

THE DEEPER LIFE CAMPUS FELLOWSHIP/CHURCH AND THE CULTURE OF PICTURES AS REPRESENTATION OF IDEAS AND AESTHETICS IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF MORAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL LETHARGY

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Abstract

In this era of various electro-media devices, many Pentecostal churches still prefer to illustrate their beliefs with powerful pictures in their churches. This culture of illustrating the unknown with known still; persists among many Pentecostal/African Independent churches in South-Western Nigeria. Perhaps this culture is retained because of the prevalent moral decadence in Nigerian society or probably because of the popular belief that visual aids impress ideas more in people's minds than mere audio messages. Some pictures are designed to emphasize sexuality and gender relations. Some of them are to encourage submissiveness and decency in the sexuality of women. They equally emphasize the importance of trust and moral integrity, especially in the selection of sexual partners, more so, when the spread of HIV/AIDS has been linked to the growing promiscuity in both men and women in and outside the church. Emphasis on the kingdom of God and the last judgment is also responsible for a number of pictures which are meant to show heaven and hell more graphically. In the light of this continuous usage of picture as both symbols of beliefs and aesthetics, this paper examines the use of pictures by the DCLF in OAU to depict spiritual messages.

Keywords: Pictures, Aesthetics, Socio-Political, Lethargy and Deeper Life

Introduction

In the intensely corrupt environment of Nigeria where nothing works effectively, different methods have been used by Pentecostal preachers to awaken people's conscience to the divine call to repentance. Several preachers make use of the mass media, especially radio and television to

reach wider audience. Other preachers pass across their messages through tracts, personal contacts, and internet services, all to influence people in a positive manner in a country which is ranked among the most corrupt nations in the world. Some other Pentecostal preachers emphasize prosperity, but this has contributed to the get rich quick syndrome in Nigeria.

Pentecostal preachers also attempt to impact their hearers through various religious drama and films in order to make long lasting impressions in their minds. This is because it is generally believed that any idea or precept enacted as plays create indelible impressions in people. But instead of the preachers making radical changes in the populace attitude, their effects have been marginal.

It is quite surprising that Nigeria that produces world acclaimed evangelists and preachers like Pastor W.F. Kumuyi of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry; Pastor E.A. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (R.C.C.G); D.O. Oyedepo of the Living Faith (a.k.a) the Winners' Chapel; Pastors. T.O. Obadare and S.K. Abiara of the Christ Apostolic Church, coupled with multiplicity of churches founded by other evangelists and pastors, still harbours several hardened criminals and felons of all descriptions. It is clear beyond doubt that as religious as Nigerians are, different Christian's messages, over the years, have little or no impact on the vast majority of the people.

One major dimension in the study of Christianity in Africa is the Pentecostal use of religious pictures to press home some of their teachings or virtues which they want their members to possess. The churches are making efforts to influence their members and other people around for good. This study therefore examines the use of pictures in the Deeper Life Bible Church and the likely influence which this culture can have on both members and visitors.

The Deeper Christian Life Ministry

The Deeper Christian Life Ministry was established as an interdenominational ministry by Williams Kumuyi in 1973. The ministry later started Sunday services with the maiden service on Sunday, November 7, 1982. The ministry then started an arm known as the Deeper Life Bible Church. Other arms of the ministry include the Deeper Life Students' Outreach (D.L.S.O.) which is meant for secondary school students and the Deeper Life Campus Fellowship (D.L.C.F.) which is for students in higher institutions.

Representation of Ideas in Pictures

Representation of ideas in pictures, posters and film is important because of the general belief in an interminable 'spiritual war' which is

going on between God and Satan. Meyer (2008:85) identifies highly repetitive emphasis on the ‘spiritual war’ between God and Satan that allegedly goes on in the realm of invisible, and that is visualized repeatedly in pictures, posters and films.

This ‘continuous war’ makes it necessary to draw attention to the frictions and clashes of interest that have the potential of leading to collision and undermining of the Christian virtues in any society where those who follow God and Satan cohabit especially in Nigeria where the environment is corrupt.

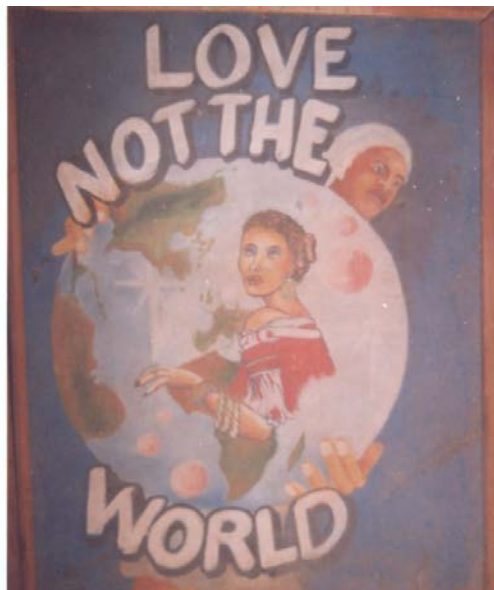
Christian beliefs portray to greater or lesser degrees a dualistic framework in which nature is hyper-separated from culture. Within this nature/culture pair is mapped onto master/servant; human/non-human; sacred/profane; man/woman; God/human; infinite/finite and heaven/earth binaries. Thus, like the power of double itself, money is a Janus-faced signifier at once potential evidence of one’s virtuousness and one’s corruption. Desire for money can lead to corruption and other vices. This is why various pictures are used to warn against the love of money such as pictures of people seeking for money during fellowship meetings and people obtaining bribes at their places of work. (Honner: 1985:481). To many Christians, Satan is not simply a conceptual contaminer, but a real spirit with particular appearance and the capacity to bind potential followers of Christ through intimate encounter and seduction with money and wealth. Many ‘born again’ Christians have testified to their experience with Satan in this direction, even though many of them who claim to be followers of Christ really love money probably because Nigeria is a country where there is a monomania for materialism. Invariably, many people have attributed this trend to economic depression which has resulted in rapid establishment of neo-Pentecostal churches (prosperity churches). Many, including Christians, have been retrenched or sacked because of the poor economic state. Abogunrin (1990:94) captured this level of deprivation and poverty when he reported that:

As never before in Nigerian history, Nigerians today confront the stark reality of abject poverty where a negligible percentage are of the population living in unprecedented affluence, while the majority are condemned to poverty and deprivation.

Many politicians attend various churches on Sundays and many pay their tithes in their churches, at the same time, these are people that are often accused of embezzlements and falsification of accounts. In spite of this, people still accuse Satan of deception, perversion and distortion of biblical truth. This is the more reason why powerful pictures are used to press home some biblical truth.

In Peter's submission 'Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil as roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet. 5:8), this warning echoes popular Christian concern with the devil, the tricky enemy, whose evil machinations can only be avoided through constant vigilance and abstinence from avarice. Devil is depicted as an agent of darkness whose activities are wrapped up in grand deceit and allurements to commit sin. Africa is generally referred to as a dark continent in view of the perceived unlimited works of the devil.

Besides, there are pictures warning against pleasures of life. Some female pictures are seen with flamboyant dressings with chains around their necks, shoes with high heels and to some extent, women with lipstick, depicting them as children of 'Jezebel'. The pictures are designed to warn people who have been 'saints' to beware of their dressings and the tendency to gravitate towards being 'sinners' instead of keeping their saintliness. The environment can easily influence the believers but a timely warning would make a difference.



There are other pictures which are meant for encouragement. The pictures teach people to fight the devil. A picture of a man dressed like a soldier with armour and sword is pasted in conspicuous places in some Deeper Life Campus Fellowship centers to motivate individuals to resolve to fight the devil by being ready to offer fervent prayers, keeping themselves awake from pollutants, so that they would be more careful about worldly allurements and grandeur.



According to Meyer (2004), one of the things which Christians should break away from is the power of kinship. He illustrates this in the Ghanaian case:

Pentecostal ideology encourages that individuals break with extended family obligations and free themselves from the dangerous powers of kinship. Recognizing that witchcraft – or satanic influence – is strongest within family ties, Pentecostal deliverance is conceptualized as an ‘untying’ of social bonds – the opposite of traditional anti-witchcraft praxis which repairs collective bonds. Meyer (1997:170).

Salvation rejects not only continuity with the past, embodied in traditional and family practices, but also the continuity between one person and others and between persons and their former companions or groups. Rather than engendering familiar growth and wellbeing through practices that open up the flow of life between the living and the dead and amongst kin, salvation centres growth on a bounded self, which can enter into a personal relationship with Jesus.

Pictures of Spiritual Warfare

The pictures of women and another of a man praying are suggestive of people battling the forces of darkness, especially during prayer for barren women or families. Barrenness in Africa is attributed to Satan. According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2007:437) barrenness is ‘an issue of deep religious concern in Africa. He further says that:

Men, women and couples with problems of sexuality and childlessness make use not only of the resources of traditional African religions but also of the many Pentecostal /

Charismatic churches and movements that have burgeoned throughout sub - Saharan Africa in the last three decades...

Consequently, child-bearing or procreation after wedding is much expected in Africa. This is because Africans, more than others, cherish children and attach some importance to posterity. Anything short of this is known to be the handiwork of Satan. The only route of escape among Christians is to pray to God to terminate the work of the devil. Christians believe that God has supreme power to bring to pass all the desires of Christians that are not opposed to His will. Although, at times, people forget that barrenness may not be due to evil forces but due to biological problems like biological malformations, 'low sperm count', 'acidity of virgina' or reckless abortion before marriage. But a good number of Pentecostal preachers interpret childlessness as a harassment by the 'evil powers'.

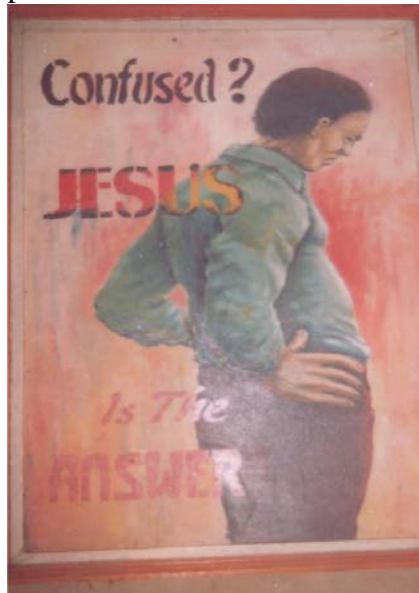


Therefore, both husbands and wives must be involved in violent prayers. Prayer times which are organized for such people are often tireless, very aggressive, serious, physically and emotionally draining. Tears are often seen on people's cheeks while clothes are drenched in sweat. They also pray for spiritual blessings like sanctification, baptism of the Holy Spirit, gift of prophecy, interpretation of tongue, discerning spirit, miracle working, healing gift, word of wisdom, word of knowledge and other gifts.



Other category of people who are often involved in such serious prayers are “sinners”, who on listening to preachers, discover their depravity and frantically need to do something urgently to escape God’s judgment. Also, ‘backsliders’ are involved. These are people who probably had been acquainted with the way of God or what they call ‘the truth’ but fell back into sins.

Besides, prayers for healing cancerous, malignant and terminal diseases are also offered. Although Corten and Marshall-Fratani (2001:3) do not believe that much time should be allocated for healing of members in any church, but many Pentecostal churches, especially the Deeper Life Bible Church and Campus fellowship in Yorubaland have paid much attention to the healing of their members. Sometimes, they exorcise evil forces through prayers from their members. In an article on Ghana, Birgit Meyer (2004:448) has argued that experiences of ‘illness and suffering are indeed the primary incentive for individuals to convert to a Pentecostal Church’. This is because Pentecostal Churches are seriously concerned about their members’ healing. However, she warns that continuing membership in a Pentecostal congregation could not be explained through the healing prayers of these churches. The pictures give a summary of what is involved in a warfare apart from their aesthetic appeal.



As this popular culture of pictures persists in the Deeper Life Bible Church and in a church like the Redeemed Christian Church of God, there are various pictures which show various needs of people in the church. The picture of a man who appears confused and of someone who is almost drown in an ocean together with another one where people are chained show that the people in such situations need salvation urgently in order to be free from

their unpalatable situations. The Pentecostals believe that the contemporary world is tightly in the grip of Satan who is spreading immorality, corruption, worldliness, drunkenness, nudity, armed robbery, untold hardship and suffering. The concern of the Pentecostal church is therefore to take up the fight against Satan and his cohorts not only on a local scale but also on a global scale. (Meyer, 1998:752). The indelible impression which the pictures are meant to create in the mind is to show that everyone is born into a state of sin and that he is exposed to all sins of the world from early childhood till he dies if nothing is done. But a person can be ‘saved’ from perdition by becoming aware of the ways through which Satan exercises control over one’s life, that is, through commission of sins. Having been aware of the ways through which Satan draws people into bondage, such sensitivity would aid in the understanding of salvation message which preachers preach to liberate sinners from the grips or shackles of Satan.

Salvation as they often preach it would come when a person acknowledges himself as a sinner and he confesses his sins. It does not end there; the person has to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour. According to Pentecostal preachers, old things, that is, old lifestyle characterized by fornication, violence, adultery and so on is gone and new lifestyle of godliness comes in. The preaching is against the submission of Corten and Marshall-Fratani who have argued that ‘salvation’ is “an ongoing existential project” (2001:7).

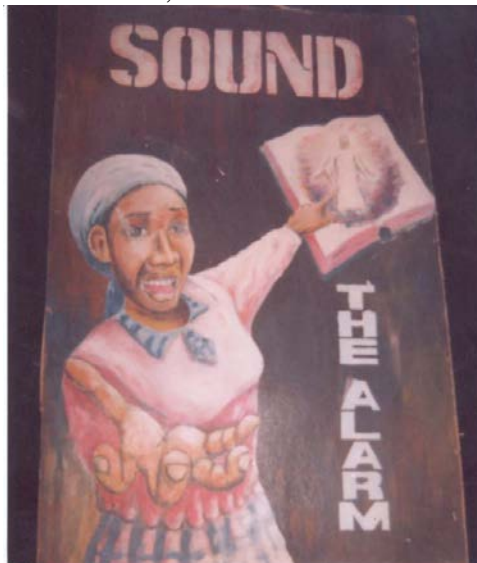
Further, the Deeper Life Bible Church pastors, especially Pastor W.F. Kumuyi believes like other Pentecostal preachers like Pastor E.A. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) that conversion to Christianity entails a complete transformation in one’s way of life. In many African countries, Pentecostal preachers demonize and condemn local drugs or concoction of herbs for healing or treatment of ailments as well as drinking anything made of alcohol. Such practices prevent Africans from becoming true believers (Ogot: 1963:256; Staryer 1978; Kirween 1993). Many of these beliefs are represented by different pictures. According to Anderson, the Pentecostals provide a ‘holistic theology of salvation’ a pneumatological soteriology that sees salvation not exclusively in terms of salvation from sinful acts and from eternal condemnation in the hereafter, but also in terms of salvation from sickness (healing), from evil spirits (exorcism) and from other forms of misfortunes. He says:

...People want to celebrate life to the full and triumph over prevailing adversity, particularly disease, poverty and injustice. Sickness and affliction prevent the fullness of life that Christ came to bring and the ‘leprosy’ in biblical times; they isolate people from full participation in the community and disturb the social equilibrium. AIC offer

solutions which are seemingly more powerful than those offer either by traditional means or by Western Christianity and they claim in the name of Jesus Christ deliverance from this adversity.

Evangelism and Endowment of Power

The picture of “sound the alarm” and “rescue the perishing” emphasize the God-given, God-ordained ministry of evangelism which most believers regard as The Great Commission. The Great Commission is about the preaching of the gospel “evangellion” –the preaching of the good news. It is good news from a living God to a lost world that through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, there is salvation.



Evangelism according to D. Watson (1976:125):

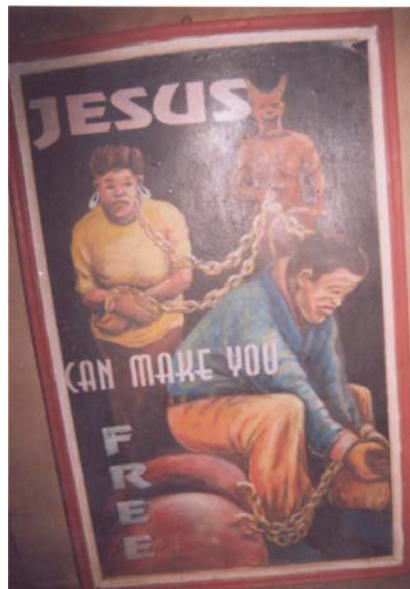
...is to present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that men shall come to put their trust in God through him, to accept him as their saviour, and serve him as their king in the fellowship of his church.

To T.L. Osborn (1974:13): “Evangelism is giving the word of life to those who are dead in their trespasses and sins, who have never had life – the unsaved, the unchurched.”



But to R. Bonnke (2002:23), the gospel must be preached immediately because of the time factor. Time, according to him, is short and we do not have long time to preach it. This is why he probably says that: “The gospel is eternal but we haven’t eternity to preach it...we have only as long as we live to reach those who live as long as we live.”

Evangelism is the task (great commission) which Christ has committed to all Christians. It could be done through personal interaction, and crusade, electro-media devices like radio, television, the internet, retreat or conventions. Besides, evangelism is carried out through literature, that is, tracts, magazines such as *Women Mirror*, *Life*, *Pear* magazines, Bible Study materials and spiritual books.



It is believed that well-written tracts and other literature materials are capable of disarming hardened individuals and can convict and convince seasoned skeptics. Primarily, evangelism is to convert sinners, those who are almost drowned in the ocean of sins, and it is also to set people free from the claws of wicked people (witches and wizards), foes and other sociological problems. However, the pictures are to remind 'born again' members of their duty to evangelize the world because people are dying in their sins and thereby are perishing.



Some other pictures show beautiful facial appearance of women to warn members that they should look beyond ordinary superficial beauty which may be alluring and deceitful. In this direction, spinsters and bachelors are to comply with the biblical instruction that “favour is deceitful and beauty is vain; but a woman who feareth the Lord, she shall be praised” Provb 31:30. The Biblical instruction here warns bachelors to be aware of ordinary superficial, fascinating or captivating faces of women who are in or outside the church to seduce them with mere beauty. This instruction assures Christians of the empowering capacity to enjoy a kind of divine super-vision especially when it comes to material issues if they so desire.

Pictures encouraging Christian on the endowment of power through the baptism of Holy Spirit are seen in the church. The Church believes that until members are on fire for God, evangelism and other Church activities can be very habitual and unexciting and people may be going to their houses after each of the services unignited. To avoid uninteresting services and programmes, they need power.



Aside from all this, the church allows their children to watch Christian video films that dramatize certain vices and virtues. In such films, cannibals, witches and wizards are seen as being responsible for evil deeds among men because of the ‘power’ of Satan or ‘devil’ which they rely upon. On the other hand, the virtuous ones especially those who rely on the provisions and power of God through prayer and hard work are seen to be successful. The ‘wicked ones’ are seen, at times, to be successful if they work hard but not with peace of mind as they believe. This is because witches and wizards kill people indiscriminately. According to Sasha Newell (2007:461), the witches want evil and not good things. He says:

... the witches only want what is bad in life. If someone is rich and bad and has a brother who is rich and good and does things to help the community, they will kill the good one first. The bad guy who keeps all his money to himself they will let live. If someone gets the money together to bring electricity to the village, once they’ve put up the poles and only need to add wire to finish, he is dead. They don’t like progress.

Of course, this is the general belief of the Africans concerning witches and wizards (the male counterparts).

Reflections

Wealth is regarded with praise and envy in the society, but it cannot be procured by sacrificing normal hours for religious services otherwise avarice or love of money can be said to have set in and that in the church. This is why various pictures are used to warn member against the love of money, yet this method of pressing home this biblical message can be said to

have achieved little in Nigeria society. Although this has helped many of their members but not in the larger society where everyone is eager to succeed within the Nigerian capitalist system (Moore and Sanders 2001). Generally, Pentecostal churches are often linked to a gospel of prosperity, suggesting that faith in the Lord is directly linked to financial success, while a tendency to sin correlates with illness, poverty and other forms of misfortune.

Satan is being held responsible for all woes and catastrophic occurrences in the society including the backsliding of Christians. It is believed that unless Christians are vigilant, and at alert, they are likely going to fall victims of the wiles and grand deception of Satan. This belief drives the Church to paste different pictures of Satan which appears, more or less, like having obsession for the pictures of Satan. Such fears of Satan should not be entertained since the Christian God is assumed to be more powerful than Satan.

Furthermore, pictures of prayerful women and men are displayed in the church to drive people to aggressive prayers on their urgent needs and using the same as offensive potent weapon against the devil. Exercising mountain-moving faith, people are encouraged in the church to pray to melt away their sorrows, afflictions and tribulations. Prayers are however encouraged instead of reliance on human wisdom or herbal power, which can fail at anytime. Although people pray in Pentecostal Churches, this does not mean that everybody relies on God for provisions and healing. A number of people are still secretly consulting with herbalists and diviners. After all, many of Nigerian politicians attend various Pentecostal churches and yet protect themselves with herbal power and guns for which they obtain licenses.

Religious images according to Meyer (2008:97) play a key role in attributing reality to divine representation, making it seem as if the picture possesses “its referent within itself”, but images are not convincing by themselves, but work in the context of particular grammars and traditions of usage which induce particular dispensations and practices toward them.

Conclusion

We have seen that the use of pictures as a tool for evangelism could offer people the opportunity to be born again without listening to repeated sermons from the pulpit. Various pictures are so strategically pasted in the Church that those pictures that warn believers to be careful of worldliness and wiles of the devil are so conspicuous and overwhelmingly many for anyone to ignore their messages. Although not every visitor in the church would readily take cognizance of the pressing messages of the pictures, but those who care to see and meditate on the various pictures would give them

some consideration. Some beautiful pictures in the church and on both handbills and posters for their retreats and other programmes are to impress and invite people into their church.

However, it is very impressive that the Deeper Life Bible Church, especially has cultivated the habit of saturating their church with pictures which give different messages. By attending different services in the church, people can easily be carried away or be overwhelmed with these pictures and their suggestive meanings. These pictures, apart from their aesthetic appeal, have some pervasive influence on the worshippers.

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