



CULT OF PERSONALITY?

BY JENNIFER JILL SCHWIRZER

The term “cult of personality” is defined in *The Fast Times Political Dictionary* as: “authoritarian regimes in which the enormous power of the leader is reinforced and enhanced by exaggerated propaganda centered on him personally. The leader’s picture is everywhere, on billboards, in public squares and buildings; he is supposed to be the embodiment of wisdom and compassion and courage and

leadership—a true father of the country, possessing almost superhuman powers.”

The term was first used in 1956 by the Russian Communist Party when it denounced Josef Stalin for indulging in a personality cult when he was in power.¹ It was thought that under Lenin, “communism was to serve man, whereas under Stalin it appeared that man served communism.”²

Fingering Josef Stalin for perpetrating a system of cult-like loyalty among his people was accurate.

Even though he killed between 15 and 25 million in his infamous “purges,” there were still sufficient adoring mobs at his funeral to see some trampled to death in the confusion.³ Twice *Time* magazine named him the man of the year.⁴ The spell of his magnetic personality did not fade until years after his death, until today he is regarded as the megalomaniacal monster he truly was.

Exalting Humans—Not God

Cult of personality has a new incarnation in western society. It is a

kinder, gentler tyranny that involves no mass murder, no bloodbaths or concentration camps. Only the uncanny worship of mortal man remains intact. I've never known a bona fide despot, but I have observed some individuals who possess preternatural power to

should be. This is the heart of celebrityism, and the result is the rampant loss of true selfhood.

Which is why pop culture is so intrinsically inconsistent. Never before has freedom of expression and individualism been so prized, and never before so essentially compromised. When we engage in creature worship, our false god ultimately robs us of personhood, using us until we lose our usefulness to him or her. Every human who consents to be worshiped is actuated by the luciferian spirit that sees

“star” within the affections of the people. With mass marketing of religious products, there comes the need to make household names out of the religious personalities behind them. Mass media has brought the most polished, talented and articulate religious leaders into our living rooms, making church attendance seem ordinary, even boring, by contrast.

Spectator Christianity can't meet the deep needs of the human heart, but it can seem to. A strange, instant intimacy is cultured between celebrity and fan, and the need for spiritual and social connectedness is at times masked over by these pseudo-relationships.

Perhaps a confession is due here. Although I'm not much for Christian rock stars and pop preachers, I have succumbed to personality cults on a more regional level. The celebrities I have chosen have names that you wouldn't recognize. Yet the syndrome is the same. Spiritual heroes have offered me the hope of being part of something greater than myself. A social being who craves a sense of belonging, I have at times gathered with others at the shrine of a larger-than-life religious personality as a quick fix for my inborn alienation and loneliness. Suddenly I had connectedness, definition and power, short lived as it was.

But now the spell of these charmers has been broken by the hard knocks of religious life. As I examine my heart I see that the essence of my creature worship was self-worship. I fashioned idols that reflected my own fallenness. The sins I cherished in myself were polished and glamorized in these deities of my own making. Now they have tumbled into the dust like Pharaoh's gods before the Ark of the Covenant, and I intend to leave them there.

The Folly of Hero Worship

Sacred history is littered with accounts that reveal the folly of hero worship. Israel asked God for



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sway the masses. So have you. Sports, pop music, Hollywood, are all about making gods out of fellow human beings and tacitly issuing them permission to steer us—the herd—in all of life's matters from who should win the presidency to the benefits of belly shirts. In a cult of personality, fans live, eat, breathe and worship their icons. Selfhood is then defined by, and therefore submerged in, the great, exalted self, the star, the ubiquitous alter-ego. The net result is that man is exalted in place of God.

Why are we so prone to “serve the creature, instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever, Amen”?⁵ Simply because we are created beings and by the dictates of our nature, we must worship something. We long to lose ourselves in another. When a release of self takes place in God, he returns our identity to us, fortified and ennobled by his own high estimation of our individuality. But this natural worship-drive has been perverted by sin. It's so easy to put visible, audible human beings where God

others as either stumbling blocks or stepping stones to their self-advancement. Holding out the hope of enrichment, creature worship leaves us broken and poor.

Christian Credentials

If Christians are honest with themselves, they will acknowledge that this very celebrityism is big business in the Christian marketplace. While there have always been popular Christian communicators, there are more now, and they are more effectively marketed. According to the Colorado Springs-based Christian Booksellers Association, the Christian retail industry accounts for \$4.2 billion in annual sales, up from \$1 billion in 1980.⁶ Advertising genius and image brokering have brought star status

to pretty teen songbirds and thundering preachers alike. When the survival of the ministry relies upon the support of “fans,” it becomes a severe temptation for these gospel emissaries and their support team to overstep in their attempt to place the



a king, and the inspired record painfully delineates the sorrows that were borne when these kings failed the people.⁷ The young Christian church was tempted to section off under their favorite apostles; “Each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’”⁸ Apparently the members of the Corinthian faith family were making icons out of their favorite Christian leaders. The icon itself became the iconoclast as Paul trounced upon the practice of regarding religious leaders as little saviors on a level with Christ himself.⁹ He said, “Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”¹⁰

If Paul lived today, wouldn't he utter the same warning? Have believers lost their proclivity for hero-worship, or have our evangelists, teachers and thought leaders, even our musicians, at times enjoyed near adulation as they have become beneficiaries of mass popularity?

I'll try to be balanced about this. Role modeling has its place within the body of Christ. Timothy should be able to learn from their Pauls without being labeled sycophants. We will always admire those who know more, and can express what they know better than we can. Brilliant minds, adept communicators, witty artists and gifted musicians will always tend to find a place of prominence among us. Remarkable people with exceptionally dramatic biographies or outstanding achievements will garner the attention of the many.

But we should not think ourselves immune to a “Christianized” cult of personality. More insidious than their secular counterparts because they are less blatant, religious personality cults may mouth glory to God while subliminally drawing glory to man. But this need not be. When Paul raised a lame man to his feet, the people of the land began to worship him and Barnabas, saying

they were Hermes and Zeus. As they prepared to sacrifice to their newfound idols, these apostles tore their robes and cried, “Why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn

Redeemer, “Him who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and the springs of waters,” “the Lamb.”¹² The other camp will worship “the beast” and his cohorts.¹³

I wonder if the current climate of celebrityism is preparing people to



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from these vain things to a living God.”¹¹

These holy men did what I wish my fallen heroes had done, and what I wish today's Christian celebrities would do. They proclaimed that they were men of the same nature. There was nothing innately sacred about them, nor were they somehow of a better cut of flesh. Paul deflected human praise by humbling himself before those who wanted to worship him. He took a pin to his own balloon to deflate his persona's awe-factor. “I am a sinner like you,” he said, “don't indulge in what would be mutual exploitation, using me to satisfy your need for an object of worship, and tempting me to use you to minister to my own conceits.”

I hope this isn't just a personal hobby horse of mine. Sometimes I fear that I'm a self-appointed iconoclast. But then I read the book of Revelation, and noticed that someday the world will be divided over this issue. One camp will worship God, the Creator and

take their stand on the wrong side. One thing is sure—the Holy Godhead and the coalition of evil will ever compete for our homage. Now and forever, it behooves us to worship God and God alone. □

1 <http://www.fast-times.com/dictCo2Cu.html>
 2 The History Guide, Lectures on Twentieth Century Europe, Steven Kreis, <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/cult.html>
 3 <http://www.celebritymorgue.com/josef-stalin/>
 4 In 1939 and 1942. See www.Time.com
 5 Romans 1:25, NASB
 6 Gwen Florio, “Christian Retail Industry Sees Annual Sales Multiply,” Denver Post, Dec. 2003.
 7 1 Samuel 8
 8 1 Corinthians 1:12
 9 Notice that Christ is mentioned alongside Paul, Apollos and Cephas as if he was one of many options.
 10 vs. 13
 11 Acts 14:15
 12 Revelation 14:7 and 13:4
 13 See Revelation chapters 13 and 14. The dragon is mentioned as an object of worship in 13:4 and the image in 14:9.

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