

A MORAL DISCOURSE ON THE PHENOMENON OF RELIGIOUS MIMICKING IN NIGERIAN FILMS: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF II CORINTHIANS 11: 13-15.

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Abstract

Nigeria as a nation is notoriously religious. There is hardly anything done without religious coloration. The question begging for answer is whether such deep love for religion is fake or real. The most probable yardstick to answer the question here or there perhaps should be the agreement of the natural roles of religion with the citizens' moral upliftment. As far as the Nollywood actors are concerned, religion itself might not be fake. Most adherents, particularly the leaders are somewhat less than real. The paper is out to study religious mimicking in some home videos. Since the conclusion in such videos usually end up in expressing the hypocritical tendencies of religious leaders, the paper adopts historical and comparative study of II Corinthians 11:13-15. It concludes that until Paul's warnings are taken into consideration, religion particularly Christianity will continue to occupy space without much value on the society's moral standard.

Keywords: Nollywood, Mimicking, Christianity, Social vices.

Introduction

The prevailing moral decadence in our society has justified the call by Douglas Crow as quoted from Suleiman Jamiu for a discourse that would make a religious tradition relevant to the condition and challenges of modernity.¹ The justification is hinged on the continued increase in social vices in our society in spite of the acclaimed moral and reconciliatory roles of religion in both extended and nuclear families of the world. Perhaps, the assumed failure of religion to make positive moral impacts in Nigeria in spite of its deep religiosity, brought into existence various groups of "moral watchers" in our society. One of such groups is no doubt the Nollywood, a group of artists using their talents in film and home video productions.

The main interest of this paper is the way the Nollywood actors are using religious words, phrase and even costumes as make-belief in order to expose hypocritical

tendencies of religious leaders and adherents to the dismay of its teaming fans in Nigerian homes. The exposures in most cases seem to impugn on the characters of religious leaders, but the shocking neglect of known religious precepts in place of hedonistic gospels from Christian leaders as seen and heard from both church and electronic preachers is no doubt a temptation to agree with Nollywood make-belief actors that all is not well in our Churches. The question now arises: should the problems of immorality be blamed on religion or its adherents particularly as it affects Christianity in Nigeria? After all, the more churches we have now, the more crimes appear to increase.

This paper goes into exegetical exposition of II Corinthians 11: 13-15 for the purpose of reassessment of a biblical support for religious mimicking by Nollywood actors and its implication for the contemporary church leaders in Nigeria. While religion, if positively channeled, is capable of healing the wounds of social malaises in the Nigerian society, the role of these make-beliefs should not be seen as that of disrespect for religion but a warning to believers that faith only in God rather than in religious leaders is a necessary antidote to social maladies in our religious society.

Religion and Nollywood

William Grassie describes religion as one of the markers of cultural and national identity, which in turns become a natural aspect of our species.² According to him, even though the best and the worst things that humans do seem to be motivated by religion, it is not realistic to discard it off our life, instead, we must encourage it to try to make it more wholesome in human affairs.³ Corroborating Grassie's views, Adeoye Oyewole in his argument for religion as an instrument for the mental well-being of humanity, expresses his supports for Carl Jung's psycho analytical theory as a major synergy for religious role in our societies.⁴ According to him:

While Sigmund Fiend believed that religious doctrines were all Illusions and universal obsessional neurosis of humanity, Carl Jung... viewed religion as collective mythologies with profound effect on personality. Thus, in Jung's view, religions are indispensable spiritual supports, whereas in Fiend's, they are illusory crutches.⁵

Since leadership is a necessary nexus in any progressive society however, positive effects of religion can only be felt in a situation where leaders allow truthfulness, moderation and objectivity to be their watchwords. To be a religious leader is not only to be a seeker after truth and knowledge, one should equally be able to live a life worthy of his or her callings. The call according to I Timothy 3:1-7 requires a life that is proportionate with religious tenets in values and attitude. For example, a detachment from crass materialism is one of the biblical tenets (cf I John 2: 15- 17) for all Christians, but much more for church leaders who are being looked upon for directions. Failure to obey this precept could be translated to sacrificing truth and knowledge on the altar of self-aggrandizement

and other egocentric passions which would be distanced away from religious values. It is almost impossible for instance, for one to be crassly materialistic seeking immoral and illegal gains and still spew novel religious messages and attitudes.

In Shola Odunfa's consideration of what Nigeria's movies industries reveals about the country's spirituality, he opines that a major reason which made him to like Nollywood films is that it makes it easier for him to relate the stories told and the morals implied.⁶ He said "I do not need a fertile imagination to understand the plots... if there are any serious ones- neither do I find it difficult to connect to the spiritual impulses of the characters."⁷

In support of Odunfa's submission, a number of home videos display Nigerian deep religiosity in less spiritual proportion. First is the dramatic upsurge of apparent fundamentalism in Christian religious practice. The vogue in our society today is the turning away from orthodox churches and the rushing to the Pentecostal churches ostensibly for the waves of new gospel of prosperity and miracles. The new army of Pentecostal "born again" being launched into the Nigerian land scrape has become one of the synergies for hedonistic tendencies as seen in the rituals of tithe and offerings in the churches. Prophetic message in tithes and offerings no longer come in riddles and proverbs but in plain Nigerian, but biblical mis-interpretative language- God loves a cheerful giver. And one does not have anything over the other except in most important matter of bank balance.

Secondly, Pentecostal leaders' success depends to a very large extent on the ability to work on the psyche of Nigerian for personal gains. An average Nigerian believes strongly in destiny. It is believed that no matter how hardworking or lazy an individual is, the will of the gods, as pre-destined, will come to pass. Appeasing the gods rather than taking responsibilities through "spiritual" leaders is always encouraged.

Odia Ofeimun, while acknowledging the ability of Nollywood actors to project the reality of their stories, observes that much of what you see in Nollywood in relation to religion is hogwash because the human ability to solve problems is denied.⁸ According to him:

The power to make things happen is given to God, who already gave powers to use. It's as if you are denying that God gave you those powers when you credit to him every evil or good that happens. In Nollywood that is the way it happens. Problems that have direct objectives and scientific solutions are made to appear so outlandish, so out of this world, so other worldly, that it is solely by appealing to God that they get solved... every night mare is interpreted as a spiritual attack which some pastors will deal with. People have stopped using their brains. Societies like that are asking to be colonized.⁹

Of equal importance is the double standard of some church pastors in their occult practices and traditional religious ritual. However large and strong the followers of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria are, traditional beliefs still have a very strong pull most especially in times of personal troubles or tragedies. In the views of Don Akhilomen, while some leading Church leaders are laying claims to have the ability to dispense the grace of divine healing as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church, Pentecostal practices in Nigeria have been uniquely colored by social-cultural and economic background of the Nigeria people.¹⁰ He opines that, "...the traditional religious belief in the efficacy of magic, sorcery and witchcraft has also largely influenced the popularity and practice of faith healing by Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria".¹¹

Despite the upsurge of social vices and the seeming ineffectiveness of religious practices in our environments, effective Pentecostal practices, coupled with the growing popularity and accompanying wealth and prosperity of many church leaders, Pentecostal churches continued to emerge in all nooks and crannies of this country, claiming similar abilities and soliciting for similarly large audiences. Who could then blame the Nollywood actors for presenting the religious leaders in the ways their lives, attitudes and styles present them in our midst? Will anyone not be tempted to ask of the impact of such Pentecostal efforts, if indeed the motives are heavenly than worldly? If the real God is actually being projected by some religious leaders, would there not be difference between human efforts and God's in our approach at solving the current socio-political problems? A recourse to the emerging challenges in our lives shows that Nigerians face myriads of problems ranging from leadership to economic, social, financial, health and spiritual to mention just a few. These Nollywood actors and the hedonistic pastors are simply responding to the Nigeria's current situation by using the best means at their disposals to get what they want. But, while the latter is exposing the anti-religious antics of the formal, the formal is using their antics to draw followers after themselves with all the hedonistic tendencies in an already bad society as regularly seen in robberies, fraud, bribery, insurgencies, corruptions, prostitutions, abortions, examination mal practices, money and sex for marks among lecturers and money and sex for employment in virtually all aspect of our social life.

Exegetical Study of II Corinthians 11: 13-15

The Text:

13.oi(gaʀ toiu=toi yeudapo/stoloi, e)rga/tai do/lioi, metasxhmatizo/menoi ei)\$ a)posto/lou\$ Xristou=. 14.kai\ ou) qau=ma: au)to\ gaʀ o(satana=\$ metasxhmati/zetai ei)\$ a&ggelon fwto/\$. 15.ou) me/ga ou@n ei) kai\ oi(dia/konoi au)toy= metasxhmati/zontai w(\$ dia/konoi dikaiousw/nh\$: w!n to\ te/lo\$ e&stai kata\ ta\ e&rga au)tw=n.

Transliteration: 13:

Hoi gar toioutoi i pseudapostoi ergatai dolioi metaschematizomenoi eis apostolos christou. 14. Kai ou thauma autos gar ho satanas metaschematizetai ies angelon photos. 15. Ou mega ounēi kai hoi diakonoi autou metaschemematizontai os dikaiosunes on to telos estai kata ta erga auton.

Translation:

13. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen and masquerading as apostle of Christ. 14. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as angel of light. 15. It is not surprising then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.¹³

Apostle Paul's correspondence to the Corinthian church addresses series of challenges faced by members. These challenges range from social, to legal and doctrinal problems. Chapter eleven and indeed the entire book which is now known as second Corinthians, was written for the sole purpose of addressing doctrinal problems, raised by some interlopers, whose identity remains a subject of debate to date.¹⁴ The interlopers, represented by someone Paul describes as a newcomer *erchomenos* brought into the church a new feeling of resentment among the members who before then had a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (11: 3-4). In order to have a strong hold on the church, they meant to undermine Paul's prestige in the eyes of his converts. Unknown to them and the church however, a fundamental doctrine of Christianity is being seriously distorted. In his usual characteristics manner, Paul engages the church with interplay of Greek words to express his surprise that the church members who before then were in good standing in Christ could easily succumb to the newcomers. The distorted doctrine affects not only the Jesus they first received, a new spirit and gospel was indeed being cunningly introduced to them by those who regard themselves as more superior in the ministry (super Apostles). According to Paul, while Jesus the interlopers brought to the church is another of the same kind *allon*, their spirit and their gospel are indeed others of different kinds *heteron* (11:4). That is, while they appear to be genuinely regenerated, the gospel they preached was clearly different from the canonical one the church received initially and definitely not with the same kind of spirit the apostle projected to them.

As exposed in II Corinthians 11: 7-12, the real spirit driving the interlopers is the spirit of mammon.¹⁵ They were surprised that Paul could engage in vigorous labour among the Corinthians church free of charge. Harris puts it succinctly when he observes that:

Paul, they alleged, was a double-minded (apostle) who acted capriciously (II Cor. 1: 17-18; 10: 2-4) and lorded it over his converts (1:24; 7: 2), so restricting their spiritual development (6: 12). He carried no letters of commendation (13: 1; 10: 13) because he commended himself (4: 2, 5; 5: 12; 6: 4; 10: 12, 18; 12: 11; cf I Cor. 9: 1-3; 14: 18; 15: 10b) as obscure (4:3; 6: 2-3),

so also the letters he wrote were unintelligible or devious (1:13) and written with the perverse aim of condemning and destroying (7:2-3; 10:8, 13:10 and causing pain (2:2, 4-5; 7: 8)...his refusal to accept remuneration from the Corinthians proved that he cared little for them and that he was aware of being a counterfeit apostle, not the mouthpiece of Christ (11: 5, 7-11, 13; 12:11-15; 13:3,6). Yet he exploited the willingness of the church to support him by having his agents organize a collection, ostensibly for the saints at Jerusalem but in reality for himself (12:16-18).¹⁶

As observed by Richards in support of Harris "why should Paul's willingness to support himself be a cause for criticism".¹⁷ Paul had earlier explain that while he had a "right" to support, he surrendered that right (1 Cor.9) not only as a sacrifice in favor of an external reward, but a genuine means of encouraging the Christian church that money is neither only nor always a motive for spiritual services. Paul's opponents have distorted Paul's motive for their selfish aggrandizement. And as expressed by Bruce,

In Paul's mind, arguments did not affect his personal status so much as the truth of the gospel and the nature of the church. If his ministry bore the stamp of divine approval, if the Corinthians church was the zeal of his apostleship, then the opposition of those intruders was opposition not merely to him but to the lord who commissioned him, to the spirit who empowered him, and to the gospel which he proclaimed.¹⁸

The people, who engage in these character assassinations, presenting errors as truth, are those being referred to as "such men" (11: 13). For the first time in his letters and indeed the whole of the New Testament, Paul refers to such people as false apostles *pseudapostoloi* who are both deceitful and dishonest workers. To demonstrate how serious the nature of their tactics, they are described as satanic agents who transformed *metaschematozo* themselves as agents of Christ. Here lies the real danger the church at Corinth faced. These interlopers would be difficult to identify physically and by motives. The word masquerade appears three consecutive time in the three verses under review. The first *metaschematizomenoi* (a present middle masculine participle plural noun) to describe the interlopers themselves, the second being *metaschemazetai* (a third person plural present perceive indicative verb) to express Satan's attitude of changing colours at will, and the third is *metaschematizotai* (a third person plural present perceive indicative verb) as a prove of the facts that a leopards child cannot change from leopards skin.¹⁹

The active voice in which the voice appears forms an interesting angle to their meaning. While *metaschematizomenoi* is a participle with active meaning, the rest two are perceive verbs in active voice to indicate that the actions of the interlopers are not done for the

sake of anybody, not even for the sake of the ones they claimed to represent, but themselves alone. This corresponds to Paul's teaching in Romans 16: 18 and Philippians 3: 19b, where such people's god is said to be their appetite and their stomach respectively. Rather than serving the lord Jesus, they engage in flattery and smooth talk to deceive naive minds. This attitude of theirs is said to be in agreement with that of Satan who appeared as agent of enlightenment (photos) to deceive Eve with his subtlety *panourgia*, a word best define as craftiness and trickery. Since Satan, their real mentor is capable of posing as "gentlemen of the cloth, when indeed he is nothing but cloth itself, it should never be surprising then if the interlopers exchange the righteousness of Christ for pecuniary gains. According to Tasker, "Satan never present himself as Satan; neither does he present sin as sin"²⁰. He will always present himself as the real God who knows what is best for man and who will provide the real pleasure, enjoyment, and fulfillment. So also are force ministers who disguise as angels of righteousness, particularly the righteousness given by Christ. They stress the life and teachings of Jesus but ignore His righteousness that emphasizes the fact that. "... a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk.12: 15). And that nothing makes life worthy than contentment and moderation (Heb. 13: 15; 1 Tim. 6:6 cf. Phil. 4: 11 etc.).

Paul and Nollywood Religious Mimicking

Paul's polemic as explained above and the religious mimicking being displayed by Nollywood actors in some Nigerian films are no doubt serving the same purposes-exhibition of the activities of fake religious leaders and a godly warning to innocent, sincere and devoted Christians. And although, their methods and motives differ, both can conveniently bear the title of messenger per excellent.

The concept of apostleship in both classical and biblical Greek carries the idea of an ambassador with a clear mission in favor of a superior's message.²¹ One could bare such message either by copying his or her superior's style *prosopopoia*,²² or imitating the character when positive and mimicking when negative both embraced by another Greek word "*mimeomai*" a deponent verb from the noun form of "*mimos*".²³ A clearer picture of the usage of this word especially in its mimicking from is seen when the preposition "*ana*" (on or upon) is combined with the future verb form of "*mimeomai*" "*mimnesko*" to form a Greek compound word "*anamimnesko*" (to put to remembrance). As used in 1 Cor. 4: 17 and 2 Tim. 1: 6, it carries the implied meaning of exhibiting something or someone.²⁴

Pentecostalism has indeed become the wave of the moment. Conflicting motives have made it difficult to separate the genuine from adulterated. Yet, people need a constant reminder and encouragement to seek for the genuine in the midst of the diluted. It would be difficult to impress such a reminder except the evil ones among them are constantly exposed in the open. Paul's silence in the face of serious such pretentious interlopers would have meant consent. It could also be cancerous evil as many might take them for

real and fall without remedy. What is more dangerous is that they are not likely to fall alone without pulling others along. Kudos should there go to the mimicking actors for exposing those Paul himself refers to in Acts 20: 29 – 30, as those whose duty is distorting the truth in order to draw away disciples after themselves.

One of the fundamental Christian doctrines as taught by Paul, particularly for Christian blessings is giving than receiving. At the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, he mentioned a “collection for God’s people” (16: 14). Between A. D 52 and 57, much of his energy had been devoted to raising money for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem (Rom. 15: 26; Gal.2: 10). Richards gives four possible reasons for poverty among the Christian populace at that time. These are:

1. Many were ostracized and would neither be employed nor have the right to purchase food because of being counted as apostates.
2. Food shortage from the overpopulation of A. D 46 and misrule of Claudius (Acts 11: 27 – 30).
3. Heavy taxes imposed in Palestine by both Romans and local leaders.
4. The selfish activities of the powerful aristocrats in the use of their wealth that further impoverished the poor.²⁵

Whatever the reason, Christians of that period were near destitute and in a vivid demonstration of the central Christian truth, Paul raised money not only in the spirit of equality, love and godliness but even towards others rather than towards self. They were reminded about the fact that each would receive what he or she sows (2 Cor. 9: 6 – 7), and that no one can out give God, who supplies us with all we need so that we can be generous towards others (9: 8 – 11). This is the distinct Christian theology that Paul exemplified among the Corinthian church that made him a trust worthy leader with his persistence commitment to servant hood, display of hard work, suffering, deep concern for God’s people and an evidence that God is still at work in the face of various challenges. And it is this that the interlopers meant to distort and replaced with a self induced message which Paul refers to as another (heteron) gospel. And it is the same adulterated messages that the Nollywood actors are trying to expose in our own society even for their own commercial gains. After all many of them profess one religion or the other and the activities of their leaders are never hidden from them. Were Paul to be alive to see the efforts of Nollywood actors at exposing fake religious leaders in our society, how would he have reacted? The reactions would have been that of joy despite the fact of non ministerial callings as shown in a near similar situation in his letter to the Philippians’ Church (Phil.1: 18).

Conclusion

Nigeria, no doubt is in a difficult period. Just like in the first century Christian times, Nigerians are forced to bear the burdens exacerbated by joblessness and poverty, occasioned by leadership problems, heavy taxes and immoral display of ill-gotten wealth, all of which are strong enough to push people into any kind of means in order to assuage

the terrible effects of poverty in our society. Although, no reason is good enough to drive people into crime in a religious society, the worst of crimes is perhaps the crimes being perpetrated at the altars. Some of such crimes as occultism, deception, fraud and deliberate falsehood in teachings and pretentious living are no doubt cankerworm in the nerves of the society at large. Such have the force to sway away gullible adults from the right attitudes to life and drive our young and innocent citizens to crime by propagating evil seeds in their minds and making them look like good. Those young once are the future hope of any nation. Having tried all kind of formulas as probable solution to the ills of the country without success, moving back to the basic tenets of religion is no doubt the way forward. Religion itself cannot be blamed for moral decadence in our society. The teachings and practices depend on better examples from religious leaders. If religious mimicking would stop from Nollywood actors, the religious leaders must learn to do it right by following the lives and correct teachings of their progenitors. Or else they are as Paul has described the interlopers at the Church in Corinth – fake ministers with fake messages.

In the meantime, Femi Abbas' prayers would be appropriate for our religious nation. Oh God, "Give us a leader from amongst us whose piety will be the basis of his leadership, whose conscience will be the scale of his conduct; whose words will match his deeds; and whose temptation will check his greed and avarice".²⁶

Endnotes

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