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DOI:

[10.1080/19392397.2019.1567366](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2019.1567366)

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*Document Version*

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*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Alpion, G 2019, 'Why are modern spiritual icons absent in celebrity studies? The role of intermediaries in enhancing Mother Teresa's advocacy in India and Australia prior to the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize', *Celebrity Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2019.1567366>

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Checked for eligibility: 25/03/2019

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## **Why are modern spiritual icons absent in celebrity studies?**

### **The role of intermediaries in enhancing Mother Teresa's advocacy in India and Australia prior to the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

There is increasing consensus amongst scholars from various academic disciplines that the influence of celebrity culture on our lives is compatible to the function and impact of religion prior to the Enlightenment. Notwithstanding the growing body of literature on the correlation between celebrity culture and faith, so far little has been written on how they affect each other. The absence of spiritual icons in celebrity studies is also noticeable. This study explores the interrelationship between religion and celebrity culture by focusing on Mother Teresa's work in Calcutta and Melbourne during the 1949-1978 period. By the time the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize turned the nun into a global luminary, she was already a celebrity largely because of continued media interest in her work despite lacking a 'newsworthy' private life. The article also examines the role of some of her little known and hitherto unknown supporters in constructing her image as a spiritual and humanitarian icon. The study concludes that the interconnection between Mother Teresa's personal life, especially her spiritual darkness, and her ministry, her collaboration with the media, and the contribution of intermediaries in enhancing her advocacy collectively illustrate why religious celebrities should no longer be sidelined in celebrity studies.

## **KEYWORDS**

Celebrity studies; modern spiritual icons; media; Mother Teresa; intermediaries; celebrity advocacy; spiritual darkness

### **The absence of religion and spiritual personalities in celebrity studies**

Celebrity studies, Chris Rojek once remarked, is 'a foundling discipline' (2014, p. 455). The orphan metaphor is poignant also when approaching the sidelining of modern spiritual icons within the sociology of celebrity culture. Although they are not the only ignored constituency, their marginalisation is both conspicuous and puzzling given the presumed growing affinity between celebrity culture and religion.

For some, this affinity is of a 'complementary' nature (Bennett 2011, p. 445). Others hold that fame and its related industries, including science fiction (Jindra 1994), perform roles similar to that of religion and religious institutions before the Enlightenment. There is also the view that celebrity culture has somehow replicated religion (Maltby et al. 2002), thus emerging as a dominant modern manifestation of spirituality (Alpion 2007).

The fact that religion, like everything else nowadays, has gone through the twin processes of 'celebrification' and 'celebritization' (Driessens 2012), does not mean that religious personalities became 'celebrities' in modern times. Nor did spiritual figures metamorphose into 'stars' only with the advent of the media age.

Charismatic religious figures had a following and were mobbed much in the same way as present-day celebrities before the emergence of modern reporting and fandom. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, icons, relics and oral culture were crucial to sustaining popular adulation for spiritual leaders (Howells 2011, Kleinberg 2011). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, followers' oral

testimonies were instrumental in turning female stigmatics into 'religious celebrities' (Graus 2017).

The marginalisation of religious personalities in celebrity studies is baffling given their role in and importance to organised religions. The Vatican, for instance, employs 'strategic canonisation' to promote 'models of sanctity' through the elevation of 'celebrity saints' (Bennett 2011, p. 438).

The sidelining of spiritual personalities is anomalous especially given the significance of the religious notion of charisma to celebrity culture and the study of celebrity. As such, one wonders what prevents celebrity studies scholars from exploring renowned religious figures, at least from a charisma perspective.

This article does not purport to identify all the reasons why celebrity studies continues to ignore the interrelationship between fame industry and religion and the role of the former in the construction of religious personalities. Such reasons are numerous and some of them too complex to be addressed satisfactorily in a journal article. Others, such as political correctness, the re-emergence of militant religion, and the proliferation of religiously-motivated terrorist attacks are not within this study's remit.

This article focuses on five reasons. The first has to do with 'the inherent secular tendency' of modern social sciences (p. 440). This implies that the sociological study of celebrity reflects 'the secularization thesis', according to which modernisation and rationalisation have led to 'the displacement of religion from the centre of human life' (Bruce 2013, p. 1).

Notwithstanding its decline since the Renaissance, organised religion is proving more resilient than predicted by Émile Durkheim and other social theorists. Rather than its disappearance, we are witnessing the weakening of the hold of religion's 'traditional forms' and 'the displacement of religious emotion into other areas' (Tucker 1968, p. 733), including popular culture. This explains why symbolic communities, such as Star Trek fandom, are seen as 'quasi-religions' and as a part

of the 'sacralization' offering resistance to the secularisation and rationalisation of modern life (Jindra 1994).

The second reason is related to the preferential treatment of religion. This privileging, deemed both unjustified and dangerous, occurs 'in public discussions of ethics in the media and in government' (Dawkins 2007, p. 43) and in a number of academic disciplines.

The 'favouritism' enjoyed by religion has not stopped some scholars from exploring the interconnection between celebrity culture and faith and certain aspects of religious authority from a celebrity culture perspective. So far, though, this correlation is addressed mainly in publications in fields such as sociology of religion (Corcoran and Wellman Jr. 2016), religious studies (McCutcheon and Richman 2016), psychology (Maltby et al. 2002), media and cultural studies (Alpion 2006), and social and cultural history (Kleinberg 2011).

The third reason is related to a reluctance to 'trespass' into theology's domain. Dubbed 'a continual insult to human reason' (d'Holbach 2004, p. 13) at the end of the nineteenth century, this discipline's standing has hardly improved since. To some, there is no place for this 'pre-Enlightenment relic' in the twenty-first century university (Loughlin 2009, p. 221).

While theology's 'monopoly' of religion is untenable, so is the view that this discipline is past its sell-by date. Theological research remains an important aspect of our endeavours to understand the nature and importance of faith and organised religion.

Celebrity studies scholars occasionally venture into the domain of theology. Even in such rare cases, the tendency is to concentrate on saints (Howells 2011, Harris 2013) and past religious personalities (Natale 2013), rather than spiritual dignitaries who have passed away recently or are still alive.

The fourth reason is related to the prevailing reluctance to look at religious personalities 'as socially constructed celebrities' (Graus 2017, p. 56). Attempts to link spiritual icons to the celebrity industry are frowned upon by those with a religious

vocation (Neuhaus 2007) and their admirers amongst the laity (Liaugminas 2007), as much as religious institutions. The Vatican, for instance, 'has traditionally regarded sociological studies of sainthood as profane exercises', maintaining that 'saints are made by God, not the church, and any suggestion that human motives or institutions play a decisive role is unwelcome' (Woodward 1996, p. 118).

Finally, the fifth reason is linked to the presumption that religious personalities have only a public self. This, and the reticence they shroud themselves in, create the impression that they lack a personal life and lead an uninteresting existence.

This situation is epitomised by Mother Teresa (1910–1997). Although she always conducted her work under the glare of the media's spotlight, and is one of the most written about religious personalities of the modern age, very little is known about the private woman behind this public missionary.

Mother Teresa literature abounds with sweeping statements about her 'ordinary' and 'uninteresting' personal life. The lack of interest in her private self explains why, except for a few publications (Alpion 2004, 2007), an internationally renowned religious personality like her has yet to become a 'suitable' topic in celebrity studies.

Aware that Mother Teresa literature is thin on details about her personal life, the nun's biographers are keen to mention her repeated requests not to write about her as an individual. These requests, they argue, reflected primarily two things: her view that there was nothing worth recording about her family, and her inclination to attribute her success to God (Egan 1986).

There were many points of interest in Mother Teresa's life that would undoubtedly prove more interesting if she were a 'normal' celebrity. Her reticence, especially about her family members, also was not simply motivated by modesty or piety. She did not talk about her father because she never came to terms with his death (Alpion 2007, p. 159), maintained silence about her brother because of his association with Mussolini's army (p. 143), and avoided mentioning her mother and sister, living in communist Albania, lest the regime made their lives even more difficult (p. 141).

Mother Teresa kept her personal life private even when media interest in her soared as a result of her winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. As will be seen in the next section, by then, she had been dealing with the media for thirty years.

### **Mother Teresa – India’s unlikely celebrity**

Mother Teresa’s ‘symbiotic relationship’ with the media, it is claimed, began with a BBC documentary in 1969 (Bennett 2011, p. 447). By then, however, the nun had been making headlines for two decades. She attracted the attention of the media in Calcutta shortly after leaving the Loreto order in 1948. In the following year, her work with slum dwellers was covered by the city’s three leading English newspapers, *The Statesman*, *The Herald* and *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*.<sup>1</sup> From 1950 onwards (Anon. 1950a, 1950b), she became a regular news item in India.

Mother Teresa is not the first religious personality to employ the media to promote her work. Nor is she the first spiritual celebrity of the media age. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, Italian Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola used the newly introduced printing press to disseminate his sermons widely. In the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of spiritual mediums in the English-speaking world employed the popular press skilfully. Father Charles Coughlin used radio effectively at the start of the twentieth century to broadcast sermons across the United States.

Mother Teresa’s media involvement in India is of particular interest for two interrelated reasons: it began shortly after the country’s independence and at a time when Christian orders were instructed to stay low. This directive was issued following calls by some Indian leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi, for restrictions on the activities of Western missionaries and even their expulsion.

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<sup>1</sup> Calcutta’s English newspaper *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* ran from 1868 until 1991.

Mother Teresa was aware of the missionaries' precarious situation in the 'new' India. Nonetheless, not only did she find a new order when the Vatican was closing down congregations but also maintained a high media profile throughout.

Mother Teresa's involvement with the media was resented from the first by superiors from Loreto and other orders. Some of them apparently concluded that, by conducting her activities under the glare of publicity, she was belittling and eclipsing their work. Resentment for her was noticeable amongst some superiors in India also in the mid-1970s (Bernstein 1978, p. 270).

Mother Teresa's cooperation with the media was frowned upon also by the Church in India. Following a tip-off from a Catholic functionary and fellow newspaperman in Calcutta, reporter Desmond Doig wrote a supportive article on her in 1949. Only months later, he was cautioned by the same person: 'You'd better be careful, she's seeking publicity. The Church is rather concerned' (Doig 1988, p. 42).

Mother Teresa's positive media coverage in India was resented especially by some Indian nationalists and Hindu devotees, including a number of intellectuals. They argued that her image as the 'saviour' of Calcutta was built at the city's expense, and that such public humiliation was made possible mainly because of the 'capitulation' of the Indian media (Datta-Ray 1997).

Mother Teresa's Indian critics fail to acknowledge, however, that she did not invite the media to write about her. Nor did she single out Calcutta as the epitome of poverty. She never spoke ill of any city, country, faith or culture. In this respect, she differs radically from the aforementioned Father Coughlin who used radio and the press to preach hatred (Warren 1996).

Mother Teresa 'dealt' with the media differently also from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualist movement personalities. While she kept in touch with the media through voluntary 'mediators', the mediums employed assistants to announce and promote séances on the popular press. Their assistants also performed other roles normally associated with managers and agents in the entertainment industry.



The mediums usually charged fees for their séances. They also generated income from patronage (Natale 2013). Mother Teresa, on the other hand, never requested fees for her talks. Nor did she or her supporters organise fundraising events. To this day, her congregation depends on donations.

Finally, the mediums disclosed to assistants details about their personal lives, which were reported to popular press journalists. This information was publicised to maximise their profits and 'credibility' as 'professionals' (p. 95).

As mentioned earlier, Mother Teresa never shared personal information with the media. To protect her privacy, she even stopped cooperating with 'intrusive' reporters. On one occasion, she ensured that the journalist Sunanda K. Datta-Ray did not conduct a previously-agreed television interview because, during a preliminary meeting, he had asked her to explain how she differed from other 'social workers'. Horrified by the question, the nun had replied that God had told her to help the poor for the sake of her soul stressing 'the difference between social service as an end for those who are helped, and the service for the helpers' spiritual welfare' (Datta-Ray 1997).

Despite such occasional friction, unsurprisingly Mother Teresa retained good contacts with the media. She saw the media's positive impact on her ministry soon after the publication of the first few articles about her. It was through her mediated work, to borrow Sean Redmond's words (2014, p. 68), that she touched people, 'both in the metaphoric sense and in the lived and living sense'. They found her 'love in action' (Muggeridge 1971, p. 60) morally uplifting and were inspired to follow in her footsteps.

Indian media coverage of her work also drew the attention of influential leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru (Spink 1998, p. 77) and Jyoti Basu (Alpion 2007, p. 130), who became eager to befriend her. Reciprocating the friendship, she proved herself an effective and steadfast ally to forward-looking Indian lawmakers determined to implement positive discrimination policies aimed at helping the poor and those stigmatised by disease and low social status.

Moreover, the Indian media was instrumental in turning this foreign nun into a 'home-grown' heroine. In due course, this favourable publicity played a role in changing the country's lukewarm and, at times, hostile attitude towards Western missionaries into a more positive one.

Finally, the ongoing positive media coverage of Mother Teresa's work in India was instrumental in turning her into a sainted woman, thus initiating her popular canonisation when she was still unknown in the West.

While Mother Teresa's high-profile backers in India, especially amongst legislators, are known, her public image-makers and other mediators remain largely anonymous. This is true also for her supporters in Australia, one of the first Western countries to which she extended her activity.

In the next section, the focus is on one of Mother Teresa's most influential supporters. This person's role is second to none in drawing unprecedented international attention to her work in India and paving the way for her ministry's worldwide expansion.

### **Opportunity Knox**

In addition to God, in 1969, Mother Teresa attributed her congregation's success to Pius XII and Paul VI (Muggeridge 1971, p. 93). Notwithstanding the significance of the pontifical support, by then her ministry had also benefited from a number of other influential intermediaries. Amongst them, the most effective go-between was the Roman Catholic priest James Knox (1914–1983).

A career diplomat since 1950, Australian-born Knox became internuncio in India in 1957. Meanwhile, Mother Teresa's reputation was growing across the country. By the early 1960s, she ran homes in nine Indian states.

The nun and the internuncio became close friends from the start. This explains why she made him privy to her biggest secret (Teresa 2007, p. 253), known only to a handful of people in her lifetime.

The interest in Mother Teresa's private life increased after her death. Since then it has been claimed that her Skopje years and her father's unexpected death, when she was nine, played a crucial role in her decision to become a nun (Alpion 2007).

Mother Teresa did not join the religious life because she was 'a preternaturally religious child' (Higgins 2006, p. 142). Rather, being an exceptionally sensitive child, like other well-known religious figures such as John of the Cross and John Paul II, she turned to religion for comfort and in search of answers in the wake of experiencing inconsolable parental loss.

The publication in the 2000s of selections of Mother Teresa's letters to her spiritual directors and other private writings revealed for the first time that she had suffered from the phenomenon known as 'the dark night of the soul'.<sup>2</sup>

These writings illustrate convincingly that her spiritual aridity was not of a transitory, momentary nature. Nor was it caused by exposure to poverty and suffering, an aftermath of demanding targets, a 'paradoxical and totally unsuspected cost of her mission' (Kolodiejchuk 2007, p. 1), or the 'price' she paid for her order's speedy success (Neuner 2001).

Mother Teresa's spiritual darkness has been the focus of some studies mainly in the fields of theology and psychology (Frohlich 2008, Sundararajan and Kim 2014). Given the remit of the journals they have appeared in, their focus is not on the implications of this controversial aspect of her life to her standing and legacy. So far, her spiritual crisis is treated from a 'celebrity scandal' perspective primarily in the media (Hitchens 2007). As for celebrity studies scholars, they continue to stay clear of this controversial topic.

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'the dark night of the soul' comes from a literal translation of the title of the poem *La noche oscura del alma* by the 16th-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross. In Roman Catholic spiritual theology, the concept of 'the dark night' refers to a period of extreme spiritual desolation that eventually leads to a complete mystical union with God.

Mother Teresa's spiritual anguish began when she lost her father in 1919 (Alpion 2014). It intensified in the following three years when eight of her close relatives, whose story will be revisited briefly in the next section, died one after the other. Interestingly, it was in 1922, at the age of twelve, that she experienced what is known as 'the first call from God', and took an initial interest in missionary work.

During this sad time Mother Teresa went through a 'dual process'. On the one hand, she started replacing her dead biological father with Jesus, a divine paternal figure. On the other hand, the loss of her father and the other bereavements that befell her initiated her spiritual desolation (pp. 32–33).

Mother Teresa went to India at age eighteen to serve Jesus by helping the poor. As mentioned earlier, she admitted to have taken this decision primarily 'for the sake of her soul' (Datta-Ray 1997).

She realised shortly after arriving in India, however, that she had joined Loreto under false expectations (Alpion 2007, 2014). Contrary to the vision of this congregation's main figures Mary Ward (1585–1645) and Frances Teresa Ball (1794–1861), by then, Loreto nuns in Calcutta had little contact with the poor.

Loreto's educational orientation was crucial to Mother Teresa's decision to leave the order after seventeen years. Her private writings illustrate clearly that she took this step because she had not gone to India, to paraphrase her words, to 'spoil' rich children in 'select' missionary-run schools (Le Joly 1977, p. 63).

Charismatic religious leaders emerge at a time of 'radical social change' (Barnes 1978, p. 4). This is true also in Mother Teresa's case. She announced she would establish her congregation immediately after religious and communal violence engulfed Calcutta in mid-August 1946.

Her decision to leave Loreto was not determined only by outside events, though. They only served to remind her why she had joined the religious life and travelled to India in the first place.

Establishing the Missionaries of Charity, however, did not put an end to Mother Teresa's doubts about God's existence. Notwithstanding some momentary lapses (Teresa 2007, p. 177), her letters reveal that by the end of the 1950s and early 1960s, much to her disappointment, her spiritual pain had, if anything, worsened (p. 232). As she put it in April 1961, 'the place of God in my soul is blank – There is no God in me' (p. 2).

Desperate for a new diversion, it was during this time that expanding her work outside of India emerged as Mother Teresa's main objective. To achieve this, however, she first needed to secure permission from the Vatican.

Mother Teresa used a visit to the Holy See in 1960 to submit a request to operate worldwide. Shortly afterwards, her application was supported by James Knox. Being aware of her spiritual desert (pp. 253–254), this highly educated man understood better than any of her spiritual directors the positive impact that operating outside of India could have on her spirituality.

His long-standing friendship with Paul VI made Knox an ideal advocate of Mother Teresa. Following Knox's advice, the pontiff attended the thirty-eighth International Eucharist Congress in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1964. The visit, the first by any pope to India, was a tremendous success.

Before leaving India, Paul VI gave Mother Teresa the white Cadillac he used during the visit in Bombay. The papal gift was a public relations master stroke, drawing worldwide attention to the nun as never before (Dwan 1972, p. 3). The car became even more newsworthy when she raffled it to raise money for a leprosy clinic.

Paul VI's public acknowledgment of Mother Teresa should be seen in the context of Knox's influence on him and the directives of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962–1965). This event is important for three main reasons. Firstly, it highlighted the importance of charity to the Catholic faithful. Secondly, it recognised as never before the importance of the media to the Holy See. Thirdly, it revealed a

better understanding on the part of this institution of women's importance to the Church's apostolate.

Although 'feminist spirituality' is one of the most important 'postconciliar developments' (McBrien 2003, p. 39), it was not initiated by the Council. The 'feminization of religion' was triggered by female stigmatics a century earlier (Graus 2017, p. 56). Ironically enough, the Church had tried to stifle their popularity and influence as late as a couple of decades before the Council was convened.

Mother Teresa's ministry was not a postconciliar development. She had placed charity at the heart of her congregation, had been employing the media effectively to promote Christianity, and had become the epitome of 'feminist spirituality' more than a decade before the Council.

Knox's recognition and promotion of Mother Teresa should also be seen in the context of the impact of the Council on him. Attending three of its four sessions further enabled him to view her as a promising international Church asset.

This explains why Knox thought of Mother Teresa when he learned from a bishop from Venezuela, also attending the Council, that some of his parishioners could benefit from nuns who would be prepared to live and work with them (Egan 1986, p. 159).

At Knox's recommendation, Paul VI turned the Missionaries of Charity into a Society of Pontifical Right in February 1965. This enabled Mother Teresa to open her first home in Venezuela later that year.

The speed and order in which Mother Teresa expanded her work internationally from then onwards indicate that she was in a hurry to have a presence on all six continents. Having 'conquered' Asia, Latin America, Europe and Africa by 1968, she set up a base in Australia in 1969. Two years later she started operating in North America.

With his 'quiet influence' (p.184), Knox played a key role also in introducing Mother Teresa to Australia. This, and her attachment to this country, are the focus of the next section.

### **Mother Teresa's Australian connections**

Knox's role in organising the 1964 Eucharist Congress and papal visit to India, and his contribution during the proceedings of the Vatican Council were crucial to his career progression. In 1967, Paul VI appointed him Archbishop of Melbourne 'to have the pastoral experience of governing a diocese' before offering him a senior Vatican post (Waters 2007, p. 636).

Knox arrived in Melbourne at a critical time for the Roman Catholic Church and especially Catholic education in Australia. By then, efforts to replace Catholic schools with state-provided education had intensified so much that even some church leaders were resigned to the idea that the domination of Catholic educational institutions was over.

Knox combated this defeatist mood from the start. Thanks to his hard efforts, Catholic educational provision was not only preserved but also strengthened in the state of Victoria (Praetz 1980).

Given the nature of their work, Mother Teresa's sisters could not help Knox's education campaign. They were ideally suited, however, to assist two other causes he was just as passionate about: enhancing the rights and public role of Catholic women, issues which will be addressed later, and tackling the discrimination of the country's indigenous population.

Knox 'abhorred racism' (p. 636). His antiracism intensified in the 1950s when, as apostolic delegate to British East Africa, he witnessed the disastrous impact of ancestral land sequestration on the Kikuyu people.

Knox informed Mother Teresa of his 'abiding concern' (Egan 1986, p. 184) for Australia's natives shortly after arriving in Melbourne. It is not clear if he asked for her support or if she volunteered to help. One thing is certain, though. Being grateful and loyal to a fault, she was happy to return him the favour.

Her involvement with the aborigines began when their predicament was already an entrenched cause of sharp divisions in Australia. The forced removal, since 1883, of mixed race offspring, known as the 'stolen generations', reached a climax by the end of the 1960s.

The reception awaiting silver medallist Peter Norman on his return from the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, however, showed that the country still had a long way to go. Solidarising with two African-American athletes, who used the medal ceremony to stage a silent protest against racism, cost Norman his international career. Although he qualified regularly for other major tournaments, he never made it to the national team again.<sup>3</sup>

Mother Teresa's first visit to Australia took place in 1969. She made Melbourne her primary destination because of Knox and two other individuals.

The first one was Melbourne-born Ian Travers-Ball (1928–2000), also known as Brother Andrew since 1966 when he was put in charge of the male branch of the Missionaries of Charity. Mother Teresa and Brother Andrew were concerned about, what they saw as, the spiritual poverty of the Western world. Their congregation's expansion to Australia, therefore, was part of their efforts to address this issue.

The second person was Filomena Babaçi-Çuni (1916–1979), Mother Teresa's maternal first cousin. She was adopted at the age of six by Drane, the nun's mother,

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<sup>3</sup> In 2012, the Australian Parliament issued a posthumous apology to Peter Norman (1942–2006), thus recognising his role in promoting racial equality.



having lost all eight members of her family between 1919 and 1922.<sup>4</sup> This article is the first publication on Mother Teresa to record Filomena's existence and identity.<sup>5</sup>

Gonxhe Agnes Bojaxhiu, as Mother Teresa was called prior to becoming a nun, was closer to Filomena than her two biological siblings. The two girls shared a bedroom for six years until Gonxhe left Skopje in 1928. They resumed contact through correspondence after thirty-two years in 1960.

Filomena was always grateful to the Bojaxhius for taking her in. For their part, they remained always indebted to her for her financial support;<sup>6</sup> being a rich orphan, Filomena helped them during the difficult years they went through in the wake of the death of Gonxhe's father. To express her gratitude to Filomena, Drane lived with her until she created her family in 1937.

Like many Albanians in Skopje, Filomena and her husband were harassed during World War II by the invading Bulgarian troops. This was why they migrated in 1942, ending up in Melbourne in 1952.

Knox got in touch with Filomena shortly after taking up his post in Melbourne in 1967. Knowing how much the two women meant to each other, upon receiving confirmation about Mother Teresa's first visit to Melbourne in 1969, he went to Filomena to break the good news in person.

Mother Teresa and Filomena were reunited in Melbourne after four decades in 1969. From then until her death 10 years later, Filomena and her family played a role second only to Knox in supporting the nun's work in Australia. Their collective support is explored in the following section.

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<sup>4</sup> The information about Filomena Babaçi-Çuni and her family, included in this article, comes from interviews the author conducted with her daughter Rosa Çuni-Kuka and granddaughters Mary Lehtonen and Teresa Tanti in Melbourne in November 2011 and April 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The author covers Filomena's relationship with Mother Teresa in two studies, *Rooting Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her People* and *Filomena: Mother Teresa's Forgotten Sister*, due for publication in 2019 and 2020 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> All the information about Filomena and her family and the supporting documents mentioned and quoted in this article come from and are used with the kind permission of Rosa Çuni-Kuka.

## **A celebrity nun breaks bread with Australians**

Mother Teresa travelled to Australia ten times between 1969 and 1985. All the visits received high-profile media attention, including the initial one, despite her relative anonymity at the time.

On this occasion, her arrival was covered by the state of Victoria's leading broadsheet *The Herald*.<sup>7</sup> Its editorial on 8 March 1969 featured her photo under the headline 'Finding waifs', followed by the subtitle, 'That's Mother Teresa's job', in capital letters. Her 6 × 7-inch photo – taken that day – was the largest of the three other images on the same page.

The photo is followed by a brief article introduced by a third title, 'A nun who is famous for rescuing day-old waifs from among the millions of Calcutta is in Melbourne today'. The piece highlights two issues: her devotion to India's poor and vulnerable and the strong support she enjoyed there.

The latter point is illustrated by mentioning that she was the first non-Indian recipient of *Padma Shri*, incorrectly referred to as India's 'highest order', and the following exaggerated claim: 'no one, from the lowest of the poor to the highest ranking Government officials dares to interfere with their work in any way' (Anon. 1969a).

These details serve two functions. Firstly, they highlight the moral high ground Mother Teresa already occupied in India. Secondly, they are intended to pre-empt any opposition to her projects in Australia: if a Christian missionary is received so well in predominantly Hindu India, it stands to reason that she and her nuns would be welcome in Christian Australia. As such, the article's main message is not that, to rephrase Rojek's words (2001, p. 78), this 'figure of significance' had descended to break bread with the people of Australia but that they should be happy she had chosen them.

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<sup>7</sup> Launched in 1840, *The Herald* merged in 1990 with sister morning newspaper *The Sun News-Pictorial* to form *The Herald Sun*.

The article also mentions that Mother Teresa had named a high school, run by her order in India, after Knox, highlighting that ‘the name recalls the great love for the poor’ he ‘always showed’ as internuncio (Anon. 1969a). This praise is obviously a swipe at those resenting his appointment as archbishop without prior diocesan pastoral experience and at others disapproving of his efforts to defend and promote Catholic education in Australia.

Finally, the article mentions two important details: that Mother Teresa received upon arrival a cheque for \$1,000 from Australian Catholic Relief for one of her homes for children in India, and that she would return later that year with some of her nuns to work with aboriginals in Bourke.

Mother Teresa returned to Melbourne for the second time in 1969 in September, on the eve of the twenty-fourth Conference of the Australian Council of Catholic Women. The event was convened by Knox to implement the directive of the Second Vatican Council on widening women’s participation in public life. With their mission to assist Australia’s natives, Mother Teresa and her nuns became role models for women across the country in no time.

This time, Australian media focused also on Mother Teresa’s Melbourne relatives. The editorial of *The Advocate* on the day of her arrival, for instance, was titled ‘Mother Teresa meets sister’. Accompanying the piece is a 4 × 6.5-inch photo of Mother Teresa and five Indian nuns with Filomena, her husband Lukë, and their nine-year old granddaughter Mary, carrying a bouquet of flowers. Apparently, a few strings had been pulled to allow the relatives to meet the nuns immediately after leaving the plane, which features conspicuously on the background of the photo.

The article is primarily about Mother Teresa’s three relatives. They are referred to as her ‘sister’, ‘brother-in-law’, and ‘grandniece’ respectively. The incorrect information, apparently, came either from Mother Teresa or Knox. Filomena was so dear to the nun that she always introduced her as her ‘sister’.

Mother Teresa's promoters were keen to draw the media's attention to Filomena and her family to endear this unknown missionary to the Australian public. Her relatives presented the nun as someone who already had ties with the country.

For her part, Filomena disapproved of the media interest in her and her family, and was keen to set the record straight about the nature of her relationship with Mother Teresa. As a result of her intervention, an article on the nun's third visit to the country is titled 'When cousins meet' (Anon. 1972).<sup>8</sup> Referring to Filomena as Mrs Çuni, the piece initially mentions the circumstances in which her adoption had taken place. It then highlights that she did not want to talk to the media about Mother Teresa or 'be photographed or fussed over merely because she was related' to her. She explicitly told the reporter to write about 'Mother Teresa and her order...—not me'. This attitude explains why she features very rarely in the nun's media coverage although she accompanied her regularly during her visits in Australia.

When Filomena and her family were on the news, it was because of their own achievements. They were renowned for supporting immigrants from all ethnic backgrounds to settle down and integrate.

Mother Teresa was not mentioned even when the media wrote about Filomena's passing in 1979. The tellingly titled *Mail* editorial 'Albanian leader dies at 63', for instance, stresses that she 'was looked upon as a mother by young Albanian men and women in Australia' helping them 'with her own brand of social welfare' (Anon. 1979). When her husband died in tragic circumstances a year later, speaking at his funeral, the Mayor of Footscray compared him 'with our pioneers at the birth of this great nation' (Strauss 1988, p. 359).

While Filomena's and her offspring's reticence is remarkable, especially given their continued support to the Missionaries of Charity since 1960, their complete absence in the vast Mother Teresa literature is baffling. Some of the nun's friendly biographers, including Muggerridge, are known to have met Filomena and her family in Melbourne. Moreover, they were aware of Filomena's influence over Mother

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<sup>8</sup> The author regrets that the clipping of the editorial 'When cousins meet', secured from the Çuni-Kuka family archive, does not include the title of the Australian newspaper that ran it.

Teresa; she was the reason why the nun relaxed some stringent rules for her sisters in Melbourne.

While Filomena and her family remain to this day Mother Teresa's unsung heroes, they were always appreciated by Archbishop Knox. This explains why he remained in touch with them when he moved to the Vatican.

For her part, Filomena was grateful to Knox for speeding up her reunion with Mother Teresa. She and her family also appreciated the unwavering support he gave to her nuns in Melbourne.

Knox was instrumental especially in constructing Mother Teresa's image as an apostolic figure through Catholic publications. In its coverage of the second visit, for instance, Melbourne's Catholic weekly *The Advocate* referred to her as '[t]he Albanian-born apostle to India's dying and destitute' (Anon. 1969b, p. 2). The same divine appellation appears in the title of Peter Dwan's 1969 pamphlet *Mother Teresa: Apostle of the Unwanted*, issued by the Australian Catholic Truth Society.

The pamphlet marks the beginning of Mother Teresa literature. To put together this detailed account of the key moments of her ministry, Dwan apparently worked closely with her and Knox, who was its *imprimatur*.<sup>9</sup> The publication illustrates that this former Vatican radio journalist was a shrewd and effective public relations expert.

The pamphlet refers also to Knox's role in turning the Missionaries of Charity into a pontificate order. This detail is obviously meant to make Mother Teresa even more relatable to Australians: given how much she owed to one of Australia's sons, it was only natural that she wanted to benefit his country and people.

Moreover, the publication offers assurances that Mother Teresa's interest in Australia's poor was motivated by her strong conviction concerning 'the dignity of

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<sup>9</sup> Deriving from Latin 'let it be printed', *imprimatur* is a declaration authorising the publication of a book.

every man' (Dwan 1972, p. 23). As such, the document was intended to convey the message that the nun's advocacy was not politically motivated.

Given the sensitivity of Mother Teresa's projects in Australia, Dwan is keen to stress that her sisters were already successful with similar projects in India and Venezuela, that they themselves were of tribal origin, and that their main intention was to help Australian natives acquire new skills aiming at improving their economy and quality of life. Soon afterwards, these and other aspects of the nuns' work amongst the country's aborigines were reflected regularly in the media (Kirkpatrick 1972).<sup>10</sup>

Mother Teresa's standing in Australia was boosted further by the media coverage of her 1972 and 1973 visits, both associated with the fortieth International Eucharistic Congress, which was convened by Knox in Melbourne from 18–25 February 1973. At his invitation, she gave a keynote address at the conference on population and ecology. According to the Melbourne *Sun*, she 'looked out of place among the red-robed cardinals and bishops on the stage'. Nevertheless, 'the tiny, frail figure in white robes captured the hearts of 4,000 people', who 'roared in approval' when she rose to address the Congress (Anon. 1973a, p. 19). The jubilant reception made her speech one of the highlights of the Congress.

The Congress was a major platform for Mother Teresa to express her anti-abortion stance. In this respect, the event was a dress rehearsal for her Nobel acceptance speech and lecture in Oslo in December 1979 where she paid attention to the dignity of the poor and of the unborn child (Roberge 2017).

A well-illustrated publication commemorating the Congress was produced later that year. The general consensus was that the 'most striking photograph' of the event was 'the study of Cardinal Knox and Mother Teresa listening to a talk' at the abovementioned conference (Anon. 1973b, p. 3).

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<sup>10</sup> The author regrets that the clipping of Rod Kirkpatrick's article, titled 'A fight for dignity as well as money', secured from the Çuni-Kuka family archive, does not include the title of the Australian newspaper that ran it.

The positive media coverage of Mother Teresa in Australia in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s enhanced her reputation both in this country and internationally. This encouraged the nun to expand her activity further worldwide. Equally important, her work in Australia and the reunion with a long-lost family member in Melbourne served her as a welcome diversion from her spiritual emptiness.

These developments, however, did not put an end to Mother Teresa's spiritual desolation. If anything, her interior emptiness became worse from then onwards.<sup>11</sup> By all accounts, she was gnawed to the end by doubts about the existence of God (Teresa 2007, p. 307). The intensity and longevity of her spiritual dryness make her stand out from other canonised medieval and modern mystics such as Teresa of Ávila and Thérèse of Lisieux.

Mother Teresa's growing international fame, on the other hand, signalled a new stage in her attitude towards her own spiritual darkness. Partly because she knew that her condition was incurable and partly because she feared her secret could become public, by the mid 1950s she started requesting that her private writings pertaining to this issue were either returned to her or destroyed (pp. 5–6). As her fame grew, she talked less and less about her darkness even to her spiritual directors. When it came to protecting her image, the humble nun was as ruthless as the most modern PR-driven celebrity.

## **Conclusion**

Mother Teresa is one of the most publicised religious personalities of our time. Like other luminaries of the modern age, her image was constructed by others as much as herself.

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<sup>11</sup> The author is currently working on the study *Can Humans Know God? – Mother Teresa's Spiritual Conundrum*, which identifies the main stages of her dark night of the soul.

Notwithstanding her global icon status, like other renowned religious dignitaries, Mother Teresa's life and work have yet to attract the attention of celebrity studies scholars.

Concentrating on little known or completely new information about her life before she became an internationally-recognised personality, this article has shown that, far from being a one-dimensional public nun, Mother Teresa was a very complex private individual. Equally important, the study has revealed that taking an interest in the woman behind the habit does not 'secularise' or 'desacralise' her as a person or her ministry.

This is illustrated especially by the focus on Mother Teresa's spiritual agony and the contention that this lifelong condition determined not only her choice of vocation but also every decision thereafter. The severity and duration of her dark night of the soul do not belittle or trivialise her ministry and, equally important, her perpetual and undivided attention to the poor.

As far as Mother Teresa was concerned, what she did was not 'social work'. Nonetheless, it was the humanitarian aspect of her congregation's charism, more than anything else, which explains why this devout Roman Catholic nun was welcomed in a Hindu-majority country and venerated as a saint in her lifetime.

Finally, the article acknowledges that studying religious personalities will continue to be fraught with challenges and difficulties. Nonetheless, celebrity studies, in conjunction with other disciplines, is capable of taking a leading role in exploring the lives of religious personalities and assessing their impact. In doing so, this 'foundling' discipline will come of age sooner, become more inclusive, and play more effectively its role as illuminator and emancipator.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



## Notes on contributor

Gëzim Alpión has a BA from Cairo University and a PhD from Durham University, UK. He lectured at the Universities of Huddersfield, Sheffield Hallam and Newman before joining the Department of Sociology at the University of Birmingham in 2002. His publications include *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* (Routledge, 2007), *Encounters with Civilizations: From Alexander the Great to Mother Teresa* (Routledge, 2017), and a number of studies in academic journals and edited collections. Sponsored by Arts Council England, Alpión's plays *Vouchers* (2001) and *If Only the Dead Could Listen* (2006) were well-received in England in the 2000s. His articles have appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Conversation*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Middle East Times*, and *The Hürriyet Daily News*. In recent years, Alpión has delivered over 50 keynote addresses and talks in 15 countries.

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