

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Christopher Hitchens. *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice.* London: Verso Books, 1995. xiii + 98 pp. \$15.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85984-929-3.

Reviewed by Peter S. Fosl (Hollins College)

Published on H-PCAACA (October, 1996)

From time to time, with seeming regularity, women who have devoted themselves to religious and charitable work achieve heroic stature in popular culture. Times past have borne witness to the ascendancy of the images of Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, Jane Addams, and Mary Baker Eddy. Today, perhaps no figure has come to symbolize undiluted goodness, piety, and compassion more than the small, elderly, Albanian nun, Agnes Bojaxhiu—known to millions as Mother Teresa. Might it be, however, that both the image and the reality of Mother Teresa serve more sinister purposes than at first meet the eye? Christopher Hitchens answers this question in the affirmative and presents in this book a series of pointed, trenchant, and effective arguments aimed at undermining the myth of Mother Teresa.

In order to subvert Mother Teresa's chances for canonization, Hitchens organizes his text around the three central Catholic criteria for deciding whether or not an individual is in fact a saint: 1) the performance of a miracle; 2) good works and heroic virtues; and 3) the curious quality of ubiquity. Does, however, Hitchens's structuring his book in this way mark simply an attempt to discredit Mother Teresa on her own terms or (also) his having arrogated to himself the absolute moral authority to which the Church makes claim?

Mother Teresa's "miracle" is the production of divine light in an otherwise darkened room, an event purportedly captured on film by one of the midwives of the Teresa myth, Malcom Muggeridge, in the course of filming for his 1969 BBC documentary, *Something Beautiful for God*. The only miracle Hitchens can detect in this is the power of Kodak film to perform in relatively dark spaces—as well as, perhaps, Muggeridge's charming credulity.

Demystifying camera tricks is, of course, a rather trivial affair, and one is apt to suspect that the spirit animating Hitchens is the ghost of Anglican assaults on Ro-

man Catholics—until one reads the succeeding chapters of the text. Mother Teresa is thought to work in service to the poor. In fact, however, according to the testimony of international health professionals (such as the editors of *The Lancet*) and a few of her former colleagues (one wonders if they are representative), her clinics and darkly named "Houses of the Dying" offer remarkably little in terms of diagnostics, treatment, and analgesia. She herself often seeks the most advanced medical care when afflicted. In Hitchens's portrait, Mother Teresa cares little for the suffering of the downtrodden and uses them as instruments to advance her secular ambitions of outlawing abortion, founding a religious order, and being recognized among the earth-bound as a saint.

Though Mother Teresa claims to be apolitical, she actively endorses the most brutal of right-wing governments and movements. Hitchens documents these political acts. Mother Teresa is, in short, a right-wing fundamentalist with vicious secular ambitions who has been seized upon by the tyrants of this world to valorize their own agendas.

How has this happened? According to Hitchens, Mother Teresa is the product of the image-making power of contemporary mass media, the desire of the privileged to salve the knowledge of their indifference, and the absurd appetite of popular religion and the "vaguely religious" for saints and holy spectacles. Yet, the same dialectic that calls forth sanctified heroines in popular culture also elicits a negative anti-hero in response. In Christopher Hitchens's book, the popular myth of Mother Teresa has met its antithesis.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Peter S. Fosl. Review of Hitchens, Christopher, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=640>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.