African Christianity and Personality Cult Worship

By Benjamin Achi

Introduction
Of all the religious confessions existent in today's world, Christianity has overtime enjoyed more adherence and acceptance than any other religious persuasion. Since the apostolic times, in spite of the terrible persecution that characterized some epochs, throngs of people of all races and tongues, have continued to embrace the Christian faith, not only because of the ideals it holds and teaches, but also because of the life it promises: the grace-filled life that helps us confront the pains and challenges of this present life and most importantly, the greater life that knows no end in eternal bliss. As the faith is held at a very high esteem by its adherents, so are its leaders also held with much reverence and even in some extreme cases, deified, since they are generally considered the human representatives of the divine. In recent times especially in our own clime, there seems to be a thin line between authentic Christian worship that is truly Christocentric, and a brand of Christianity that basically serves the ego and personal aggrandizement and selfish cravings of the minister. Many in the name of practicing Christianity in our time, have inadvertently resorted to personality cult worship and are unfortunately so tenaciously holding to that error, that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get them to see through that aberration and get back to the right track of authentic Christianity. What exactly is personality cult? How does it affect our practice of the Christian Faith and what impact does it have on our societal life in general? These are some of the questions that this brief piece has set out to address.

Understanding Personality Cult
The interactions of this writer with people of various classes in our society left a shocking revelation that many seem to be at a loss when the issue of personality cult comes to the table. In some cases when you accuse someone of Personality Cult worship, you get a strange look that tells you the person in question doesn’t really understand what you mean, and surprisingly, this includes even people that one presumes should be in the know. This experience thus brought me to the conclusion that the concept is not as commonplace as I had thought. For the interest of the reader who may as yet not be at home with the terminology, we have decided to present some select definitions of that concept, as offered by various English Lexicon.

- The Merriam Webster defines Personality cult as “a situation in which a public figure (such as a political leader) is deliberately presented to the people of a country as a great person who should be admired and loved”.
- The Cambridge English Dictionary defined the concept as “an officially organized admiration and love for a particular person, especially a political leader”.
- In the Collins English Dictionary, it is defined as a “deliberately cultivated adulation of a person…”
- In Oxford, personality cult is defined as an “excessive public admiration for or devotion to a famous person, especially a political leader”.

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All emphasis on the above definitions are that of this writer and those words are highlighted to drive our message home in this essay. From the words of those definitions as highlighted, one can very easily establish that every cult of personality presents some kind of make belief. When one is “deliberately presented” to be admired and loved; when such love or admiration is not spontaneous as expected but “organized”, it means that such an act is geared towards achieving an end and not necessarily because that subject of personality cult may be deserving of such love and admiration. And what is more? It is often made “excessive” because the deliberate intention is to present a larger-than-life image of the personality so projected. The intention is to make such a human character totally acceptable and all his words and actions accepted with little or no questions or resistance. The likes of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin enjoyed this to an appreciable degree in their times. As a matter of fact, the term is reported to have come to prominence in 1956, in Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences, given on the final day of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the speech, Khrushchev, who was the First Secretary of the Communist Party – in effect, the leader of the country – criticized the lionization and idealization of Joseph Stalin, and by implication, his Communist contemporary Mao Zedong, as being contrary to Marxist doctrine. The speech was later made public and was part of the "de-Stalinization" process the Soviet Union went through.

As is well known, history is replete with details of the worship and adulation that such people enjoyed.

The Example of Thomas

In the post-resurrection narrative of the Christian gospels, we have the story of Thomas, one of the chosen twelve, who has been with the Master every step of the way, and yet, had issues with the glad tiding of the resurrection. Reflecting on his closeness to Jesus as a member of the apostolic college, it would seem very reasonable to call out Thomas, chastising him for doubting the story of the Lord's glorious resurrection. Was he not there when the Lord performed all his miraculous feats: opening the eyes of the blind, making the crippled walk, multiplying loaves to feed multitudes and even raising the dead on a number of occasions? Did he not reason that he who had the potentiality to break all such unprecedented grounds, could rise even after being killed? Why was he being unnecessarily stiff-necked, even when all his colleagues bore testimony to the same truth? Something must be really wrong with Thomas, one would say.

This is the usual strict judgement and the oral crucifixion which Thomas would ordinarily receive. However, without holding brief for this doubting apostle, it may be fitting to pause for a while to reflect on what Thomas knew. He certainly knew and saw and experienced what we never did. Thomas knew that Jesus died, and it wasn't just any kind of death; he was crucified. The Jewish historian Josephus stated that crucifixion was the worst kind of death anyone would ever be subjected to. So terrible was that mode of execution that it was reported that a Roman senator, Marcus Tullius Cicero, once moved a motion on the floor of the Senate, advocating that no Roman citizen, no matter what the crime was, even if convicted of treason, should ever be subjected to crucifixion. According to records, that motion was said to have been the fastest ever to be passed on the floor of the Roman Senate at the time. But in the case of Christ, he was not just crucified, but was subjected to the worst kind of torture ever. He carried the full weight of the cross under which he almost expired before Simon of Cyrene was conscripted for the odd job; he was beaten mercilessly and crowned with thorns. And at the end, he was
to hang on the cross for three long and tortuous hours before he drew his last breath. Thomas was not a fool; he was very much at home with these facts and he must have been reflecting on all these in his mind. He probably couldn't help thinking how a man subjected to that degree of indescribable torture could very easily rise as purported. Thomas definitely must have had a lot to battle with. He didn't send his ratiocinative faculties on holiday; he was a thinking man; he was a questioner.

And it is from this perspective that this writer wants to look at the personality and character of Thomas in the wake of the personality cult worship that has become the order of the day in our age and clime. He is one important Christian character worthy of emulation especially by Christians of today. Yes! As extreme as was his reaction to the resurrection news, Christians of today, especially in our clime, need to pray for a double portion of the spirit of Thomas. We need more "Thomases" in our day. Thomas in what could be considered his extremity, left us indeed with some important lesson to take home in our practice of the Christian faith which he embraced before us. From the time Christ appeared and throughout the period he walked the face of the earth, he proved himself the messiah beyond every reasonable doubt, not only through his words and teachings, but also and most importantly through his actions and miracles. Thomas was a member of the Apostolic college. He saw and experienced all that, yet he demanded a proof for the resurrection claim of his confreres. The point here is: if Thomas could question a claim made in connection with One who is truly deserving of worship, it is instructive we always put on our thinking caps when people stand before us, making all sorts of claims and sometimes instilling fear in us, all in the name of the same Christ. It is to be noted too, that even Christ himself throughout his public ministry, toed that line as he consistently questioned the conducts and excesses of the religious and political leaders of his time and encouraged the people not to accept everything they saw or heard. He was considered a threat, especially by the Scribes and the Pharisees (the religious powers of the time), because he literally broke down their long-standing personality cult defenses. It is therefore only fitting that the Christians of today learn not only from this doubting apostle, who in his doubt, came out a better and stronger man of faith, but also from the Master Jesus himself, who questioned powers and claims.

**Faith with a Negative Bent**

The brand of Christianity we see today in Africa is a very dangerous one, and this is the case, not because there is anything wrong with Christianity itself, but basically because of the adherents’ approach to its practice.

There is no sort of crime, deception and fraud we do not see today all in the name of the Christianity. And why is it so? Because today's Christians have refused to question acts and claims.

There is practically nothing that have not been seen and heard today in the name of Christian worship. A couple of years ago somewhere in South Africa, a certain charlatan that lays claim to the appellation, "pastor", mounted the rostrum and instructed his teeming followers to jump out into an open field to start eating grasses for their “sanctification” and to receive “divine favours”; and like an army of robots being effectively remote-controlled, they rushed out like a herd of goats to do the bidding of that fraudster with a bible. Of course, they all ended up in the hospital and some were reported to have lost their lives as a result of their sheepish acceptance of that weird recommendation. Ours is an age and time when people who profess Christianity, are just so very ready to accept any claim no matter how weird, as long as such claim or assertion is made by a certain person they have been made to believe is a
“powerful man of God”. An alarming percentage of today’s Christians have this weird impression, that faith and the usual piety that accompanies it, means accepting anything said in the name of God no matter how silly or preposterous, just because a certain fellow, clinching a copy of the Sacred Book who claims to be "man of God", said so. Faith is never against reason. It is important we reiterate this fact. The faith we profess never demands that we suppress our ratiocinative powers but rather to deploy them for a better appreciation of that faith. This is one point that the saintly pontiff, John Paul II, so elaborately enunciated in Fides et Ratio, an encyclical he issued on the 14th of September 1998. For St Anselm of Canterbury, it should always be fides quares intellectum, (faith seeking understanding). It is a tragedy that majority of Christians in our time, have chosen to divorce the two. Rather than think, they have chosen the pitiable part of subservient morons. Bob Marley’s time-honored advice to "emancipate us from mental slavery...", seems to have simply fallen on deaf ears. The warning that followed is even all the more instructive: "none but we selves can free our own minds..." The lyrics of that Marley’s iconic musical piece aptly titled Redemption Song continue to resonate in my mind each time I reflect on what has become of our practice of the Christian faith in our clime. African Christians of today need to be reminded that it is some sort of mental slavery, to accept things without questions. They need to know, that anytime one begins to accept acts and claims of anyone irrespective of whatever religious position he occupies without questions, that one has ended up making a god out of such a figure. Regrettably, many are not at home with this fact and do not even seem to be ready to accept it and “redeem" themselves, to borrow the word as deployed in this context by the reggae legend.

**Fraud in the Name of Religion**

The most successful acts of fraud in our society today are the ones committed in the name of religion. Initially, it was politics and politicians that held the number one position. Today, religion and religious leaders have taken over and have even ended up as willing tools in the hands of the politicians to give some façade of legitimacy to their brazen crimes against the state. This is why Nigeria would be so derisively referred to as the poverty capital of the world and yet has the highest number of private jet-flying pastors across the globe. Now, this is not the tragedy. The real tragedy is that the so-called Christians who are supposed to question the thievery that gives birth to such brazen display of opulence, rather turn around to applaud the same band of thieves milking them dry. A man who is struggling to feed his little family or pay his children's fees in school, would be excited that his priest or the general overseer of his church, has acquired a multi-million-dollar private jet and would be glad to pay his tithe from his very meagre resources to the same man the next minute. He is so brainwashed into thinking, that he has an obligation to part with that percentage from his little revenue that is not even enough to pay his family's bills. And what is more? We even have cases where people are made to submit hundred percent of their first salary of the year with the usual religious blackmail that the “first fruit” belongs to God. And the billionaire pastor or General Overseer smiles to the banks, getting all richer, while leaving the gullible unsuspecting Christian impoverished, in pain and misery and increasingly vulnerable. This is the effect of personality cult worship found in today's Christianity. Today's Africa has a brand of Christianity where Christians worship pastors and respect their words even more than they do to God himself. The Christian of today needs to know, that no human figure merits such total and sheepish followership.
Conclusion: The lesson from Paul

Personality cult worship is one of the greatest threats to the practice of the Christian faith in this part of the world.

It is holding not just the faith itself but the society to ransom and tearing it to pieces. This is why religious charlatans keep multiplying by the day and are now synergizing with the politicians to run various African societies aground. Nigeria as a country, as always, have got a lion share of this tragedy. While the people may sometimes for any reason fall into this error of personality cult worship, it behooves those who stand as leaders in the Christian community to put them aright rather than encourage the anomaly for their selfish interests and personal aggrandizement at the expense of the gospel they are charged to preach. They should take a cue from the shining example of the apostle of the Gentiles, St Paul, who immediately rose to the occasion to obliterate that error from the minds of the members of the Corinthian Church when he received reports that such monster had reared its ugly head among them. Paul considered it such an important issue, that he had to particularly address it in his first letter to that Church. (cf 1 Corinthians 10-13). Religious leaders of our time are therefore expected to stick to this example of the Apostle Paul, and stop making themselves objects of worship instead of Christ, whose message of the gospel, they have been commissioned to carry to the ends of the earth and win candidates for the beatific vision.

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