

Poor God!

The Sin of Apathy

Developing countries are facing a new onslaught that is not purely political or economic. Desperate for hope in the face of failed infrastructures and managerial systems, their citizens, in huge numbers, are turning to the one thing that promises a solution to everything—religion! The experience is fairly predictable since these countries are made up of ethnic nationalities with longstanding traditions of submitting to and relying on the supernatural. This implies that major phenomena have been typically defined by the people in terms of supernatural involvement and influence, be it the birth of a baby, the growth and harvest of crops, the success of a business, the death of an individual, marriage, poverty, wealth and barrenness among others. Their attraction to expanding, so-called world religions and other emerging sources of supernatural security, therefore, is accelerated by the fact that they have historically embraced worldviews that situate the spiritual at the center of their lives. When François Duvalier (also known as Papa Doc) served as dictatorial President of Haiti from 1957 to 1971, one of his strategies was to prey on the Vodou allegiance and fears of the widely desperate populace by casting himself as *Baron Samedi*, a member of the pantheon of Vodou spirits (or *loa*) representing death. His customary outfit, a black suit with an accompanying black hat, was consistent with common depictions of this deity.

The *Baron Samedi* factor that played out with Duvalier in Haiti can be observed in different shapes, sizes and colors in many churches where a megastar persona is increasingly replacing the image of the man/woman of God as humble, people-oriented and trustworthy. More than commonplace preacher, the divine *megastar*, though not equal to the Father, Son or Holy Ghost, is next in line and considered quite formidable from the standpoint of familiarity with God and the possession of mystical powers. Depending on your age, you probably remember a time when the preacher was an intimate part of the community, was easily accessible, was the go-to person when people needed food, clothing and shelter, and featured in those bazaars that reminded the community that the church was also a part of its entertainment and social life. To say that things have changed is an understatement. The current celebrity preacher may influence the community, even milk the community; but he or she is not necessarily a part of the community. While a secretary or special assistant is the standard means through which they can be reached, making contact with any of these aides doesn't automatically guarantee access to the tin god.

Having grown up a Catholic who was also conversant with other mainstream denominations, it was not until the 1980s that I began to pay attention to the growing, hot-blooded Pentecostal tradition that had been sweeping across Nigeria. Even then, I generally stayed away from what I perceived as extremism until sometime between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, during which I oscillated between the US and Nigeria. I wasn't so much taken aback by relatively new messages about speaking in tongues, being baptized by the Holy Spirit, tithing, giving huge amounts of money "to God" and blessing the pastors with gifts; I was more ill-at-ease by what seemed like the replacement of standard church lessons with rigorous commands. Sometimes I was hounded by guilt when exclusive believers were asked to stand up in church and receive special prayers as reward for promising a special gift of \$500 "to God." Too bad for those of us who couldn't afford \$500 or who didn't even have jobs. Sometimes I was compelled to swoon and fall on the floor just because everyone else around me seemed to be falling for whatever reason, and just so that I wouldn't appear as being unholy.

The problem, however, is not with the demands of the new wave of fiery Christianity, but that too many adherents submit to them like comatose zombies. Perhaps they shouldn't be blamed, more so in emergent societies that have lost faith in their governments, security systems and virtually every sector. It is understandable, therefore, that they are eager to put their trust in some divine source of deliverance, especially since they are products of cultures, as already stated, that espouse close ties between the natural and supernatural. This apathy of modern, "spirit-filled" worshippers is well exemplified in a blog that I once read on the Internet, where a group of Nigerians were arguing over transparency or the lack thereof in the use of financial contributions to churches. I was shocked at the number of people that insisted it was not the donor's business to know what his or her donation to "God" was being used for. To deteriorate to this level of thinking is an indication of the type of brainwashing taking place in some of our churches, especially as the brainwashed occupy a range of intellectual and professional statuses. Many of these individuals have the choice of studying the scriptures for themselves, rather than indolently sitting back and allowing a preacher to force their selfish brand of scriptural interpretation down their throats. On a lighthearted note, I recall a recent discussion with one of my daughters who mentioned how she used to have visions of money being taken to a special place where, upon being burned, it subsequently drifted up to God in heaven. After hearing repeated directives by pastors that people should give "to God," this was the final image that she embraced. The truth is that God doesn't need anyone's money.

Considering the steady decline in morality and increase in material exploitation in some of our churches, the importance of having a critical spirit cannot be overemphasized; not one that attacks, but one that questions and assesses constructively. Failing to be critical in any situation is simply dangerous. Adolf Hitler's 1930s Nazi tirades were received with admiration and acquiescence, instead of scrutiny, resulting in the savage butchery of Jews that the German people had coexisted with for years. Careful reflection might have also prevented the massacre of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda in 1994, especially since both ethnic groups share strong linguistic, cultural and historical similarities. Without being questioned or challenged, all institutions and governments are susceptible to degeneracy.

Jim Jones' Peoples Temple had a strong philanthropic history and program; but the church was also home to a range of abuses that its members largely chose to ignore. Without this indifference, perhaps the demise of the church in Guyana where over 900 of its devotees (in 1978) died after being forced to take cyanide, might have been avoided. Such mechanical and thoughtless submission to religious hogwash is at the root of the child-witch phenomenon in southeastern Nigeria (largely Akwa Ibom and Cross River States), which, since the turn of the century 21st century, has resulted in extreme forms of abuse against innocent children branded as witches by nefarious preachers. In addition to being ostracized from their families and communities, reports also confirm that these children have been flogged, set ablaze, stabbed in the head and other body parts with knives and nails, slashed with machetes and doused with acid, leaving them dead or near-dead.

Though many churches are not cults, they are cultic in the manner that they strive to control members, usually with the aid of distorted biblical teachings. In effect, they have the potential to metamorphose to outright cults. Whether it is the Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians or the one-time Jesus of Oyingbo and Ikot Ekpene sects in Nigeria, the truth is that none of these groups started off as uncompromising cults; they began as "normal" churches. But as their excesses went unquestioned, so would their transformation and, in the end, unfolding patterns would be strikingly similar with people living in closed communes from where alleged stories of sexual, physical, emotional and verbal assaults would eventually leak. Their incomes would come under the strict control of the church, as well as the extent of sexual contact between spouses. The leader, usually delineated as second only to God, the reincarnation of Christ or the physical manifestation of something superior to mere mortals, would have unrestrictive control over and access to everything, including the collective assets of

the group and the bodies of all females regardless of age or marital status. When a church advances to this level of cultism, questioning its extremes is usually futile.

Copyright © 2016 Philip Effiong