

Mother Teresa of Calcutta: Superstar of Poverty

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Mother Teresa's death though somewhat overshadowed by that of Diana Windsor a few days before was nevertheless an event for much media orchestrated mourning on the passing of a living Saint. The Indian Government insisted on a state funeral with full military honours usually reserved for the Head of State, and her body was displayed for public viewing for six days.

Any speculation that her Order of Nuns would with her now gone, finally join the present century (even in its twilight days) is unfounded. The new Mother Superior, Sister Nirmala, promises no change at the top.

"We want the poor to use poverty in the right way. They should accept poverty with the stoicism displayed by the nuns of the Missionaries of Charity. They should not moan and groan but be content with whatever little the Lord has given them."

Mother Teresa loved the poor. She loved the poor so much that she never asked how the poor become poor nor challenged the causes of their poverty. It was the relief and never eradication of their condition that was her life's work. "But at least she was doing something."

Mother Teresa cared for the dying and destitute in her homes. She never asked whether they ought to have been in hospital instead receiving surgical or medical treatment. The curable and the incurable were all the same to her and only the fortunate received pain-killers. "But at least she was doing something."

Mother Teresa had great compassion. In 1984 in Bhopal, the leak of MIC gas at the Union Carbide plant caused two and a half thousand deaths; tens of thousands were blinded and left hundreds of thousands with respiratory problems. The 'angel of mercy' was soon on the scene (she enjoyed free air and rail travel within India), her first words to the survivors and their families were "Forgive, Forgive, Forgive". "But at least she was doing something."

Mother Teresa was above politics. She was so apolitical that she never enquired the source or means by which she received their donations, or the character of the individuals and regimes who flew her around the world in their private jets, feted her in their palaces and decorated her with their awards. The Duvaliers in Haiti, Robert Maxwell in Britain, the Hoxha regime in Albania were all beneficiaries of her benedictions. "But at least she was doing something."

Mother Teresa loved sinners. She loved them so much that when a crook called Charles Keating was brought before court on charges of defrauding US small investors in the savings and loans scandals of the 1980s, she sent a personal plea for clemency to the trial judge on his behalf. Keating had donated over a million US dollars to her Order and loaned her his jet on occasion. "But at least she was doing something."

Why was this Christian missionary tolerated and even encouraged by the central government in predominantly Hindu India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led administration in West

Bengal where her Order is based? The answer is simple.

She confirmed their perception that nothing could be done to remove the scourge of poverty, the epidemic of ill-health and malnutrition, the malady of hopelessness and helplessness: only the symptoms could be managed.

In fact it was the fault of the poor – their *karma* – actions in their past lives which contributed to their fate in the present one. A Hindu doctrine which induces fatalism and apathy among its adherents and which conveniently obscures the failure of this rotten system to improve the life-chances of the majority.

This confirmed her own world view.

One that resonated with medieval notions exalting suffering and pain as redeeming past sins and leading the tortuous path to Heaven where true reward would follow instead of looking to create a better society in this life and on this earth.

Why was Mother Teresa propelled into superstardom in the West and her words and deeds placed beyond reproach even by the liberal-left?

In his superb polemic *The Missionary Position* (Verso, London 1995), Christopher Hitchens argues that the rich world likes to believe that “someone, somewhere is doing something for the Third World. [T]he great white hope meets the great black hole; the mission to the heathen blends with the comforting myth of Florence Nightingale”.

If Rudyard Kipling’s poem *The White Man’s Burden* spoke about the ‘civilising responsibility’ of colonialism to its “new caught, sullen peoples / Half-devil and Half-child” – then remember that the missionaries followed the flag and were intimately bound up in that enterprise.

Mother Teresa went even further. She founded her own transnational, the Missionaries of Charity, operating more than 500 institutions in over one hundred countries and with 4 000 nuns and 40 000 lay workers.

In doing so she was as Hitchens notes serving the “sponsor and the donor, and not the needs of the downtrodden. Helpless infants, abandoned derelicts, lepers and the terminally ill are the raw material for demonstrations of compassion”.

The Vatican early on recognised the value of the publicity she generated for her work and herself in improving their own image and the present Pontiff, John Paul II, saw her as an ambassador for his own fundamentalist views on reproductive rights and gay sexuality.

In 1979 when Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, she used that platform to announce that “abortion is the worst evil, and the greatest enemy of peace”.

The tragedy of 250 000 women dying each year from unsafe and unsupervised ‘back-street’ abortions and the denial of the right of women to control their own bodies apparently pale in significance to the devil’s work: contraception and abortion.

In 1971 the Pakistani army embarked on the mass rape of Bangladeshi women during that country’s war of liberation and many became pregnant in consequence. Mother Teresa admonished those women not to choose to abort the foetus; this would have been an evil equal to or worse than the rape itself.

Meanwhile her San Francisco franchise for gay men with AIDS mirrors the spartan monastic regime of her outlets elsewhere; with Christian teaching substituting for painkillers. Mother Teresa herself has pronounced AIDS as “just retribution for improper sexual conduct” says Hitchens – which is not dissimilar to the Vatican’s own sophisticated thinking on the matter.

Her much praised homes in India are run with nineteenth century ideas and instruments. Prayer and Christian comfort are available in generous doses when medication, hospitalisation and surgical intervention would be more appropriate and save more lives.

It could easily have been afforded with the hundreds of millions of dollars that she received and that collect interest in bank accounts or are spent on sacramental ornaments instead. The financial dealings of the Order are veiled in secrecy and its income and expenditure neither accountable to the residents of her homes nor its staff and members.

A former lay volunteer at one of her Bombay homes said that in his many years of experience working for her organisation and observing its standard of care for the sick, “there are cases where there are only two possible descriptions: criminal neglect and criminal assault.”

Yet Mother Teresa herself died in a private hospital, with a personal physician and a team of specialists by her bed-side and round-the-clock care. Whenever she fell ill on one of her excursions abroad she was immediately booked into a private hospital: the best and most expensive care doing no harm to her soul but off-limits to the poor.

Mother Teresa symbolised the odious belief that the poor are objects for our charity and not subjects for their own liberation. She never asked why people are poor and oppressed; nor sought to address the causes of poverty and oppression, because she believed it to be inevitable. She accepted it as part of the natural order and encouraged others to do the same. “But at least she was doing something”.

P.S.

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