



RESEARCH ARTICLE

'A CLOCK THAT COVERS EVERYTHING': IS TERESA A HYPOCRITE OR IS IT HER SPIRITUAL HEROISM? A READING OF MOTHER TERESA: COME BE MY LIGHT BY BRIAN KOLODIEJCHUK

*Mohammad Kaosar Ahmed, PhD

Department of English Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Mother Teresa, a woman world famous for her faith has felt no presence of God for the last half century of her life. Though she has always greeted everybody with smile, a recently published book *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* featuring more than forty communications between Teresa and her superiors and confessors reveals that she has experienced spiritual 'dryness', 'loneliness' and 'torture'. This article attempts to show the discrepancy between her thought and her cheery public appearance which she maintains smiling, 'a clock that covers everything'.

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INTRODUCTION

Who would have thought that the person who was considered the most faithful woman in the world struggled with her faith and who would have thought that the one considered being the most ardent of believers could be a saint to the skeptics? In life, Mother Teresa was an idol, for believers, of God's work on Earth. Her organization to the poor of Calcutta is a world-renowned pictogram of religious compassion. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In an infrequent interview in 1986, Mother Teresa told CBS News "she had a calling, based on unquestioned faith. 'They are all children of God, loved and created by the same heart of God,' she said."¹ But now, it has come into view that Mother Teresa was so suspicious of her own faith that she feared being a hypocrite. In a new book that compiles letters she wrote to friends, superiors and confessors, her doubts are obvious. Shortly after beginning work in Calcutta's slums, the spirit left Mother Teresa. "Where is my faith?" she wrote. "Even deep down... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness... If there be God, please forgive me."² Eight years later, she was still looking to reclaim her lost faith. "The smile," she wrote, "is a mask or a cloak that covers everything. I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God, a tender personal love. If you were there you would have said, 'What hypocrisy!'"³ Her realizations in the letters show her strong longing for god and the fact that her aptitude to keep on her work during such torment is a sign of her spiritual heroism.

Mother Teresa was born to Albanian parents in Skoplje, Yugoslavia, in 1910, and baptized Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. Even at the age of twelve, she remembers, she wanted to be a missionary, "to go out and give the love of Christ." The desire grew when some local Jesuits, freshly sent to India, wrote enthusiastic letters home about their work in the Bengal missions. By the time she was 18, Agnes had joined the Irish branch of Loreto nuns who were working in Calcutta. In 1937 she made her final vows.

*Corresponding author: kaosarahmed@rocketmail.com

By then Teresa had fallen into the academic life at St. Mary's High School in Calcutta. There she taught geography to Bengali girls from comfortable homes, later became principal. But the school was hard by Calcutta's Moti Jheel slum, and the contrast between the horror outside and the genteel world within the convent walls must have motivated her decision to work for the poor, though she claims that it did not.

On Sept. 10, 1946, after 17 years as a teacher in Calcutta with the Loreto Sisters, Mother Mary Teresa took the 400 mile train trip to Darjeeling. She had been working herself sick, and her superiors ordered her to relax during her annual retreat in the Himalayan foothills. On the ride out, she reported, Christ spoke to her. "He called her to abandon teaching and work instead in 'the slums' of the city, dealing directly with 'the poorest of the poor' — the sick, the dying, beggars and street children. 'Come, Come, carry Me into the holes of the poor,' he told her. 'Come be My light.' The goal was to be both material and evangelistic 'to help them live their lives with dignity [and so] encounter God's infinite love, and having come to know Him, to love and serve Him in return."²

By the spring of 1948, Mother Teresa had won permission to leave the cloister and work in the Calcutta slums. In August of that year she laid aside her Loreto habit and donned the blue-edged, coarse cotton white sari that would become her new order's uniform. After an intensive nurse's training course, she opened a slum school in Moti Jheel just before Christmas. She was not alone long. Some of the young women who joined her—former students at St. Mary's—remember their own calls. Mother Teresa asked; they accepted. She believed fiercely that God would provide, and the little band lived literally from day to day, sharing with the destitute what they could cadge from charity. The sisters were to live little better than the poor they served. They were allowed only two of the humble saris (which still cost only \$1) so that they could honestly teach that it is possible to stay clean with a single change of garment. Life became only slightly less precarious in 1950,

when the Vatican approved their new congregation, the Missionaries of Charity, and they moved into quarters that still serve as the mother house. Not until two years later did the sisters take on one of their harshest and most widely admired tasks, care of the dying. Mother Teresa remembers finding a dying woman on the sidewalk, her feet half chewed away by rats, her wounds alive with maggots. Only with great difficulty did she persuade a hospital to take the woman. Within days the nun was pleading with authorities for "just one room" to which she could take the dying. What they gave her was a onetime pilgrims' rest house near the Temple of Kali, the Hindu goddess of death. She renamed it Nirmal Hriday—Pure Heart—and filled it.³ In one of letters she writes about her coming to Kolkata:

*[Jesus:] Wilt thou refuse to do this for me? ... You have become my Spouse for my love — you have come to India for Me. The thirst you had for souls brought you so far — Are you afraid to take one more step for Your Spouse — for me — for souls? Is your generosity grown cold? Am I a second to you? [Teresa:] Jesus, my own Jesus — I am only Thine — I am so stupid — I do not know what to say but do with me whatever You wish — as You wish — as long as you wish. [But] why can't I be a perfect Loreto Nun — here — why can't I be like everybody else. [Jesus:] I want Indian Nuns, Missionaries of Charity, who would be my fire of love amongst the poor, the sick, the dying and the little children ... You are I know the most incapable person — weak and sinful but just because you are that — I want to use You for My glory. Wilt thou refuse? (in a prayer dialogue recounted to Archbishop Ferdinand Perier, January 1947)***

Astoundingly her feelings of God's absence seem to have started (as it is expressed in her letters) at almost precisely the time she began tending the poor and dying in Calcutta. 'Although perpetually cheery in public, the Teresa of the letters lived in a state of deep and abiding spiritual pain'.⁴ She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it 'has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God'.⁵ She is acutely aware of the discrepancy between her inner state and her public demeanor. She wonders whether she is engaged in verbal deception. "I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God — tender, personal love," she remarks to an adviser. "If you were [there], you would have said, 'What hypocrisy.'"** Rev. James Martin, an editor at the Jesuit magazine *America* and the author of *My Life with the Saints*, a book that dealt with far briefer reports in 2003 of Teresa's doubts says that 'I've never read a saint's life where the saint has such an intense spiritual darkness. No one knew she was that tormented.' According to Kolodiejchuk, *Come Be My Light's* editor: 'I read one letter to the Sisters [of Teresa's Missionaries of Charity], and their mouths just dropped open. It will give a whole new dimension to the way people understand her.'⁶

Her Nobel Lecture On Dec. 11, 1979, makes her hypocrisy more perceptible. Teresa announces that "It is not enough for us to say, 'I love God, but I do not love my neighbor,'" she said, since in dying on the Cross, God had "[made] himself the hungry one — the naked one — the homeless one." Jesus' hunger, she said, is what "you and I must find" and alleviate. She condemned abortion and bemoaned youthful drug addiction in the West. Finally, she suggested that the upcoming Christmas holiday should remind the world "that radiating joy is real" because Christ is everywhere — "Christ in our hearts, Christ in the poor we meet, Christ in the smile we give and in the smile that we receive." This is typical Teresa, but the complexity arises regarding her belief when we see that 'less than three months earlier, in a letter to a spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael van der Peet, she wrote with weary familiarity of a different Christ, an absent one. "Jesus has a very special love for you," she assured Van der Peet. "[But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, — Listen and do not hear — the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me — that I let Him have [a] free hand."⁷

In the first half of 1948, Teresa took a basic medical course before launching herself alone onto the streets of Calcutta. She wrote,

*My soul at present is in perfect peace and joy...The old man lying on the street — not wanted — all alone just sick and dying — I gave him carborsone and water to drink and the old Man — was so strangely grateful ... Then we went to Taltala Bazaar, and there was a very poor woman dying I think of starvation more than TB ... I gave her something which will help her to sleep. — I wonder how long she will last.***

But two months later, shortly after her major triumph of locating a space for her headquarters, we find her troubled. "What tortures of loneliness," she wrote. "I wonder how long will my heart suffer this?"** This complaint could be understood as an initial response to solitude and hardship were it not for subsequent letters. 'The more success Teresa had — and half a year later so many young women had joined her society that she needed to move again — the worse she felt'.⁸ In March 1953, she wrote Périer,

*Please pray specially for me that I may not spoil His work and that Our Lord may show Himself — for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started 'the work.'***

"Périer may have missed the note of desperation. 'God guides you, dear Mother,' he answered avuncularly. 'You are not so much in the dark as you think ... You have exterior facts enough to see that God blesses your work ... Feelings are not required and often may be misleading.' And yet feelings — or rather, their lack — became her life's secret torment. How can you assume the lover's ardor when he no longer grants you his voice, his touch, his very presence? The problem was exacerbated by an inhibition to even describe it. Teresa reported on several occasions inviting a confessor to visit and then being unable to speak. Eventually, one thought to ask her to write the problem down, and she complied. "The more I want him — the less I am wanted," she wrote Périer in 1955. A year later she sounded desolate: 'Such deep longing for God — and ... repulsed — empty — no faith — no love — no zeal. — [The saving of] Souls holds no attraction — Heaven means nothing — pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything.'⁹

Being suggested by a confessor, "she wrote the agonized plea that begins this section, in which she explored the theological worst-possible-case implications of her dilemma. That letter and another one from 1959 ('what do I labour for? If there be no God - there can be no soul - if there is no Soul then Jesus -You also are not true') are the only two that sound any note of doubt of God's existence. But she frequently bemoaned an inability to pray: 'I utter words of Community prayers — and try my utmost to get out of every word the sweetness it has to give - But my prayer of union is not there any longer -I no longer pray.'¹⁰

Teresa progressed from confessor to confessor the way some patients move through their psychoanalysts as the Missionaries of Charity flourished and gradually gained the attention of her church and the world at large. "Van Exem gave way to Périer, who gave way in 1959 to the Rev. (later Cardinal) Lawrence Picachy, who was succeeded by the Rev. Joseph Neuner in 1961. By the 1980s the chain included figures such as Bishop William Curlin of Charlotte, N.C. For these confessors, she developed a kind of shorthand of pain, referring almost casually to "my darkness" and to Jesus as "the Absent One." There was one respite. In October 1958, Pope Pius XII died, and requiem Masses were celebrated around the Catholic world. Teresa prayed to the deceased Pope for a "proof that God is pleased with the Society." And "then and there," she rejoiced, "disappeared the long darkness ... that strange suffering of 10 years." Unfortunately, five weeks later she reported being "in the tunnel" once more. And although, as we shall see, she found a way to accept the absence, it never lifted again. Five years after her Nobel, a Jesuit priest in the Calcutta province noted that "Mother came ... to speak about the excruciating night in her soul. It was not a passing phase but had gone on for years."¹¹ She wrote:

*Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The Child of your Love — and now become as the most hated one — the one — You have thrown away as unwanted — unloved. I call, I cling, I want — and there is no One to answer — no One on Whom I can cling — no, No One. — Alone ... Where is my Faith — even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness — My God — how painful is this unknown pain — I have no Faith — I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart — & make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them — because of the blasphemy — If there be God — please forgive me — When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven — there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul. — I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the Call of the Sacred Heart? - addressed to Jesus, at the suggestion of a confessor, undated***

She was reluctant to talk of her inner trials because she wanted to talk about the person who motivated her. "But there is no mistaking the depth of the darkness in her mind from the late 1940s until her death in 1997. One of the drier definitions of faith given by the Catechism of the Catholic Church runs: "Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace." When no emotional feelings support the believer, faith has to be relied on, as an act of the will moved by God. When Mother Teresa wrote of her interior darkness to Archbishop Ferdinand Perier, he answered starkly: "Feelings are not required and often may be misleading."¹²

It is not clear how far Mother Teresa's darkness fits the classic sketch of the Dark Night of the Soul made in the 16th century by St John of the Cross, the Carmelite friar. "His poem on the Dark Night pictures a bride embracing her beloved: 'He struck me on the neck / With his gentle hand, / And suspended all my senses.' The bride is left, one must suppose, like a dead rabbit hanging outside a butcher's. St John of the Cross is no less thoroughgoing in his short treatise, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. It describes the journey of the soul to God. The upward winding path is labelled by him, 'Nada. Nada. Nada.' -Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Then on the mountain which the soul has worked so hard to climb? 'Nada.' Thinkers like St John of the Cross wrote from hard experience. They were deep psychologists, and, though they had no inkling of Freud, were perfectly aware of the analogy of sexual love and spiritual relations with God."¹³

Psychologists have long recognized that people of a certain personality type are conflicted about their high achievement and find ways to punish themselves. Gottlieb, a teacher at the New York Psychoanalytic Society & Institute who has written about the church notes that Teresa's ambitions for her ministry were tremendous. Both he and Kolodiejchuk are "fascinated by her statement, 'I want to love Jesus as he has never been loved before.'" Remarks the priest: "That's a kind of daring thing to say." Yet her letters are full of inner conflict about her accomplishments. Rather than simply giving all credit to God, Gottlieb observes, she agonizes incessantly that 'any taking credit for her accomplishments — if only internally — is sinful' and hence, perhaps, requires a price to be paid. A mild secular analog, he says, might be an executive who commits a horrific social gaffe at the instant of a crucial promotion. For Teresa, 'an occasion for a modicum of joy initiated a significant quantity of misery,' and her subsequent successes led her to perpetuate it".¹⁴ Gottlieb also suggests that starting her ministry "may have marked a turning point in her relationship with Jesus," whose urgent claims she was finally in a position to fulfill. Being the active party, he speculates, might have scared her, and in the end, the only way to accomplish great things might have been in the permanent and less risky role of the spurned yet faithful lover.

The Rev. Joseph Neuner, whom she met in the late 1950s and confided in somewhat later, was already a well-known theologian, and

when she turned to him with her 'darkness,' he seems to have told her the three things she needed to hear: that "there was no human remedy for it (that is, she should not feel responsible for affecting it); that feeling Jesus is not the only proof of his being there, and her very craving for God was a 'sure sign' of his 'hidden presence' in her life; and that the absence was in fact part of the 'spiritual side' of her work for Jesus".¹⁵

Teresa had expected and even craved to share in Christ's Passion, she had not anticipated that she might recapitulate the particular moment on the Cross when he asks, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" The idea that rather than a nihilistic vacuum, his felt absence might be the ordeal she had prayed for, that her perseverance in its face might echo his faith unto death on the Cross, that it might indeed be a grace, enhancing the efficacy of her calling, made sense of her pain. Neuner would later write, "It was the redeeming experience of her life when she realized that the night of her heart was the special share she had in Jesus' passion." And she thanked Neuner profusely: "I can't express in words — the gratitude I owe you for your kindness to me — for the first time in ... years — I have come to love the darkness." **

Years later, describing the joy in Jesus experienced by some of her nuns, she observed dryly to Neuner, "I just have the joy of having nothing — not even the reality of the Presence of God [in the Eucharist]." She described her soul as like an "ice block." Yet she recognized Neuner's key distinction, writing, "I accept not in my feelings — but with my will, the Will of God — I accept His will." ** Although she still occasionally worried that she might "turn a Judas to Jesus in this painful darkness," with the passage of years the absence morphed from a potential wrecking ball into a kind of ragged cornerstone. Says Gottlieb, the psychoanalyst: "What is remarkable is that she integrated it in a way that enabled her to make it the organizing center of her personality, the beacon for her ongoing spiritual life."¹⁶ Certainly, she understood it as essential enough to project it into her afterlife. She wrote in 1962:

If I ever become a Saint — I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from Heaven — to [light] the light of those in darkness on earth. **

Teresa's spiritual spigot went dry just as she prevailed over her church's perceived hesitations and saw a successful way to realize Jesus' call for her. She was a very strong personality and a strong personality needs stronger purification as an antidote to pride. As proof that it worked, we can cite her written comment after receiving an important prize in the Philippines in the 1960s: "This means nothing to me, because I don't have Him."

Though she wrote of years of spiritual emptiness, Mother Teresa continued her task, kept doing what had been revealed to her as God's will for her life. She did not reject God, or her calling. She continued to feed the hungry, care for the sick and to lead people to the Lord, even when her own faith was flagging. And As German-born American theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich once said, "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."

Who among us hasn't experienced similar feelings? And who among us hasn't, in our moments of doubt, somehow felt we were some kind of spiritual oddities? It's not uncommon to hear of religious people going through periods of doubt. For instance, Father James Martin, in a commentary on *All Things Considered*, says "Mother Teresa's spiritual struggles remind him of his own during a recent retreat. But Mother Teresa's extensive spiritual crisis is surprising for a woman of her influence ... and ammunition for her critics".¹⁷ *Time* quotes well-known atheist Christopher Hitchens (who also wrote *The Missionary Position*, a scathing attack on Mother Teresa), who says, "She was no more exempt from the realization that religion is a human fabrication than any other person, and that her attempted cure was more and more

professions of faith could only have deepened the pit that she had dug for herself."¹⁸

Mother Teresa is hardly the first religious icon to undergo periods of doubt. Even Christ, who knew the prophecy of his death and resurrection had to be fulfilled, went through spiritual agony in the Garden of Gesthemane, crying out "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken away from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Author Charles C. West once wrote, "We turn to God for help when our foundations are shaking only to learn that it is God shaking them." God shakes us all from time to time, even his saints. How we respond is an indication of the depth of our faith.¹⁹

Catholic theologians distinguish two types of 'dark night': the first is purgative, refining the contemplative for a 'final union' with Christ; the second is 'reparative,' and continues after such a union, so that he or she may join in a state of purity even closer to that of Jesus and Mary, who suffered for human salvation in spite of being without sin. By all indications this was the case with Mother Teresa.²⁰

Mother Teresa's confessions of doubt and anguish should not bother Christians in the least. After all, Christ experienced a loss of faith when he cried out on the cross that God had forsaken him. From Job to Christ to Mother Teresa, such a cry is sacred when it is uttered by the truly just which, admittedly, most of us are not, and a lot of our own anguish is pretty much self-absorbed narcissism and amazement. St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians that the only things that matter are faith, hope and love. The greatest of these, he says, is not faith and it is not hope. When faith and hope have fled, however, there is still love. Love is a decision. We can choose to love even when we have lost the object of our faith, indeed, especially when we have lost that object.

Conclusion

Mother Teresa is unique; yet the world has many who share her kind of faith and fervor. Each sister and brother in the Missionaries of Charity is a story in courage. And beyond her circle are thousands of others. Even the spiritual heroes, whose special tasks or character draw attention and emulation, seem to rise up in abundance for those who look for them. Many, like Mother Teresa, live by the standard set in Matthew: 25.

They feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. These works of mercy draw attention because they are deeds that even a world without faith can recognize as good. Yet those who practice them usually lead intense spiritual lives. Mother Teresa simply cannot be called a hypocrite because Jesus explained it so simply, "By their fruits you will know them". Teresa's good fruit is everywhere. She had doubts, but continued to seek and serve God throughout her life.

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