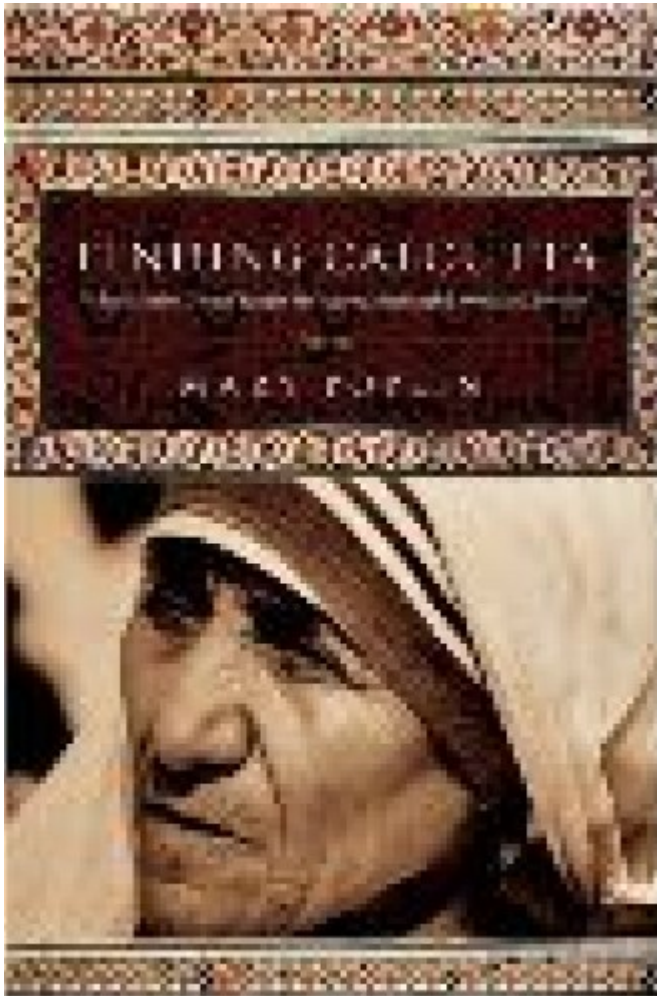


# Hope Endures/Finding Calcutta

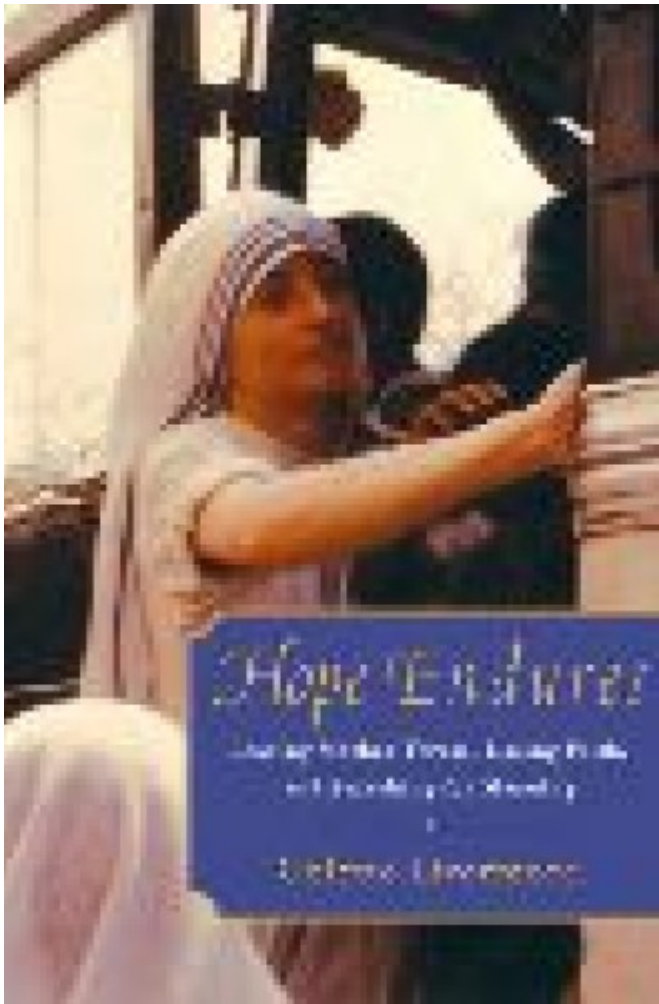
reviewed by [Jenell Williams Paris](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



## **Finding Calcutta: What Mother Teresa Taught Me About Meaningful Work and Service**

Mary Poplin  
InterVarsity



## **Hope Endures: Leaving Mother Teresa, Losing Faith, and Searching for Meaning**

Colette Livermore

Free Press

The canon of books about Mother Teresa is growing larger and arguably more mature. One stream, stemming from Malcolm Muggeridge's *Something Beautiful for God*, emphasizes her saintliness. Another knocks her off the pedestal many of us have put her on—for example, Christopher Hitchens's *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, which depicts her as a “fraudulent, fundamentalist fanatic.” More recently, Brian Kolodiejchuk's *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, sets a new standard for integrating the good and the bad. By revealing Mother Teresa's spiritual struggles through her letters to spiritual advisers, *Come Be My Light* offers a picture of a saint that is neither airbrushed to perfection nor defaced with black-marker mustache and

horns.

*Hope Endures* and *Finding Calcutta* advance the Mother Teresa canon by acknowledging both the heavenly and the earthly elements of her life. In their journeys toward spiritual growth and meaningful service, the authors of both books were forever changed by their encounters with Mother Teresa. One came away inspired, the other disillusioned. One loves Jesus more for having met Mother Teresa; the other no longer believes there is a God. It's believable that Mary Poplin and Colette Livermore are describing the same woman and the same religious order, but barely.

Livermore is an Australian who was raised Catholic and as a young woman joined the Missionaries of Charity. She spent 11 years in the order, from 1973 to 1984, and worked in multiple places, including Australia, the Philippines and Calcutta (now Kolkata; this review uses *Calcutta*, as both books do). Initially captivated by "the idea of compassionate, practical service to the poor," Livermore quickly grew frustrated with that and other ideals. Even as a novice she struggled with the extreme authoritarianism of the order. For example, nuns were not allowed to decide what or how much to eat. One woman, told to eat foods to which she was allergic, did so obediently and suffered the consequences in silence.

Sometimes, Livermore writes, the authoritarianism negatively impacted the poor. On one occasion she was out serving in the streets when a family came and implored her to try to save their dying child. She brought them to the convent and went inside to ask a superior for assistance. Her superior denied medical care and even refused to allow Livermore to speak to the family, who waited outside all night. Livermore was chastised for being disobedient and prideful, and was instructed to pray.

The Missionaries of Charity, and Mother Teresa herself, insist that their work is religious work, not social work, and that doing small deeds with great love is always a beautiful thing. After years of trying to agree with this view, Livermore concluded that choosing failure when the means for success are immediately at hand is not beautiful at all, but painfully wasteful. The nuns were inadequately trained in the language, cultural and medical skills necessary for their cross-cultural work. The order was "a culture of deprivation and isolation. Relying on Divine Providence seemed to mean that we didn't buy items such as books to help with our work, even though money was donated to us for this very purpose."

When she voiced her concerns, Livermore was chastised for arrogance, which she tried to squelch. Eventually she named her real sin cowardice. Inside the undertrained nun was a doctor trying to get out. In leaving the order, she escaped the unnecessary tension between service and obedience. She became a medical doctor and went on to serve needy populations in Australia and elsewhere.

In the end, Livermore regrets her inability to connect with Mother Teresa. She sees her as a devout woman from another era, mistakenly devoted to preserving the authoritarianism of the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church. "I had the impression that Mother was overwrought, strained, and tormented, as if confined in a psychological pressure cooker. Some ordinary human comfort and recreation [might] have released the pressure, but she never allowed herself any respite." Though she loved the whole world, Mother Teresa denied herself any specific human love or comfort, which resulted in "an institutionalized harshness" in the order. Women's depression, anger and psychological disturbances went untended and, when combined with the sensitivity and gentleness that called them to a life of serving the poor, too often grew into ugly manifestations of unmet need. Livermore saw that "the order, whose *raison d'être* was to show compassion, chronically failed to do so, both to its own members and to the poor."

After distancing herself from the Missionaries of Charity, Livermore stepped away from the Catholic Church, then away from the God of the Bible and finally away from belief in God altogether. Mother Teresa experienced spiritual emptiness and interpreted it as a trial of long-suffering. Livermore experienced something similar and concluded that the world truly is spiritually empty. "Only human love and natural beauty give us hope," she writes, "All that matters in the end is that we have tried to love one another." Christians may be saddened by the trajectory of Livermore's spiritual journey, but the unyielding critical gaze that deconstructed her religious faith is the strength of her service as a medical doctor. Her enduring inner hope and outer acts of service may yet reignite a flame of faith.

Poplin's *Finding Calcutta* carries the spark of Muggeridge's inspiration. Poplin, professor of education at Claremont Graduate University, spent two months in 1996 volunteering with the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta. Mother Teresa encouraged short-term volunteers to "find their Calcutta" and return home as more purposeful servants.

Poplin was initially intrigued by the nuns' claim to be doing religious work, not social work. Despite the inefficiency and at times ineffectiveness of their attempts to alleviate human suffering, Poplin admired the nuns' religious focus as she cared for babies in Calcutta. Though she interacted with the nuns only minimally because they were not allowed extended conversation or friendship with guests, she gleaned the best from the order and admired the nuns' courageous compassion in the face of overwhelming need. As Mother Teresa said, "It's not how much you do but how much love you put into the work."

Poplin exalts the vow of obedience, but more as a spiritual ideal than as a nun's lived reality. In her brief, devotional encounters with Mother Teresa, Poplin felt that she was in "the presence of holiness." Mother Teresa "may not have always felt Jesus' presence," she writes, "but many of us experienced his presence through her."

Poplin came to Christian faith as an adult, and her brief sojourn in Calcutta infused her American Protestant spirituality with newfound purpose. She found her own Calcutta: asserting Christianity as a good and useful worldview in graduate higher education. *Finding Calcutta* ends with lengthy appendices that lay out implications of the Christian worldview for the American university—writings that might better have been published as a separate book.

Livermore's relentless critique of both Mother Teresa and all things religious is painful to read but is mature in expressing admiration of the honorable aspects of the Missionaries of Charity. Poplin's perspective is more palatable but is limited by the author's lack of in-depth experience and by the absence of critique. Each of these books respectfully extends the legacy of Mother Teresa.