

Full Length Research Paper

Christians' perception of the concepts of death and judgment: A multimodal discourse analytical study of selected editions of *Christian Women Mirror Magazine*

Olowu Ayodeji

General Studies Department, Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, PMB 1019, Owo, Nigeria.

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In this paper, there were critical analyses of some selected editions of *Christian Women Mirror Magazine* using the theoretical framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. The study is an exposé of Christians' perception of the two concepts of death and judgement. We have carried out a Multimodal Discourse Analytical study of selected editions of *Christian Women Mirror Magazine* that discuss the subjects of judgement and death. The analyses were in two parts. First, there was the analysis of the subjects covered and the semantic indicators lifted from the magazine; and second, there was the analysis of the visual components used in the discussion of these subjects. In all, the paper revealed the perception of Christians on the two subjects discussed. Contrary to popular beliefs that death ends it all as it terminates the whole existence of man, Christians hold that life continues after death. Death, to a Christian is just the beginning of another existence either in heaven or hell. They also believe that judgement comes after death. They also hold that the judgement is total and final and banishes sinners to hell forever while the righteous will go to heaven to enjoy bliss forever.

Key words: Multimodal discourse analysis, charismatic, multifunctional, representation, visual communication.

INTRODUCTION

The subjects of 'Death' and 'Judgment' had existed from time immemorial. Different people hold diverse opinions on these two subjects depending on religious affiliations, ethnic background, educational attainments among various other bases. In this paper a concise attempt is made to reveal Christians' perception on these two subjects via the analysis of some selected semantic indicators and images from the magazine. It must be emphasized that this study falls within the purview of religious discourse. Our focus is to use the newest theory in language study for these analyses. The theory is Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is 'an emerging paradigm in discourse studies which extends the study of language to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as

images, colours, scientific symbolism, gestures, action, music and sound' (O'Halloran, 2011). Multimodal discourse analysis is the study of the 'intersection and interdependence of various modalities of communication within a given context' (Snyder, 2006). Researchers in this area seek to 'identify the influence of mode on meaning within a given context, focusing on co-occurrence interaction between multiple semiotic system' (Baldry and Thibault, 2006). Multimodal discourse analysis is essentially concerned with the theory and analysis of semiotic resources and the semantic expansions which occur as semiotic choices combined in multicultural phenomena. The 'inter-semiotic' relations arising from the interaction of semiotic choices, known as intersemiosis, is a central area of multimodal research (Jewitt, 2009).

Multimodal discourse analysis is also concerned with the design, production and distribution of multimodal resources in social settings (Leeuwen, 2001).

A SURVEY OF PREVIOUS WORKS

Undoubtedly, many scholars have contributed to the research in language use in religious discourse. Taiwo (2006) conducted an investigation into the various ways pulpit preachers in Christian religion elicit responses from their congregation. His investigation into the Response Elicitation in English-Medium Christian Pulpit Discourse (ECPD) is from the framework of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. Taiwo reveals in his study that preachers control the discourse while the congregation share in the process of creation of the text as it 'unfolds'. He reveals that preachers 'determine what responses are given, how they should be and when to give them' (Taiwo 2006). Taiwo (2005) also conducted a research into the general style of interrogation in Charismatic Christian pulpit discourse. He concentrated particularly on the peculiar use of interrogatives by Charismatic Christian preachers.

Douglas (2000) investigated the language use in Christian banners, handbills and posters. He approached this work from the framework of semantics. He investigated both the linguistic and semantic features of the verbal texts in his data. It is important to note that in all of these studies, the non-verbal components are ignored. Again, scholars such as Eilish (2007) and Keane (1977) have at various times dwelt on the linguistic persuasive elements in religious writings such as sermons, prayers, liturgy, catechumen etc. Most of these works focus on the Meanwhile, Olowu A. (2011) in his work titled *A Multimodal Analysis of Selected Editions of Christian Women Mirror Magazine* analysed the visual modes used in the magazine. His study revealed that visual resources such as colour, pictures, symbols and icons etc enhanced the semantic quality of the text. He also revealed that in *Christian Women Mirror Magazine*, the verbal and visual modes of communication played complementary roles to each other and were very significant in targeting the real audience of the text. Olowu concluded that the entire signifying practices in the *Christian Women Mirror Magazine* were useful as important communicative devices in modern print evangelism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, some copies of *Christian Women Mirror Magazine* were procured. The magazine is a monthly publication of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry and only 12 issues of the magazines are produced in a year. The selected copies cover only 2010. The choice of the *Christian Women Mirror Magazine* is premised on its aesthetics and richness in the use of colours and visual images that appeal to readers. Only two sections

of the magazine were purposively selected for analysis. These are 'feature piece' and 'virtuous women'. The analysis of the selected sections will be anchored on themes of Judgment and death. The selection is purposively done based on the subjects under considerations.

Theoretical consideration and data analysis

The data for this study are analyzed using the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis as explicated by Kress and Leeuwen (2001). According to them, images carry semiotic codes very different from texts in their ability to capture and encode societal norms, expectations and relationships. Kress and Leeuwen's multimodal discourse analysis theory is the latest in theoretical approaches applied to the analysis of visual communication.

Through the extensive use of visual examples via art, print media and children's drawing, Kress and Leeuwen (2001) strongly reinforce the notion that images carry social constructs with structural, political and cultural implications. Multimodal discourse analysis is therefore very useful in the analysis of images, colour, patterns and other concepts made possible by the modern technology. It is therefore very relevant to this study.

ANALYSIS OF THE SUBJECTS AND THEIR SEMANTIC INDICATORS

Death

Death is believed to be the end of life. Christians believe that death puts an end to human existence on earth. The world's view of death is different from Christians' perception of the subject. It is generally believed by people that death terminates the whole existence of a person. The notion is that there is no life after death and that death ends it all. But this view is not supported in the Christian faith. Christians hold that life continues after death. Death, to a Christian, is just the beginning of another existence either in heaven or hell. Death is seen as 'a kind of sleep' in that as the sleeper does not cease to exist while his body sleeps, so the dead person continues to exist despite his absence from the region in which those who remain can communicate with him, and as sleep is known to be temporary, so is the death of a person found to be (CWMM July, 2010).

Christians also see death as 'a return to the dust'. They claim that hard as it may seem for the carnal man, death is the dissolution of the body. Since Adam and Eve sinned, humans were deprived the access to the 'tree of life' and hence deprived of physical immortality. It is therefore the lot of human beings to return to the ground. "For out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19) (CWMM Dec. 2010). So the notion of death ends it all is a misconception of the subject of death as far as Christian faith is concerned.

It is of course very true that most people who are not Christians have been granted a brief stand on the

Table 1. Expressions associated with death in the magazine.**Expressions associated with the death in the magazine**

Bereavement, tragic, sudden death, eternity, tragic truth, disbelief, trepidation, ephemeral life, handbreadth, earth's chaff, heaven's gold, drowning man, pardon, humble penitence, repentance, graveyard, epitaph, wreath, strangers, pilgrims, coffin, cemetery, Brevity of life, endlessness of eternity, threshold of eternity, glimpse into the other side, other side of the divide, the reality of the world beyond, we are of all men most miserable, 'walketh in a vain shew' pardon from God, brink of eternity, a long eternity, atoning blood of Christ, no more afraid to die, the longest life is but a handbreadth, the time cometh when no man can work, a glorious exist, 'the king of terrors', death is swallowed up in victory, a kind of sleep, blissful reunion, behaviour of the wise, gathered to his people.

(CWMM, May, July and December 2010).

threshold of eternity by God. When this happens, they are made to know that there is life after death. And importantly, that when they live a life outside God, they will end up in hell. God permits this because He knows that, even for the most carefree man or woman in this world, a thoughtful consideration of eternity radically alters everything. Life ceases to be business as usual. Priorities are reordered, goals, pursuits and values are redefined and all of life assumes a whole new dimensions and sense of purpose. Just then 'money, things, time, friends, enemies, family and life itself are all adjusted to their appropriate worth and place' (CWMM May, 2010:10).

Some expressions in the magazine which have direct connection with the theme of death are identified in Table 1. Some characteristics of death are revealed in such expressions as 'bereavement', 'grave yard', 'epitaph', 'wreath', 'coffin', and 'mourning'. Death of a loved one either old or young is always very painful. No one expects his loved one to die. But as discussed earlier, Christians see the subject of death from a completely different perspective, for instance, they see it as a 'kind of sleep'. They also believe that 'death is swallowed up in victory'. These expressions are euphemism purposely employed to reduce the tension and fear of death. Christians teach that death is temporal and that at resurrection, Christians would be woken up and transformed and will die no more. Some of the words identified depict life as transient, ephemeral and not lasting. So no matter how long a person lives on earth, he is sure to die some day. Some expressions identified are highly significant and suggestive about Christians' perception of the theme of death. The expressions such as 'endlessness of eternity', 'threshold of eternity', 'glimpse into the other side', 'other side of the divide', and 'reality of the world beyond' suggest that there is another life after this present one. Usually, in Christian faith, it is believed that this present life will end at death and another life will begin. They claim that at death, the physical body of a person will die but his soul and spirit will live on. The eventual abode of the soul of a person after his demise is forcefully determined by how he had lived his life while on earth.

The expressions 'we are of all men most miserable'

and 'gathered to his people' are biblical references. The former, found in 1Corinthians 15:19 is a statement credited to Paul the apostle in his letter to the Corinthians. He considers deeply the brevity of this life and the sorrow, grief and pains it offers. Then he concludes that if Christians hope only in this present life, they are the most miserable of all people. The latter is found in one of the books of Moses called Genesis, chapter 25 verse 8. The meaning of this statement is that Abraham, after his death, was not ordinarily laid to rest at the graveyard but 'gathered to heaven' where his people who are already dead are living on. It is also significant that the phrase 'his people' does not refer to his biological relations but those saints of God who served God before him. Then if this argument is held true, it means that Abraham lives on after his demise in this present world. Hence, these references are used by Christians to substantiate their claim of an afterlife.

Judgment

The concept of judgment is very controversial. But the meaning and conception of judgment in Christian faith is entirely different from what people take it to be. There are many stages of judgment but essentially our focus will be on the last or final judgment. The final judgment in Christian theology is the final and eternal judgment of God of every nation. This concept is found in all the canonical gospels, particularly the Gospel of Matthew. Although there are many versions of explanations of the final judgment of God by different denominations, we shall hold that it is the final judgment of all nations which will take place after the resurrection of the dead and the second coming of Jesus Christ, the son of God.

The fact, according to a popular Christian opinion, remains that sometime and very soon, every person who has ever lived will be gathered to the place of judgment to be judged by Jesus Christ. This view is supported by the gospel of Matthew, chapter 25 verse 31 to 42: When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of glory, and before him shall be gathered all nation; and he shall

Table 2. Expressions associated with judgment in the magazine.**Expressions associated with judgment in the magazine**

Archangel, second death, warning signals, final judgment, eternal death, dangers, pervasion, falsehood, spiritual decadence, hell's timelessness, everlasting destruction, white throne judgment, secrete sins, speechlessness, You will be there, reality of judgment, eternity in hell or in heaven, eternity is still a long way off, mire of decadence, unbridled permissiveness, tragic historical examples, book of life, day of judgment, miscarriage of justice, every secret thing, hell is real, the wicked shall be turned to hell, dreadfulness of hell, your name is not in the book of life.

(CWMM, March and December 2010).

separate one from another, as a shepherd divided his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left ...and these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but righteous into life eternal (KJV).

At the judgment, sinners will be sentenced and banished permanently to hell fire by God, the righteous judge, while saints will be justified and ushered into the presence of God and into eternal bliss forever.

The expressions lifted from the magazine and identified above are associated with the theme of judgment. Phrases such as 'eternal death', 'second death', and 'hell's timelessness' are indicators of Christians' belief in yet another death. Four types of death are identified. These are physical death, spiritual death, death to sin and second death. Meanwhile, for the purpose of this discourse, our focus here will be on second death. The second death will be experienced by sinners immediately after the judgment. At the white throne judgment, sinners will forever be condemned to hell. This condemnation is usually referred to as second death. The phrase 'hell's timelessness' is a pointer to the fact that hell is eternal. There is no time limit in hell. Anybody who slips into hell will live there forever.

Also such phrases as 'mire of decadence', 'unbridled permissiveness', 'every secrete sin' are all indicators of reasons why people go to hell. The summary of this is that unrepented sins take people to hell. When a person decides to live in moral decadence and secrete sins, and refuses to repent, he is sure to face a hot judgment of God and to land in hell eventually. The 'book of life' refers to a book which will be opened at judgment. All names of saints of God are written in it. Anybody, no matter how highly placed or the position held in the service of God whose name is not in the book of life is thrown into hell. This view is supported by this reference in the book of revelation, chapter 20 verses 14 and 15:

And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the Second death. And whosoever was not found written in the Book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

The belief of Christians is that hell is dreadful. It is everlasting. It is the abode of the devil and his demons. It

is not created for human beings but in reality many have slipped into hell. At Judgment, so many people will be disappointed as they will hear 'your name is not in the book of life'. People who have kept their sins from the glare of the public will think they will make an easy escape of the Judgment of God. But they will be disappointed as they will hear the word 'depart from me ye workers of iniquities'. This statement as identified in the magazine will seal their eternal doom (CWMM March, 2010; Table 2). Moreover, the phrase 'you will be there' sends warning signals to all inhabitants of the earth and announces the inescapability of the judgment of God.

Analysis of the visual components

In Figure 1, there is an image of a person in white apparel who comes out (or seems to be coming out) of the globe. In front of the person are two pictures. One of the pictures is in white and the other is in yellow. In the white image, there is a man standing in the midst of thousands of creatures that look like angels. In the other picture, there is a fire burning and the entire environment is painted in black colour. All of these are signifiers. The globe from which the person emerges represents this present world. The person coming out of the world is an example of a dead person. He just passed away from the world and immediately, he appears in the 'other side of the divide'. The fact that this individual is in white garment is deliberate.

The white colour in most part of Africa is an indicator of godliness and holiness. This white apparel is therefore an indicator of God's approval of this person. The two pictures in front of this person signify the abodes of souls which go out of the world. They represent the abode of God where all true believers are expected to live forever. The other image gives information about hell fire where sinners are believed to spend 'eternity' with the devil. Hence a person has either of these two places to go after death as captured in this image. This dead individual has either of these two places waiting for him. As stated earlier, it seems this dead person's life was pleasing to God while on earth. Hence, he appears to be moving towards heaven. A close look at the image of heaven

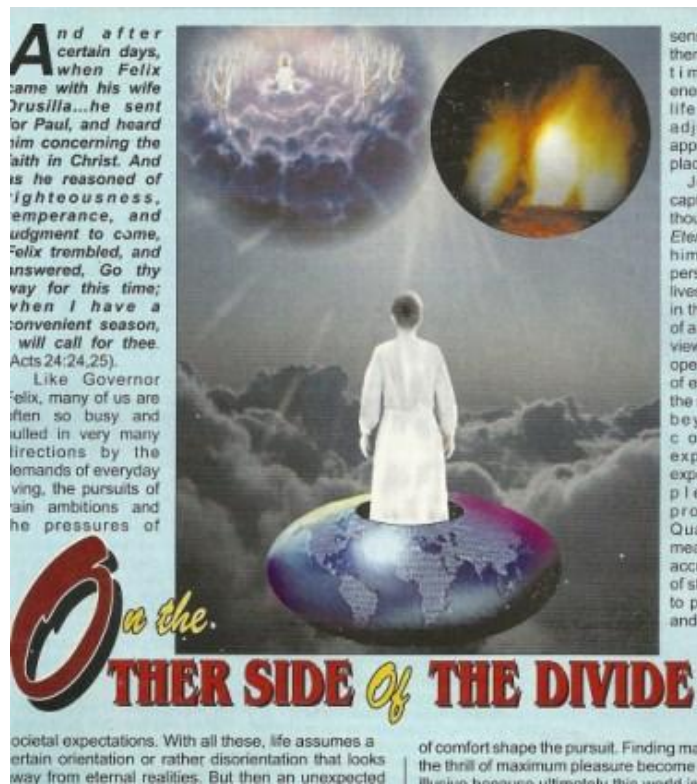


Figure 1. Other side of the divide.

here reveals the picture of a man who is standing apparently in a posture to welcome the dead man. The general impression given in the image is that at a certain time, each inhabitant of the earth will die. But death will not end it all. Man will be fully conscious when he appears at 'the other side of the divide' where he will be expected to spend eternity either in heaven or hell. Consequently, the image teaches life after death. And more importantly, it gives such information that sinners will end up in hell to spend his life after death. It therefore qualifies as a solemn warning to all living at present on earth to come to God and live righteously as death will only open a door for another life either with God or devil.

Figure 2 is also a discussion on the topic of death. Here, we see the globe and the picture of a woman in it. Unarguably, this is the picture of Pastor Mrs. Abiodun Kumuyi, the late wife of the founder and general superintendent of the Deeper Life Christian Ministry, Pastor Folorunsho Williams Kumuyi. Pastor Mrs. Abiodun Kumuyi passed on to glory on 11th April, 2009. We also notice that the same image has been 'transformed' as it goes out of the earth. A careful look at the image reveals a hand which touches the globe. This incident signifies the passing away of a Christian into glory. The woman in our image is a representation of all godly people who had lived a righteous life on earth. Those who live in continuous fear of God's law, and who, when their time were fulfilled left the world to receive their rewards from God.

The hand that touches the globe represents the awareness of God about the death of believers. The death of a true believer is divinely approved by God. Nothing on earth happens without his knowledge. The whole incident here teaches a lesson, first on the brevity of life and second on the hope of Christians after death.

However, the interpretation given about these images may vary from other opinions. This is possible since researchers according to Rose (2001) assert that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and can mean different things to different people. Hence, this analysis can be better understood by Christians who already have a good knowledge of the event described here. Images are visual metaphors which serve to reinforce the dynamic process through which texts are constructed and reconstructed. The point made by Rafranie (2003) is reinforced in the analysis of these images that visual metaphors are often implicit, opening up "a wide range of possible interpretations, which depend largely on the attitudes and level of knowledge of the reader".

In this image (Figure 3), we see a personality who dresses in a glittering white apparel and sits comfortably upon a royal chair mounted on a platform which looks like a throne of sort. At his right hand side is a creature with wings. The creature holds a book in his hand and carefully peruses it. Just below at the left hand side of the man is a big scroll. There is a hand holding a pen on top

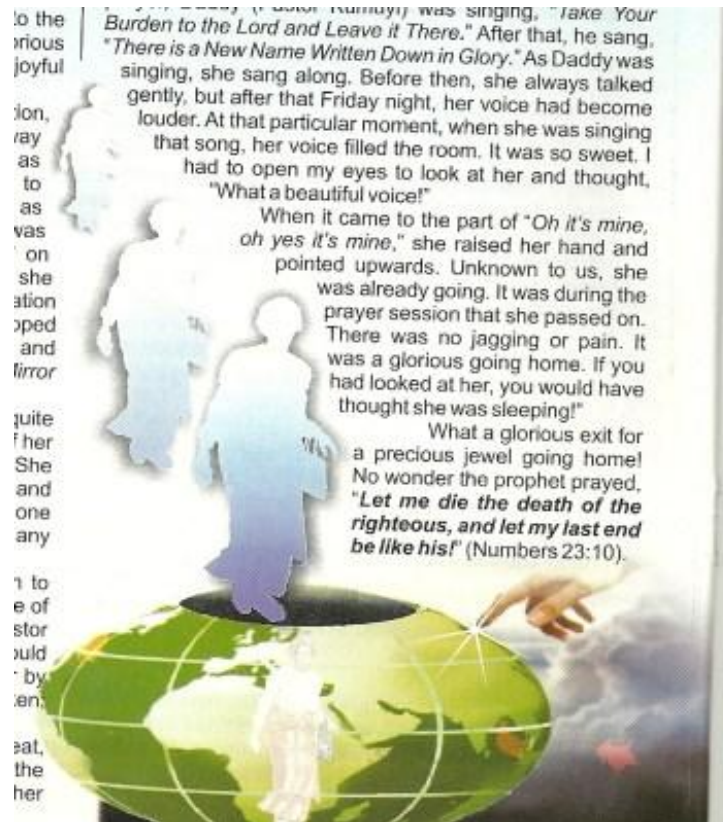


Figure 2. The picture of Pastor Mrs. Abiodun Kumuyi.

of the scroll. The scroll is placed on some other books. At the centre of this image are several thousands of people who appear to be waiting for something very crucial.

The event signified by this image is the final judgment of God. The personality sitting on the white chair represents God Almighty, the judge of the universe. The creature perusing an open book is an angel commissioned by God for such an assignment. The book in his hand is the 'book of life' in which names of all saints of God are written. Here is a demonstration of the process of the final judgment. God will sit on his throne and judge every person in the last day. Each person will be judged based on things written in those books. It is observed that the angel at the left hand side carries only one book. This is the 'book of life'. Only names of true believers are written in this book. Those whose names are not in this book are doomed forever. The other books are those which contain all deeds of man on earth. All the accounts of individuals who compulsorily will appear before the judgment of God are written in these books.

The thousands of people seen in this image are those waiting for the Judgment of God. They signify the whole human race that had at one time lived on earth. A close look at the image shows that these people are of different races and colour; black, white, brown, brunet, Indian among others. This encodes the salient truth that every

soul will face the Judgment of God. We also see the man sitting on the white chair pointing to his left. This is the direction sinners will follow. The right hand side of the man is the route of all saints of God. The other side signifies hell fire where sinners will be banished from the presence of God and condemned to hell forever. It is also quite noticeable that these people waiting for Judgment are apprehensive and agitated. This stems from the fact that they are completely unaware of their fate in the hand of the judge. This is particularly noticed in their general disposition as some of them are holding their heads in anticipation of the Judgment. This image provides information on some basic 'truths' in the Christian faith. First, that there will be a final Judgment for all inhabitants of the earth and this Judgment will come after the resurrection of the dead and the second coming of Jesus Christ; second, that the Judgment is for all races and nations of the world; and third, that the Judgment is going to be final in the sense that saints will enter God's eternal bliss while sinners will be sentenced and condemned permanently to hell fire. It is obvious that viewers of this image especially those who have heard about God's final Judgment will definitely feel an impact either consciously or unconsciously. This image is a relay into the consciousness of all readers of the reality of God's final Judgment. The author of this image no doubt has

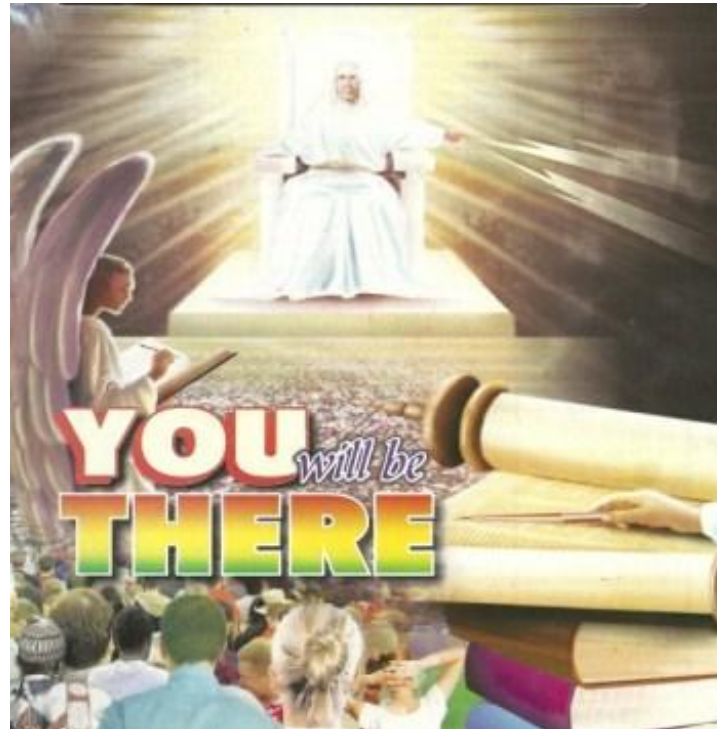


Figure 3. Final judgment of God.



Figure 4. The image of an angel who opens a very big book.

effectively communicated into the psyche of all viewers/readers the process of the event that will mark the end of all existence in this realm. This is corroborated by Kress and Van Leeuwen when they assert that:

Images are produced in the context of real social institutions, in order to play a very real role in the social life- in order to do certain things to or for their readers and in order to communicate attitudes towards aspects of social life towards people who participate in them, whether authors and readers are consciously aware of

them or not (Kress and Leeuwen, 2002).

In Figure 4, we see a very huge gate plated with gold. The gate looks so big and mighty with very giant pillars at both sides. There is an image of an angel who opens a very big book. The angel makes a pronouncement "your name is not in the book of life, sinners cannot enter here".

In front of the gate is an individual on his knees who appears to be pleading. Just beside him is a box which is slightly open to reveal its contents. The materials of the box read 'self-righteousness', 'secret sins', 'church mem

-bership', 'pride' and 'good works'. The whole of this scene is a signifier. The giant gate is no doubt the gate of heaven. It is a magnificent and awesome structure. It is entirely plated with gold. The angel standing beside the gate is the archangel of God. The big book in his hand is the book of life in which all names of saints of God are written. The man on his knee in front of the gate is a signifier of all those who pretend to be good Christians but who live hypocritical lives. They may be anybody in the church. They are found among pastors, choir, workers, deacons, overseers etc. They live continuously in sins which are not known to man but which are not hidden from God who incidentally will be their judge at the white throne Judgment. The box signifies all actions of a man while on earth. It houses all sinful actions of a person while on earth. Those materials coming out from the box are the sins which were not repented while the person was still alive.

A close study of this image reveals that the box arrives before the owner. This means that works of man go ahead of him to Judgment. Also, the pronouncement of the angel is significant. It is important only to seal the doom of this unrepentant sinner. One thing is also significant in this image. The man did not say anything in response to the angel's pronouncement. His speechlessness means that he is completely guilty. He is fully aware of his depraved condition just as he sees a panoramic display of his sins. This man presumably must have learnt about heaven as the abode of the righteous. He knows through the several teachings he had participated in that hell is the final destination of sinners. He only succeeded in keeping his sins away from his fellow man but not from God. From his speechlessness, this man has accepted his faith with equanimity. He stands condemned and through the angel's pronouncement, sentenced and banished to hell eternally. As stated earlier, this image is a representation of an event that will happen after this life. The man here signifies the crop of debauched, depraved and hypocritical Christians who will stand speechless on the Judgment day. Their Judgment will not be anywhere different from what we witness here. Hence, this image is a signifier of the impeccability of the Judgment of God.

The monologue here is a linguistic feature employed to reveal the mind of the angel and to express the eternal fate of the man in our picture. It is a device employed by the author to catch the attention of the readers and to reveal the spiritual state of the man in Judgment.

Conclusion

Multimodal discourse analysis has made it possible to account for the visual components of this study. This is made possible by the theoretical framework we have adapted in this study. However, it is instructive to note that interpretation of images is by its very nature subjective, and an image can carry multiple messages

dependent upon the nature of the visually interpreting culture. Just as Kress and Leeuwen suggest that '...social interactions and social relations can be encoded in images so that we are instructed silently regarding a set of implicit norms' (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996). The study is an exposé on the perceptions of Christians towards the subjects of this paper; death and Judgment. While many others have contrary perceptions of these concepts, through the images analyzed, it is obvious that Christians believe that 'death' does not end existence but only opens an entrance into another sphere where existence continues. 'Judgment' is believed to come after death and that everybody will face it. For people who lived reckless lives while on earth, they will be banned eternally to hell fire after the final Judgment. Those who lived honest and righteous lives will enjoy bliss forever. In all, we hope that this study has contributed to an array of scholarly works in religious discourse.

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