews/hitchens.html>; M. Cherry (1996) 'Christopher Hitchens on Mother Teresa', *Free Inquiry* (New York), vol. 16, no. 4, Fall, Available at: http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/hitchens_16_4.html; and D. Postel (1998)

- 'The missionary position: Mother Teresa's crimes against humanity', *LiP Magazine* (Oakland, CA), 15 Sept., Available at: http://www.lipmagazine.org/articles/featpostel_56.htm (All accessed 1 Aug. 2003).
- [8] For Malcolm Muggeridge's alleged involvement with MI6 and the CIA see Chatterjee (2003, pp. 47, 51).
- [9] Aroup Chatterjee's letter to the author of 26 Jan. 2005.
- [10] See Lalaj (2004).
- [11] For more information on how Mother Teresa and those who supported her managed to keep away from the media any 'controversial' detail about her personal life that could put her 'saintly' image in jeopardy see Alpion (2004, pp. 240–241).

References

- Alpion, G. (2003) 'Oh! not Calcutta', *The Guardian*, 6 Sept, p. 25.
- Alpion, G. (2004) 'Media, ethnicity and patriotism—the Balkans "unholy war" for the appropriation of Mother Teresa', *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 227–243.
- Belton, J. (2005) *American Cinema/American Culture*, 2nd edn, McGraw-Hill, Boston.
- Boorstin, D. J. (1962) *The Image: a Guide to Pseudo-events in America*, Vintage Books, New York (Latest edition 1992).
- Carlyle, T. (1966) in *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. C. Niemeyer, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London.
- Chatterjee, A. (2003) *Mother Teresa: the Final Verdict*, Meteor, Kolkata, India.
- Chawla, N. (2002) *Mother Teresa*, Vega, London.
- deCardova, R. (2003) 'The emergence of the star system in America', in *Stardom, Industry of Desire*, ed. C. Gledhill, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 17–29.
- Dutta, K. (2003) 'Saint of the gutters with friends in high places', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 16 May, p. 29.
- Eberts, J., Joffé, J. & Medoff, M. (1992) *City of Joy: the Illustrated Story of the Film*, Newmarket Press, New York.
- Egan, E. (1986) *Such a Vision of the Street: Mother Teresa—the Spirit and the Work*, Doubleday, New York and London.
- Egan, E. & Egan, K. (eds) (1990) *Living the Word: a New Adventure in Prayer Involving Scripture, Mother Teresa, and You*, Collins, London.
- Gjergji, L. (1990) *Nëna Jonë Tereze Our Mother Teresa*, Drita, Ferizaj, Kosova.
- Gjergji, L. (2000) *Nëna e Dashurisë/Mother of Love*, Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosova, Prishtina, Kosova.
- Gledhill, G. (2003) 'Introduction', in *Stardom, Industry of Desire*, ed. G. Gledhill, Routledge, London and New York, pp. xiii–xx.
- González-Balado, J. L. (ed.) (1997) *Mother Teresa: In My Own Words*, Hodder & Stoughton, London.
- Gray, C. (1990) *Mother Teresa: the Nun Whose 'Mission of Love' Has Helped Millions of the World's Poorest People*, Exley Publications, Watford.
- Hitchens, C. (1992) 'The ghoul of Calcutta', *The Nation*, 13 Apr. 1992.
- Hitchens, C. (1995) *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, Verso, London and New York.
- The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments with Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.* (1989) New Revised Standard Version, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford.
- Johnson, E. (2003) *Mother Teresa: From Teacher to 'Living Saint'*, Franklin Watts, London and Sydney.
- Lalaj, A. (2004) 'Shqipëria, asnjëherë faktor i rëndësishëm', *Korrieri*, 29 Jun., Available at: <http://www.korrieri.com> (accessed 20 Dec. 2004).

- Matto, K. (1996) "'Mother' Teresa', *Biblical Discernment Ministries*—3, Available at: <http://www.scionofzion.com/teresa/htm> (accessed 29 Jul. 2003).
- Muggeridge, M. (1971) *Something Beautiful for God: Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, Collins, London.
- Porter, D. (1986) *Mother Teresa: the Early Years*, ISIS, Oxford and New York.
- Rojek, C. (2001) *Celebrity*, Reaktion Books, London.
- Sebba, A. (1998) *Mother Teresa: Beyond the Image*, Orion, London.
- Shah, D. (2003) 'Mother Teresa's hidden mission in India: conversion to Christianity', Aug., Available at: <http://www.indiastar.com/DhiruShah.htm> (accessed 16 Aug. 2004).
- Smith, A. (2002) 'All in a good cause?', *The Observer*, 27 Jan., pp. 45–47.
- Spink, K. (1981) *For the Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Her Missionaries of Charity and Her Co-workers*, Colour Library Information, Surrey, UK.
- Spink, K. (1998) *Mother Teresa: an Authorised Biography*, Fount, London.