The Institution, the Ethic, and the Affect: 
The Hillsong Church and the Production of Multiple Affinities of the Self

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College of Arts & Social Sciences, Australian National University

Matthew Wade

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Unless otherwise acknowledged in the text, this thesis represents the original research of the author:

Signed:…………………………

Matthew Wade
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Abstract

The Hillsong Church, based in Sydney, is the Australian exemplar of the ‘megachurch’ phenomena, characterised by large, generally non-denominational churches with evangelical, ‘seeker-friendly’ aspirations and adoption of contemporary worship methods. Given the increasingly large following the Church commands, there is surprisingly little scholarly research on Hillsong, particularly from the perspective of Sociology. This study seeks to contribute to a sociological understanding of the phenomenon of Hillsong by analysing the particular ways that its doctrine and practices evoke and respond to crises of the self in modernity. Hillsong does not rail against the developments associated with modernity, rather, the Church consciously evangelises in recognition of them, managing to both empower the individual and also act as a bulwark against more dehumanising elements of modern society. This study will first argue that Hillsong represents a new form of Goffman’s Total Institution, one that recognises and responds to the voluntaristic component of faith through the offer and provision of order and stability in a chaotic world. Secondly, Hillsong espouses ‘prosperity theology’, the injection of divinely-mediated meaning and purpose into the acquisition of wealth. Thirdly, by harnessing and producing affective labour the Church is able to provide meaning, ways of feeling, connecting, and experiencing generally not experienced in everyday life. Ultimately, Hillsong attempts to simultaneously satisfy multiple identity projects of the individual, and somewhat paradoxically the subsumption of the individual within a cause greater than themselves. I conclude by arguing that their success is due to their ability to ‘invert the void’, whereby all that was once hollow and aimless becomes imbued with significance, meaning and purpose. This inversion, however, does not substantially change the lifestyles of constituents, only their perspective, raising several worrying implications regarding the conflation of the sacred, commerce, and identity.
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Chapter One – Introduction: The Rise of the Megachurch

The Church that I see is a Church of influence. A Church so large in size that the city and nation cannot ignore it. A Church growing so quickly that buildings struggle to contain the increase.

I see a Church whose heartfelt praise and worship touches Heaven and changes earth; worship which influences the praises of people throughout the earth, exalting Christ with powerful songs of faith and hope.

I see a Church whose altars are constantly filled with repentant sinners responding to Christ's call to salvation.

Yes, the Church that I see is so dependent on the Holy Spirit that nothing will stop it nor stand against it; a Church whose people are unified, praying and full of God's Spirit.

The Church that I see has a message so clear that lives are changed forever and potential is fulfilled through the power of His Word; a message beamed to the peoples of the earth through their television screens.

I see a Church so compassionate that people are drawn from impossible situations into a loving and friendly circle of hope, where answers are found and acceptance is given.

I see a people so Kingdom-minded that they will count whatever the cost and pay whatever the price to see revival sweep this land.

The Church that I see is a Church so committed to raising, training and empowering a leadership generation to reap the end-time harvest that all its ministries are consumed with this goal.

I see a Church whose head is Jesus, whose help is the Holy Spirit and whose focus is the Great Commission.
YES, THE CHURCH THAT I SEE COULD WELL BE OUR CHURCH - HILLSONG CHURCH.

Vision of the Hillsong Church (2010, The Vision)

If one has never heard of the Hillsong Church prior to reading the above statements they will, at the very least, be certain of one thing: the organisation does not lack in ambition. The above vision statement of the Hillsong Church touches on many of the themes that will be discussed in this study. In these declarations we see the desire for global influence placed awkwardly, yet not disingenuously, alongside the insularism that is characteristic of the evangelical ‘megachurch’, a term which will be defined later in this study. We see that services at Hillsong are not simply a pretext for morning tea after Sunday Mass, rather, life for the ‘Kingdom-minded’ within Hillsong is intended to be totalizing, all-consuming, and to wield such influence that ‘the city and nation cannot ignore it’. Simultaneously, but yet again without recognizing a cognitive dissonance, the Church proclaims individual empowerment and this study will demonstrate how Hillsong walks the tightrope of competing ideals between having followers who are ‘Kingdom-minded’ yet also free-thinking individuals. In the very fact that Hillsong has prepared a vision statement we see the highly professional, corporate approach of the organisation. Hillsong is faith as a product, and driver, of globalisation and capitalism, unafraid of using ultra-modern methods to ‘beam’ their message across the earth, unperturbed by the ethical dilemmas raised in the mix of capital and religion, eager to network and share resources with other churches and always determined to market
themselves as ‘seeker-friendly’. Though Hillsong shares with other churches the millenarian belief in an ‘end-time harvest’ and their mission to ‘save’ the ‘unsaved’ before this event: ‘The Great Commission’, the way they operate sets them apart from their contemporaries and has created a mindset and body of teachings hitherto unseen in Australian society.

*The Hillsong Church – A Brief Overview*

The Hillsong Church was originally established in 1983 as the ‘Hills Christian Life Centre’ in Baulkham Hills, Sydney, by husband and wife pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston who continue as head pastors today. Hills Christian Life Centre was originally part of several ‘Christian Life Centre’ churches overseen by Brian’s father, Frank Houston. The more market-friendly moniker of ‘Hillsong’ did not come into existence until 1999, after allegations of sexual abuse levelled at Frank Houston resulted in his handing over of the leadership of all ‘Christian Life Centre’ churches to his son Brian, prompting a quick re-badging of the organisation. The name ‘Hillsong’ is a portmanteau derived from what was, after Frank Houston’s removal, now the major campus at Baulkham Hills and Church’s growing reputation as a producer of Christian music. The Church today boasts two main campuses in Sydney, ‘Hills’ and ‘City’ along with a third, smaller campus in Campbelltown (‘South West’) and
another in Brisbane. Hillsong states that from a initial congregation of 45 in 1983, today the two main campuses in Sydney regularly attract a total attendance on any given weekend of over 20,000 people (Hillsong Church, 2010, <http://myhillsong...about>).

One of the main drivers behind this exponential growth has been the music arm of the organisation. Hillsong is recognised worldwide for its Christian music and is amongst highest selling and most prolific producers of Christian music in the world, releasing over forty albums and selling over 11 million units since 1988 (Hillsong Music, 2010, <http://hillsongmusic...about>). Hillsong-produced albums regularly appear at the top of the ARIA charts and several members of the Hillsong worship team have celebrity status amongst the global evangelical community, including Brian Houston’s eldest son, Joel. In addition to the music arm Hillsong also provides Christian ‘resources’ (at a price) including DVDs, CDs, mp3s, rights to downloadable content, podcasts and vodcasts of their teachings (Hillsong Music, 2010, <http://www.hillsongmusic.com>), along with broadcasting a television

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1 In addition to the main campuses there are also 14 ‘extension services’ currently operating across Sydney, catering to different locales and cultures (Hillsong Church, 2010, <http://www.myhillsong...extension-services>). In recent years the Church’s reach has become global with the establishment of Hillsong-branded churches in London, Kiev, Cape Town, Stockholm, Paris, Moscow and most recently in New York City (Hillsong Church, 2010, <http://www.hillsong.com/>).

programme ‘… in over a 180 countries and territories around the world!’

(Hillsong Church, 2010, <https://www2.hillsong...2154>).

Hillsong is governed by a twelve-member board of elders (all men, it should be noted), which includes Brian Houston and Joel Houston, and only elders appoint new members to the board. Unsurprisingly then, the organisation is tightly controlled and insular by nature, with the appointment, rather than election of elders rationalised by Hillsong General Manager^3^ George Aghajanian for the reason that ‘people might stand who don’t have a great understanding of the way the Church works or have the same vision we have for the Church’ (Bearup, 2005, <www.smh... 2005/02/18>). Additonally, Hillsong is affiliated with Australian Christian Churches, the national branch of the Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal organisation in the world. Brian Houston has previously been the head of the ACC and the organisation is largely a fellowship used for networking and resource-sharing purposes.

Membership of the ACC is open to any church which embraces basic Pentecostal teachings. These basic beliefs include:

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^3^ The presence of this title in a religious institution is revealing of Hillsong’s corporate-like approach to evangelism. This is further evidenced in the makeup of the Hillsong Eldership and Board. Members of these two groups (see Hillsong Church, 2010, <http://myhillsong...eldership>) include: Nabi Saleh, Chairman of Gloria Jeans’s Coffees Australia and New Zealand, Dr Gordon Lee, medical practitioner and operator of several medical practices in Sydney, Leigh Howard-Smith, Managing Director of several companies involved in logistics/transport and plastic manufacturing, and brothers Andrew and Philip Denton, Executive Directors of the intriguingly named property development company ‘Hillscorp’ (2010, <http://www.hillscorp...html>), amongst other members associated with the business sector.
- An unwavering belief in the inerrancy of God’s Word, the Bible

- God as creator, existing in three persons: Father, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit

- Humanity is inherently flawed and sinful, with redemption only found through ‘new birth’, repentance, and submitting one’s life to Jesus

- An eternal afterlife in heaven or hell determined by response to, and acceptance of, the teachings of Jesus

- Millenarian belief in a ‘end-time harvest’, and the second coming of Jesus Christ

(adapted from Australian Christian Churches, 2010, <http://www.aog...Believe.page>)

These beliefs are very similar to Hillsong’s own stated beliefs (Hillsong Church, 2010, <http://myhillsong...believe>) and are fairly standard amongst the Pentecostal tradition. The most defining quality of the Assemblies of God, however, is not their basic beliefs but their especial focus on evangelism. The beliefs are inwardly focused and emphasise a personal relationship with the divine, as is typical of Pentecostalism, however, their action and mission are outwardly focused (McGee, 2003, pp.289-300). Within Hillsong this leads to a curious type of modern faith-based sectarianism (Ellingson, 2010, pp.259-263) caused by the tension between observance of tradition and avoiding debasement and dilution of their faith, whilst also reaching out to the unsaved,
using strategies found in the secular marketplace. Despite their membership in the Assemblies of God and eagerness to network with other churches, Hillsong operates completely autonomously of any other Christian organisation and stridently espouses an ethos of non-denominationalism, even to the point of being explicitly anti-denominational. Rather, the Church seeks to distance itself from other denominations by emphasising that ‘Jesus didn’t die to give us religion’ (Hillsong Conference 2010, Session 6).

There are inherent difficulties in analysing a large multifaceted institution like Hillsong. Consequently, this overview has intentionally skirted over several aspects of the Hillsong Church, such as a typical weekend service, their spectacular annual events, tailored programs and activities, and the Church’s distinctive doctrine, based on a form of ‘Prosperity Theology’. These elements will be gradually introduced and discussed as they relate to the core arguments of this study.

Curiosity into Australia’s Megachurch

Despite the level of interest in the fastest-growing church in Australia there has been relatively little academic research conducted specifically on the Hillsong Church. John Connell (2005), a social geographer, provides perhaps the best
general overview of the Church’s basic operations. Though his study is largely a descriptive account of the Church’s methods and practices Connell (2005, p.327) also makes a brief but pithy argument that Hillsong fills a ‘void’ within the civic life of suburbia, particularly in areas such as Baulkham Hills where urban development has preceded the establishment of more traditional civic institutions. Hillsong has established itself and grown exponentially within the civic vacuum characterised by ‘urban sprawl’ (Garreau, 1991, pp.4-15), capitalising on a deprivation of ‘social capital’ driven largely by meaningless consumption, overwork and the demise of ideals of the ‘local community’ (Mackay, 2007, pp.285-292; Hamilton, 2005, pp.85-129; Carroll, 1998, pp.83-150). Hillsong, and megachurches in general, are increasingly adept at replacing the bonds of community previously formed by a sense of commonality of place, or through political affiliations, union membership, recreational centres and support groups. Chapter Two will show that for the Church’s growing devotees Hillsong has come to signify the ‘town square’ of old, providing a sense of community, or indeed, constituting a self-contained community in itself, with a network of support rarely found in urban metropolitan areas today.

Interestingly, given the centrality of its evangelical mission the new type of ‘community’ found in Hillsong is marked by an intensity and sense of purpose not normally found in suburban, secular Australia. Additionally, if, as Robert
Putnam (2004, loc.2011-2390) argues, megachurches have come to play an important role in filling the void left by processes of modernisation, the precise ways in which they do this are worthy of further analysis. Accordingly, this study seeks to further investigate, articulate and address the ‘void’ Hillsong has been able to exploit. This is not just the filling of a void in the civic sense, but also concerns the methods through which the Church has been able to not only make tolerable, but also render meaningful, fulfilling, and even joyful the daily round of life.

Overwhelmingly, the most popular areas of inquiry into Hillsong, academic or otherwise, tend to revolve around Hillsong’s commercial interests and political influence. That the Hillsong Church inevitably and irrevocably constitutes a ‘political’ institution there can be little doubt. This, as Simons (2007, p.79) points out, is certainly not in the strict ‘party political’ sense, and despite the concerted canvassing efforts of several high profile politicians and the emergence of the Assemblies of God-affiliated Family First Party there is little evidence to suggest there is a ‘Hillsong vote’ (Lloyd, 2010, http://www.abc...2971529.htm). Rather, political elements manifest

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4 For an explanation of this type of citation please consult the bibliography.
6 Former Prime Minister John Howard, Former Federal Treasurer Peter Costello, Former New South Wales Premier Bob Carr have all addressed Hillsong gatherings during their holding of highest office and (Lohrey, 2006, p.iii) Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, through a video message, has also addressed the Hillsong congregation (Iggulden, 2007, </www.abc...2001192.htm>).
themselves in the Church’s general doctrine and consequent worldview of
‘Hillsongers’. Hillsong, like almost all Pentecostal organisations, espouse
teachings that are generally politically and socially conservative, particularly
on the so-called ‘moral’ issues of abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research,
homosexuality and gay marriage (Levin, 2007 & Venn-Brown, 2007).
Moreover, by way of their call to evangelise, unlike some other political
institutions Hillsong’s constituents are explicitly charged with the task of
spreading their ideology to others. The finances of the Church and its leaders
have also come under scrutiny\(^7\). This is unsurprising given their annual
revenue and value of facilities, which, according to Brian Houston himself
million and $100 million respectively in 2005\(^8\). However, despite these
incredible figures, Hillsong, as a religious and, ostensibly, not-for-profit
institution, pays no company or payroll tax, draws upon a very large voluntary
workforce\(^9\), and is not obligated to produce annual reports for public inspection
(Ferguson, 2005, p.36). Wallace (2007) refers to this peculiarity as the ‘Purple
Economy’, whereby religious organisations, particularly newer establishments
like Hillsong, exploit loopholes in tax law in order to further their own ends,

\(^7\) In response to this scrutiny Brian Houston (2010, <http://hillsong..letter-brian-houston>)
recently published an open letter on the Hillsong Church website regarding his personal
finances. Even if one takes on faith Houston’s estimates of his various sources of income, the
figures are still very disconcerting considering he is the head of a tax-exempt, not-for-profit
institution.

\(^8\) Since 2005 the Hillsong Church has declined to state the value of its annual revenue and
value of facilities and in the meantime no other sources have provided reliable figures on the
Church’s wealth. Given the Church’s continual growth and expansion though one can only
suspect these figures have significantly increased.

\(^9\) Over 4,500 volunteers assisted in Hillsong’s largest annual event, the Hillsong Conference, in
2009 (Hillsong Church, 2010, Hillsong Conference 2011 Promotional Brochure)
even when their operations increasingly come to resemble in both method and scope those of the secular sphere.

A second, and related, major focus of critical inquiry into the Hillsong Church has been its implication in several controversial activities. Levin (2005) and Venn-Brown (2007) have both produced ‘insider’ accounts chronicling the Church’s anti-homosexuality (Venn-Brown, 2007, Levin, 2007, pp.173-177), patriarchal ideals of the family, social roles, and the ‘ideal woman’10 (Levin, 2007, pp.167-197), unseemly recruitment strategies (Levin, 2007, pp.121-131), anti-intellectualism and generally very conservative and insular worldview (Venn-Brown, 2007, pp.224-225). Hillsong has also come under criticism for their mistreatment of disadvantaged women through their now discontinued ‘Mercy Ministries’ program (Childs, 2009) and has been subject to investigation over fraud and gross misuse of Federal Government funding ostensibly dedicated to outreach programs for Aboriginal communities (Simons, 2007, pp.46-53, Lohrey, 2006, pp.26-27).

Though these aspects of the Hillsong Church are of significant interest this thesis differentiates itself from existing studies by placing Hillsong within a broader reaction to crises of the self in modernity. My contention is that the

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10 Enforced subtly and less jarringly by the fact that it is predominantly the women of Hillsong who impose these standards upon themselves. Examples include a speaker during the 2005 women’s only Colour Conference calling the audience to turn to the person next to them and state ‘You’re looking skinnier by the minute!’ and a ‘domestic goddess’ competition that involved folding a pile of washing (Levin, 2007, p.249).
ascendance of Hillsong within the highly secular nation of Australia has some profound sociological and philosophical implications. For this reason, Hillsong deserves to be analysed in its own right, rather than being labelled merely an Australian version of a phenomenon found elsewhere. Furthermore, analysis needs to go beyond the treatment of Hillsong as simply ‘convenient theology’ or American-inspired right-wing evangelicalism, a characterisation that has tended to pervade much journalistic writing on the topic\textsuperscript{11}. The aim of this study, then, is to look beyond the typical explanations of contemporary-style worship, charismatic speakers and modern marketing techniques as the reasons for Hillsong’s exponential growth. Instead, the aim is to explain how Hillsong creates meaning, both at the shared and personal level. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that this meaning is derived from beliefs, teachings, doctrine and dogma that sustain the individual but do not require changing one’s lifestyle from the secular norm. Indeed, the individual is actually encouraged to flourish within the dominant social order. Hillsong thus provides a form of self-help spirituality specifically tailored for the modern consumer society.

The emergence of this new spirituality that aligns closely with material conditions and secular norms raises questions about the validity (specifically

\textsuperscript{11} It should be noted that the evangelical stereotypes do not readily apply to Hillsong; ‘Hillsongers’ are neither the xenophobic ultra-conservatives found in the American South, nor, despite their similar energy and vigour in worship, are they similar in many respects to the predominantly Black gospel churches in the United States (Mitchem, 2007). One could not imagine these kinds of churches being able to successfully transpose their organisational models to other nations, in the manner that Hillsong has established itself around the world.
for the case of Hillsong) of the ongoing debate between ‘Secularisation’ theorists (see Bruce, 2010, pp.125-140) and ‘Resacralisation’ theorists (see Davie, 2010, pp.160-177). As Chapter Three will demonstrate, Hillsong’s ‘Prosperity Theology’ complicates this debate, as for Hillsong devotees what was once conceived of as the purely ‘secular’ becomes imbued with elements of the ‘sacred’. Nevertheless despite its unusual character Hillsong can be considered as part of a growing spirituality ‘movement’ within Australia. This ‘movement’ is addressed by Bouma (2006, pp.1-7), who argues that the decline of monopolistic control of formal religious institutions has, far from signalling the decline of spirituality, has enabled a ‘...vastly increased diversity of both organised religion and private spiritualities’ (p.5). Dehumanising processes of secularisation have played a shaping role in this new incarnation of spirituality in two main ways. Firstly, a growing social malaise caused by the ‘Two-Pronged Threat’ of ‘Nihilism-Consumerism’ (Carroll, pp.85-149, see also Hamilton, 2003, 2005) has led many to seek forms of spirituality that can deliver on, or at least alleviate, the broken promises of the consumer market of some form of sustainable self-actualisation. Indeed, as Hamilton (2008) argues, the desire for self-actualisation has shifted from a strictly personal project driven by the hoped-for realisation of one’s potential to that of a quest for a form of subsumption, an accessing of a realm greater than the material, thus operating on a felt and affective, rather than rational, level. The second consequence of processes of secularisation has been a growing ethos of ‘spiritual innovation’ (Bouma, 2006, pp.162-171) whereby religious institutions, through a recognition (tacit or conscious) of the dual projects of
the self for ‘worldly’ self-actualisation and ‘spiritual’ subsumption, subsequently adapt their teachings and operations so that the individual may achieve these goals through faith. Chapter Three will demonstrate how Hillsong has achieved this by conflating the two projects of rampant individualism and self-actualising subsumption into a single, cohesive, overarching rationale, whilst Chapter Four will discuss the Church’s particular methods for creating the perception of spiritual subsumption.

Furthermore, Chapter Three will show that the response of the Hillsong Church to its lack of pre-existing cultural cachet has been to espouse a body of teachings that foment divinely graced links between the material and the spiritual, delivered in a manner strikingly similar to the self-help and inspirational styles of the motivational speaker. These teachings are unlikely to ever be considered theologically ‘deep’. Rather, as Lohrey (2006) points out, the outside observer cannot help but notice that Hillsong ‘messages’ or ‘rallies’ (the Church does not use the term ‘sermons’) tend to be ‘...lively but largely inchoate’ (p.15) and ‘... on the level of the banal pep talk ... akin to New Age feelgoodism, with Jesus thrown in as a bonus’ (p.23). Nevertheless they are effective to those seeking a certain rationale and/or affective experience.

Hillsong is one of a select group of ‘megachurches’ found in Australia, and is by far the country’s largest example of this relatively new phenomena, one that is still in its infancy in regard to academic research (Ellingson, 2010, pp.263-
The megachurch has its origins in the United States during the 1970s, but is now found worldwide. Customarily the megachurch is defined as a Protestant church with over 2000 regular attendees (Ellingson, 2010, p.248, Einstein, 2008, loc.152). In the broadly comparable demographic of the United States over 1,000 churches fit this definition, yet, only around five percent of these have regular attendances of over 3,000 people (Ellingsong, 2010, p.248). This places the 20,000 strong Hillsong Church in the very upper echelons of the megachurch in terms of attendance, though even Hillsong’s numbers are dwarfed by megachurches in South East Asia (Kim, 2002, Goh, 2009).

Megachurches tend to be functionally non-denominational (Ellingson, 2010, pp.248-249) and thus cannot readily draw upon the cultural cachet of their forebears in order to attract attendees. Instead, in a further blurring of the processes of secularisation and (re-)sacralisation, megachurches have shown a willingness to engage in developing a ‘brand’ akin to that which is attempted in the commercial sphere. The development of a Hillsong ‘brand’ as a type of affective labour will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

Ultimately it is the intention of this study to demonstrate the means and methods by which Hillsong creates multiple affinities between the self and the Church. These affinities are driven by; promises of personal transformation and reinvention, along with an order and stability to daily life; invocation of teachings that fosters a distinct ethos of insularism within the Church; a core doctrine that aligns perfectly with the overarching structural conditions given by late capitalism; and lastly the creation of ontological affinities through the
conscious manipulation of affective states, which creates subjectivities irrevocably entwined with the evangelistic aims of the Church. Indeed, Hillsong is an institution unprecedented in Australia, as I will now go on to demonstrate, firstly through its quality as a ‘Total Institution’ for the consumer society.

Chapter Two – Hillsong as Total Institution

This chapter will explore the reach of Hillsong into the different spheres of the devotee’s life. It will be shown that the increasingly voluntary quality of faith has driven Hillsong towards using more ‘secular’ means of evangelism. This strategy, however, threatens the Church’s ability to sustain itself as an insulated sect, differentiated from the corrupting outside world. Hillsong’s resolution of this dilemma is to essentially create a world within a world, a ‘Total Institution’ whereby the loyalties of its constituents are effectively captured by aligning their personal desires for transformation and self-development with the overarching aims of the Church. For the committed and ‘institutionalised’ devotee these two projects in time become synonymous and inseparable.
Since the dismantling of traditional conceptions of institutions, customs and moral systems brought on by the influx of liberal values from the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ through to today’s late modernity, there has been a steady enlargement of the area over which the individual is granted, and indeed expected to exercise autonomy (Giddens, 1991). Perhaps ironically, the last of these areas to be emancipated from the binds of tradition is one that for some is antithetical to the very ideals of the Enlightenment, namely aspects of faith and spirituality.

Regardless of what one thinks of this development, it is clear that rather than faith being an ascribed, unalterable quality it is increasingly a matter of personal choice and preference. Furthermore, within the consumer society these preferences include not just a choice amongst different religious alternatives, but even religion as just one alternative of many in regard to how individuals use their leisure time. This individualisation of faith has accelerated in recent decades, leading to what Roof (1990) refers to as the ‘New Voluntarism’ of faith. Roof (1990, loc.107-114) argues that the ethos of New Voluntarism came in the wake of the social revolutions of the 1960s and 70s, centred on ideas of the self, identity, and subjectivities. The gradual acceptance or tolerance of moral and cultural pluralism has permeated aspects of faith, which has in turn become increasingly ‘privatised’ and elective under New Voluntarism. It is thus apparent that the societal changes encapsulated in the concept of New Voluntarism and the consequent advent of the ‘Spiritual Marketplace’ (Roof, 1999) have had profound consequences and implications,
both positive and negative, on the development and operative style of the megachurch, in particular these institutions’ methods of evangelising to the masses.

‘The Great Commission’

Hillsong, outspoken in its status as a non-denominational, but explicitly evangelical church has as its core reason for existence ‘The Great Commission’ (Levin, 2007, p.2). In its most quoted version this is espoused by evangelicals to be a decree, delivered by Jesus, challenging his followers to:

‘Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...’
Matthew 28: 19-20 (King James Version)\textsuperscript{12}

All operations of the Hillsong Church are directed through this evangelical aim. The ethos of the Great Commission is not unique to Hillsong, but is, rather, the defining aspect of most evangelical churches, their \textit{raison d’être} (Arias, 1991). What is distinctive about Hillsong, though, is their particular approach to this vocation.

Hillsong, like most other megachurches, competes for attention in the secular market, using strategies more commonly associated with modern marketing compared with other, more austere, faith-based institutions. Hillsong’s recognition of the New Voluntarism and subsequent tailoring of teachings and operations in order to align their ‘product’ to the tastes of the secular market is characteristic of the ‘seeker-oriented’ megachurch (Sargeant, 2000), discussed in further detail in Chapter Four. Seeker churches conduct themselves entirely on the basis of attracting converts, particularly the previously ‘unchurched’, and tend to espouse non-denominationalism, often even when they have official ties to a denomination (Ellingson, 2010, pp.250-251)\textsuperscript{13}. Hillsong is very strong in its anti-denominationalism to the point of even arguing against

\textsuperscript{12} The Great Commission is invoked in Hillsong’s Vision Statement (see Chapter One), and several other explicit references are made to this scripture in publicly available, Hillsong-produced literature. Furthermore, during the 2010 Hillsong Conference the entire second day’s program (themed ‘To Give Hope to the Hopeless’) was dedicated towards espousing the call to evangelise and frequent invocations were made of this scripture (Hillsong Conference 2010, Sessions 3, 4 & 59)

\textsuperscript{13} This is meant both in the sense that they themselves do not constitute a denomination and do not want to be considered as such, but also in the sense that their membership in the Assemblies of God is part of a fellowship, a network of support, rather than a formal denomination.
‘religion’; ‘Jesus did not die to give us religion’ (Hillsong Conference, 2010, Session 6) and Brian Houston vehemently stated during a plea for conversion that ‘It’s not about religion, it’s about Jesus’ (Hillsong Conference, 2010, Session 1). The aim is to ‘transcend denominations and traditional church behaviour’ (Connell, 2005, p.316) and thus make the Church more appealing to the previously ‘unchurched’. However, given the Church’s growth and expansion, combined with a distinctive capitalism-friendly doctrine (see Chapter Three), it would be worthwhile to consider Hillsong as a quasi-denomination in itself. This conception of the megachurch is beginning to surface in the academic literature (Ellingson, 2010, pp.259-260). However, for Hillsong to sustain itself and its ‘Commission’, requires stoking a wholehearted commitment within the seeker, a commitment fomented by more than espousals of ‘anti-bureaucracy’ and the promise of eschewing the ossified drudgery of the traditional church. Rather, Hillsong seeks to ultimately align the daily life of the seeker with the functioning of the Church.

Beyond the ‘Third Place’

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14 The idea of Hillsong being ‘anti-religion’ is not intended by the Church as a repudiation of faith, but reflects both Hillsong’s Pentecostal preferences (which emphasises a personal relationship with the divine) and an anti-institutional and non-bureaucratic philosophy, another common characteristic of the church geared towards attracting the seeker.
Beginning in the 1980s sociologists Ramon Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett (1982, pp.265-284) developed the concept of the ‘third place’, a location (which is not necessarily physical) outside of the spheres of ‘home’ or ‘work’, in which the individual voluntarily associates with others. Social researchers following in the footsteps of Oldenburg and Brissett have traced the decline of the quintessential ‘third place, the town or village square/commons, and its underwhelming replacement by the shopping mall (Putnam, 2001, Garreau, 1991, pp.3-4, Klein, 2000, pp.203-211). The privatisation of the ‘commons’ has entailed that certain forms of collective expression (eg. mass protest) are no longer tolerated, thus creating a void of collective action (Klein, 2000, pp.203-205).

This privatisation and commercialisation of the ‘third place’ is evident in the way marketing experts have adopted this concept for their own objectives. Marketers commonly define the third place as an area besides work or home that the consumer feels comfortable within. They may have no explicit desire to purchase a product or service, though the business functions on the basis purchases will occur regardless (Mikunda, 2004, pp.2-7)\(^\text{15}\). Hillsong emulates this basic marketing concept of the privatised, regulated third space with the design of its own campuses. In particular there is the presence, somewhat

\(^{15}\) Prominent examples of companies that aim to be this third place include large book retailers such as Borders or Barnes & Noble, who provide comfortable lounge-style seating and in-store cafes in an attempt to create a comfortable, homely atmosphere. This commercialisation of the third place has even pervaded the virtual sphere, whereby crafted digital avatars meld the comfort of a specially chosen social realm with a reinventive project of the self (Peachey & Moore, 2008), a ‘melding’ that will later be shown is also present in Hillsong.
jarring for the uninitiated, of an in-house Gloria Jeans franchise within both the ‘Hills’ and ‘City’ campuses. Gloria Jeans is part-owned and operated by two prominent members of Hillsong (Ferguson, 2005, p.41) and the coffee houses’ presence certainly aids Hillsong’s project of putting the individual at ease and providing the environment of the village commons.

Yet, it is notable that Hillsong aims to be more than just the ‘third place’, defined as that is by its accompanying qualities of intermittent and ‘freewheeling association’ (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982, p.266). Rather, Hillsong is both practically and spiritually a ‘full-service’ church (Connell, 2005, p.316). Unlike mainstream churches, Hillsong has no intention of Sunday service being merely a pretext for weekly worship or social occasion. Instead, once sufficiently integrated, life within the Hillsong Church can become ‘all-encompassing’ for the individual (Connell, 2005, p.323). Hence what might begin as a curiosity evolves into a ‘third place’ and ultimately the only place. This is achieved through a gradual process of slowly interweaving practices already engaged in by the individual with the fabric of Church life, and, after gaining the commitment and loyalty of the constituent, gently ushering them into other ways they may contribute to the organisation, which in turn further fosters their growing dedication.

One way in which this integration of the Church into the fabric of everyday life occurs is through the intersection of recognisably church-based and more
broadly social functions. Hillsong’s regular weekend services are plentiful, and upon visiting one of the two main Sydney campuses newcomers and visitors are encouraged to make their way to the ‘Welcome Lounge’ after the service (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www.myhillsong...services>). After services attendees will often gather in the commons and converse over a Gloria Jeans coffee. Apart from regular services there are also the annual conferences such as the five day music, worship, and practical teachings-based ‘Hillsong Conference’ (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www.hillsongconference.com>), the two day Men’s Conference (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www.mensconference.com>) and the six day ‘Colour’ (Women’s) Conference (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www.colourconference.com>). Aside from being significant events for regular Hillsong members, these events also attract many visitors. While celebratory and worship-driven, these events are also unabashedly evangelical in purpose. Additionally, special one-off events such as practical teachings-based seminars on topics like the ‘Healthy Home’ (Hillsong Music, 2010, <www.hillsongmusic...hhs>) and ‘Healing’ (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www.healingseminar.com.au>) increase the reach of Hillsong into areas of daily life most conventional churches would consider too ‘secular’ or private to broach.

Hillsong, by means of its significant resource base, can also tailor programs and activities towards a project of ‘structured diversity’ (Ellingson, 2010, p.248), geared towards meeting the interests and needs of different sub-populations within the Church. Evidence of this is found in the huge range of
extra-curricular activities on offer at Hillsong. Though there is a particular focus on youth practically all age groups and demographics are catered for in some way. ‘Hillsong Kids’ programs are abundant, tailored specifically to narrow ranges of age (Hillsong, Church, 2010, <www2.hillsong... 1919>). There are also numerous and regular Hillsong Youth programs (Hillsong Church, 2010, <http://hillsongyouth.com>); ‘Frontline’ for young adults (Hillsong Church, 2010, <http://myhillsong...frontline>); ‘Sisterhood’ for women (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www2.hillsong...women/home>) as well as ‘Connect’ groups designed for social gathering and bible study across all age groups (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www.myhillsong...connect-groups>). In addition to this are programs, which, whilst serving a social/recreational purpose, are also integral to the specific functioning and evangelical aims of the Hillsong Church. These include the Hillsong International Leadership College, which produces the next generation of pastors, worship leaders and other roles within the Church, the Performing Arts Academy, whose students often perform during services, and the Hillsong Leadership Network, a support-based fellowship of churches overseen by Hillsong.

There are also many other services provided by the Church, such as the Hillsong Health Centre which houses general practitioners, counsellors and psychologists (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www.myhillsong...healthcentre>); The ‘Family Business Directory’, established initially by Hillsong in 2000, for those ‘who would mostly prefer to deal with likeminded Christians’ (2010, <www.familydirectory...about>); and ‘CityCare’ courses which provide
practical teachings and support on issues such as personal development, family and relationships, anger management, work/life balance, personal finance, sexual abuse, and drug and alcohol problems (Hillsong Church, 2010, <www.myhillsong...citycare-course>). Hillsong also encourages devotees to make a contribution to the Church through volunteering. This may range from ‘joining the ‘hosting, hospitality and car park teams’ (Connell, 2005, p.324), to working in one of Hillsong’s ‘Street Teams’ (2010, <www.myhillsong...street-teams>) or even as performers, technicians or stage crew aiding in the production of the Church’s polished, high-quality services, concerts, and rallies.

As discussed earlier the Hillsong Church, aside from their television program, also provides a plethora of Christian ‘resources’, available for purchase, a practice which is common amongst megachurches (Swanson, 2010). These include not just music CDs and DVDs, but also audio and video of conferences and seminars, as well as resources designed for use by other churches\textsuperscript{16}. Also of note is Hillsong’s huge web presence, with practically every Church group, senior pastor, and ‘cause’ having some form of dedicated webpage, blog, twitter or Facebook account, podcast, and so on. The internet, has become a vital tool of the seeker-oriented megachurch as it provides a mass-mediated form of communication with a level of interactivity unattainable through other mass mediums (Swanson, 2008), enabling devotee’s integration beyond the

\textsuperscript{16} Combined with the Leadership Network, the sale of resources designed for use by other churches is a savvy method of spreading the Hillsong ‘brand’ and doctrine.

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bounds of the physical church. Hillsong has even recently launched an ‘Online Church’ service (2010, <www.churchoffline.hillsong.com>), and thus it seems the ‘third place’ of Hillsong now truly occupies both the physical and the virtual spheres.

In short, this brief overview of Hillsong operations shows there is virtually no facet of life which the Church cannot provide for if so desired by the individual. As a result, Hillsong can fulfil whatever void or role community groups, unions, more conventional church groups and the like might otherwise have occupied. Indeed, Hillsong functions as a sort of contemporary Total Institution, as I now go on to argue, by applying and updating Erving Goffman’s work on that concept.

Hillsong as Seeker-oriented Total Institution

In his now classic collection of essays, Asylums, Goffman (1962, p. 4) introduces the concept of the ‘Total Institution’, developed through the observation that ‘when we review the different institutions in our Western society, we find some that are encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than the ones next in line’. Goffman’s Total Institution is defined as a place of residence and work where individuals, though often bound in some
form of clearly defined hierarchy (eg. Staff and inmates), live together over a lengthy period, working together towards a single, shared, overarching rational purpose. Constituents of the Total Institution tend to be physically and/or symbolically, spiritually, mentally or otherwise separated from the wider society and together lead ‘an enclosed, formally administered round of life.’ (Goffman 1962, p.xiii). Life in the Total Institution engenders the conflation of the spheres of normal life, with the breakdown of these barriers, orchestrated and overseen by authority structures within the institution, serving towards the accomplishment of the overall rational plan of the organisation (Goffman 1962, p. 6). Furthermore, a panopticon-like surveillance prevails and infractions are instantly visible (Goffman 1962, p. 6-7).

Intended as a Weberian ideal type rather than a rigidly defined category (Perry, 1974, p.349), the concept of the total institution highlights the pervasiveness of authority into different spheres of life, the intense break-down of barriers between spheres of life, and the degree of ‘encompassing’ of the motivations and psyche of the individual. Life in Hillsong is not characterised by the physical conflation of the spheres of work, sleep and leisure as it is in a ‘classic’ Total Institution, such as the asylum. Rather, the Total Institution of Hillsong sees the gradual melding of lifeworlds, whereby all forms of meaning and practice become integrated within the life of the Church to the extent where they become functionally inseparable, yet does not eradicate the devotee’s conception of themselves as an autonomous individual.
My claim, then, is that Hillsong reflects a new kind of Total Institution\(^{17}\), one that for the committed devotee orders all aspects of their daily lives, but does not result in the perceived obliteration of the self. On the contrary, it will be shown that this new kind of Total Institution, tailored specifically to the consumer society, actually provides a sense of self-development, one that progresses as the purposes of the devotee and the Church become increasingly synonymous.

It should be noted that the application of the concept of the Total Institution to the Hillsong Church is not intended as a value judgment. Though, as Goffman himself was well aware, the attribution of value to a term intended as ‘scientific’ and neutral is a risk that the social scientist must negotiate (Becker, 2007). Goffman (1962, pp.4-5) posited five broad categories of the Total Institution\(^{18}\). The first three of these categories were largely defined by the involuntary nature of their ‘inmates’, whilst the latter two have a (usually) voluntary quality. In these latter institutions, which were not the focus of

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\(^{17}\) In an overview of megachurches, Ellingson (2010, p.264) gestures towards the idea that the megachurch reflects a form of Total Institution. However, Ellingson does not elaborate on this supposition and no other academic work has explicitly overlaid Goffman’s Total Institution on the modern megachurch. This recognition but perhaps unwillingness to apply Goffman’s ideal type is striking, but perhaps understandable given its historical links with grossly dehumanising contexts.

\(^{18}\) These categories, very briefly, are: (1) those that care for the incapable and harmless, such as nursing homes; (2) care for the incapable who also pose some sort of risk or threat to the community, such as mental hospitals or care for those suffering from highly infectious disease; (3) those that restrain and punish and/or contain capable people who pose threat to the community, such as jails; (4) those established for instrumental goals, such as army units, crews of naval ships etc.; (5) those established as retreats from the world, such as monasteries or convents (Goffman, 1962, pp.4-5).
Goffman’s research, the subject enters usually with the intent of self-development, or with a sense of commitment to larger, instrumental, cause. Often it is a combination of both of these motivations.

One would hope that the draconian institution that Goffman documents through his participant observation in *Asylums* is a relic of the past, and thus it seems appropriate that we now investigate the now more prevalent ‘voluntary’ Total Institution\(^\text{19}\). Thus, through the Hillsong Church, we can observe the shift from an institution that is coercively encompassing of time, space, and even physical bodies, to one that is much less physically restrictive but instead marked more by an encompassing hold of personal loyalties. This is a Total Institution that is increasingly being directed through the prism of the ‘New Voluntarism’ of the consumer society, which produces a ‘different set of meanings, motivations, and experiences’ for the individual (Scott, 2010, p.219).

Hillsong is able to garner much from its devotees largely because in turn the Church provides the scaffolding upon which every sphere on daily life can be built, providing an order, stability, and assurance to life that for many is hard to achieve in the secular sphere. For the devotee every role they play, every practice they engage in, and every element of their lifestyle that they can

\(^{19}\) Goffman’s (1962, p.iv) writings support such an endeavour, reflecting his pragmatic approach to the use of orienting concepts; ‘...if sociological concepts are to be treated with affection, each must be traced back to where it best applies, followed from there wherever it seems to lead, and pressed to disclose the rest of its family’.  

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conceivably envision gradually becomes moulded and funnelled through the Church’s own ends. This encapsulating of the individual’s whole capacities can be likened to Coser’s (1974) idea of the ‘Greedy Institution’. Coser (1974, pp.3-4) argues that the modern individual typically moves between several social spheres, which shift according to the role the individual is expected to perform at any one time. Furthermore, normative standards tend to preclude exclusive demands being made on the individual by elements of one sphere, in recognition of the necessity and right of the individual to be able to shift between spheres according to their own desires and social expectations. However, some ‘Greedy’ institutions make demands on the individual that are grossly out of step with the rest of society. These institutions seek to encompass the individual in their totality;

‘... they [Greedy Institutions] seek exclusive and undivided loyalty and they attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries. Their demands on the person are omnivorous.’ (Coser, 1974, p.4)

Unlike some forms of Goffman’s Total Institution, though, these omnivorous demands are not conducted by way of external coercion. Rather, the Greedy Institution operates by capturing the competing loyalties of the individual through voluntary compliance (Coser, 1974, p.6). Hillsong is able to capture these loyalties by tying the organisation and all its activities to a ‘higher’, collective purpose, that of ‘saving’ the ‘unsaved’. This overriding loyalty to the evangelical cause is then reinforced and bulwarked against from outside
influence through the creation of symbolic boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (Coser, 1974, p.6). The Greedy Institution is accordingly characterised by the creation of a mental, rather than physical, partition between the institution and the outside world, which threatens to corrupt the individual in regard to their commitment.

Hillsong is very effective at erecting this partition through their constant invocation of ‘the enemy’. I have argued that Hillsong constituents find themselves wedged between competing ideals of protecting the purity of their faith whilst also addressing their evangelical call to save the unsaved. The concept of the enemy serves to partly alleviate the difficulties of these dual aims by acting as a psychological shield against disheartenment and weakening of (the Church’s collective) will. Consequently, anything which threatens the aims and continued existence of the Church becomes designated as ‘the enemy’ (though Hillsong refrains from labelling specific individuals). Senior Hillsong Pastor Bobbie Houston repeatedly adopts this strategy. In her book, *I’ll Have What She’s Having* (2008, loc.709-816), frequent reference is made to the enemy as a means of creating the mental partition characteristic of the Greedy Institution. Discussion of the enemy in Hillsong literature tends to be vague, but nevertheless these teachings are certainly effective at fostering a psychological shield against outside influence. The reader is told that the enemy; threatens to steal potential (Bobbie Houston, 2008, loc.399) and to create confusion (loc.578); keeps the devotee blind and ignorant (loc.595); seeks to persecute and insult (Houston, 2002c, p.49); and has ‘destructive
forces [that] are rapidly advancing’ (Bobbie Houston, 2008, loc.1351). A distinct strain of anti-intellectualism abounds in these teachings, with pastors arguing that the enemy will attempt to use logic and reason in order to weaken devotee’s commitment and hence, ‘that is why it is imperative that we operate in a realm known as faith, which transcends logic’ (Hillsong Conference, 2010, Session 2). Devotees are also inculcated with an insular rationale guarded by circular or irrefutable logic, such as ‘the greater the opposition, the greater the blessing!’ (Hillsong Conference, 2010, Session 1). Altogether the insularism and anti-intellectualism embodied in teachings on ‘the enemy’ erect a form of mental partitioning that, once established within the mindset of the devotee, is virtually impervious to change.

Thus we see that ‘the enemy’ is used as a kind of ‘residual category’, adopted by the institution of Hillsong, to negate ‘all the possibilities that a society is unable to fully include within its own moral and cultural order’ (Fenn & Delaporte, 2001, p.336). The combination of acquiring loyalty, directing this loyalty through institutional activities, and the erection of symbolic boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ certainly constitutes Hillsong as an exemplar of the Greedy Institution.

Another adaptation of Goffman’s Total Institution that is readily applicable to Hillsong is Scott’s (2010, pp.213-231) conception of the ‘Reinventive Institution’. This institution is characterised by its ability to provide a retreat
and respite from the outside world, one which the subject willingly enters into with the desired ends of a sense of self-transformation and self-development. The ascendance of this institution reflects Giddens’ (1991, pp.5-9) ideas of the modern, enfranchised, individual seeking some form of greater personal authenticity, thus engaging in a kind of ‘project of the self’. The offshoot of this ‘project’, the Reinventive Institution, ‘is both reinvented, in its structural form, and reinventing, in its effects on members’ identities’ (Scott, 2010, p.218). Subjects enter into this form of institution with the mindset of consumers, acquiring a service of therapeutic and holistic care in which the hoped for end-products are usually forms of empowerment and self-actualisation, in essence, a better ‘self’ (Scott, 2010, p.219).

Hillsong’s promotion of itself as an institution capable of providing ‘reinvention’ is most evident during the ‘altar call’, the plea made towards the end of a service for conversions from the ‘unsaved’. Here is an excerpt from an altar call made by Brian Houston:

‘I don’t know how you came to be here, but I don’t think it’s any coincidence... if you will just open your life up... then that is a trigger for your life... that can change your future... people are going to start out on a whole new journey... this is your night, this is a new beginning, a new day...this can
be a night of God-given destiny, of God-given purpose... to
give you a reason for being...

(Hillsong Conference, 2010, Session 1)

Similar appeals are made during most altar calls, heavily imbued with promises of personal transformation and realisation of latent potential (Hillsong Conference 4, 7, 10 & 13). These promises are then complemented by a wealth of self-help literature the Church produces, which combines theological teachings with practical advice (Houston, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d & 2002e). In the evocative altar calls Hillsong stokes the desire for reinvention, and then seeks to satisfy this desire solely through the Church by way of consoling, uplifting, and orienting literature, activities and ritual, which in time come to encompass the individual’s entire conception of the self. The personal quest for reinvention thus becomes aligned and indeed synonymous with the cause of the Church, and this can be further analysed by returning to another of Goffman’s concepts.

The Moral Career

So far in this chapter I have argued that the ‘New Voluntarism’ of faith has presented the evangelical church of Hillsong with both a challenge and
opportunity. Hillsong’s response has been to embrace marketing techniques normally associated with the commercial sphere, such as ideals of becoming the ‘third place’. However, Hillsong strives to go even beyond the ‘third place’ by providing the scaffolding upon which every sphere of daily life can be built. This is in part achieved by capturing loyalties and fostering insularism in a way typical of the ‘Greedy Institution’, through invocations of the ‘enemy’, which functions as a residual category for those things which the Church cannot accommodate in its doctrine or practices. Another means of inculcation is through promises of reinvention, which can only be realised if the devotee willingly subsumes themselves within the overarching purpose of the Church. The following will look at one way this dual process of personal reinvention and acquiescence to the Church’s ends is achieved, through the ‘moral career’.

Goffman argues that in the Total Institution there is a template of personal morality, predicated upon the overarching rational purpose of the institution, which the devotee is strongly encouraged to adopt (Goffman, 1962). As a consequence we can witness ‘in miniature the development of something akin to a functionalist version of moral life’ (Goffman, 1962, p.87), manifested on the individual level in the ‘moral career’ (Goffman, 1962, p.128). This idea of personal, moral transformation and development, willed by the institution and freely consented to by the constituent is prevalent in the approach of Hillsong. The moral career of those uninitiated into the Hillsong Church begins with strong encouragement to undertake the Church’s ‘Discovering Christianity’ course, either in person or online (Hillsong Church, 2010,
During this course the progress of the individual is tracked and frequent opportunities and encouragement given for the individual to proceed to the next stage of the course, which usually requires some sort of affirmation of their growing faith and a sense of a break with the past, another quality of the ‘moral career’ (Goffman, 1962, p.120). This strategy of slowly integrating the individual into the Church through positive encouragement and fostering a perception of progress and personal development is common practice amongst large evangelical churches (TIME, 1954, www.time.com...823597,00.html). Hillsong encourages members to become ‘planted’ within the Church, and to ‘take root’ by becoming more than just a ‘casual attendee’ (Houston, 2008, p.23). Note that this guiding metaphor, whilst reflective of the moral career, also incorporates elements of the ‘Greedy’ and the ‘Reinventive’ Institutions. Being ‘planted’ entails demands upon the individual to contribute beyond what is typically expected, characteristic of the ‘Greedy Institution’. Also, through the imagery of the plant ‘taking root’ there is an implicit promise of personal growth, a quality of the ‘Reinventive Institution’. This promise is also made explicit by Brian Houston, albeit phrased in the negative; (2002b, p.49), ‘If you are not planted anywhere, you will not grow’. The moral career is also present in the focus the Church places on ideas of emulation. Devotees are encouraged to evangelise not by proselytising, but by promoting the worldly benefits of their faith, to show that ‘it works’ in a very manifest sense that stokes desires of emulation within seekers (Hillsong
Espousals of emulation abound in Bobbie Houston’s (2008) *I’ll Have What She’s Having* where she provides numerous examples of women within the Hillsong Church whom she admires and aspires to be like. By extension, through her role as senior pastor, Houston implicitly recommends these women as avatars of aspiration and emulation for others. Additionally, Hillsong pastors and worship leaders, particularly Brian and Bobbie Houston, are transcendent ‘brands’\(^{20}\), objects of inspiration, aspiration and emulation, rather than embodiments of authority and religious stricture. Emulation of these avatars can only be achieved by way of making a tangible contribution to the Church, one that goes beyond mere monetary donations and instead towards donating whatever time and resources the devotee can spare. Volunteering within the Hillsong Church thus goes well beyond that of other comparable institutions, to the extent where the old hierarchical divide between ‘inmates’ and ‘staff’ within the Total Institution becomes extremely blurred.

Ideals of success in the moral career through emulation are also present in role expectations within the Church. Though Hillsong, mindful of being seeker-friendly and conscious of public scrutiny, rarely formally legislates and enforces role expectations, devotees are nevertheless acutely aware of desired behaviours. Levin (2007), in her insider account of the Church, addresses role expectations in her discussion of ‘ideal’ leaders. Levin (2007, pp.181-189) argues that an individual seeking a position of leadership within the Church

\(^{20}\) For evidence of this one need only to peruse their website www.brianandbobbie.com
(thus signifying the pinnacle of the moral career within the Total Institution) needs to be married, preferably with children. Deviances from this norm are unlikely to result in gaining a position of leadership, and if widely known usually result in a permanent loss of status within the panopticon of the Total Institution. This is testament to the way Hillsong can incorporate all aspects of daily life, including family, consumption and work (see next chapter), and notions of the ‘self’, and subsequently direct conceptions of these aspects through the overarching aims of the Church.

**The Affinity of the Church and the Self**

Goffman (1962, p.13) argued that the Total Institution does not attempt to substitute the ‘outside’ culture for one of their own. Rather than acculturation or assimilation, Total Institutions ‘create and sustain a particular kind of tension between the home world and the institutional world and use this persistent tension as a strategic leverage in the management of men’ (Goffman, 1962, p.13). This persistent tension is certainly present within committed Hillsongers by way of their dual desires to find ways to evangelise to the ‘consumer society’, and simultaneously insulate themselves from the outside

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21 This integration of ideals of the family within the Total Institution dispels arguments made by Davies (1989) of an unbridgeable distinction between Goffmanian ‘batch-living’ and ‘family living’, in Hillsong these characteristics are not mutually exclusive, but rather integral to Church functioning.
world. Ellingson (2010, pp.256-263) describes this dilemma, common amongst megachurches, as an element of the ‘New Sectarianism’. This ‘movement’ of sorts is characterised by the attempt to strike a sustainable balance between a faith-based institution that is marked as separate from the outside world yet is also appealing to outsiders, whilst not creating an unbearable tension for constituents with the surrounding culture.

This chapter has demonstrated that Hillsong has navigated this dilemma through a controlled process of gradually integrating the seeker into the fabric of the Church. Chapter Four will discuss in further detail the use of affective labour to capture the attention of seekers, but this chapter has focused on the consolidation and integration of the already faithful, and the subsequent framing of belief through the operations of the Church. Espousals of the goodness of being ‘planted’ within the Church lead devotees to dedicate the utmost of their abilities and capacities to Hillsong, and in time their normal practices, along with their sense of purpose and meaning, become inseparable from the goals of the Church. Through the ‘moral career’, the Hillsong devotee, to adapt Goffman (1962, p.5), comes to take the Church’s view of himself/herself. This occurs to the extent where the Church ‘… does not so much support the self as constitute it’ (Goffman, 1962, p.168). Yet, all this is achieved in a way that still aligns with the ethos and norms of modernity, in particular espousals of the integrity of the individual and their right and responsibility to realise the potential of the self. Thus, it seems the project of the ‘self’ and the ‘Church’ becomes synonymous, and furthermore this binding
of oneself to the Hillsong Church is not done begrudgingly, but rather, with hope and promise, entered into willingly, exhibiting a level of affinity with which few other institutions can compare.

However, for Hillsong to sustain its ability to function as a Total Institution requires a balancing of the tension between the desire to remain as a functioning sect and ‘full-service’ church and the task of financing and resourcing this project. The next chapter discusses how Hillsong navigates this particular tension through the Church’s unique doctrine.

Chapter Three – The Hillsong Ethic and the Spirit of Consumerism

‘The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of
all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.’


‘Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.’

*A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Karl Marx (1977, p.131)

’It is God’s will for you to prosper!’

*You Need More Money*, Brian Houston (1999b, p.55)

The previous chapter argued that the Hillsong Church exhibits the characteristics of a new kind of Total Institution, one that is all-consuming or ‘greedy’, but also a voluntarily entered into association motivated by desires for reinvention of the self. In this new kind of consumer-oriented Total Institution there is a certain tension that must be negotiated between fostering a sustainable insularism whilst not allowing the orienting tenets that bind members together to become overly diluted by outside influences. David Martin (1990, p.232) summarises this dilemma in regard to expanding Pentecostal movements:

'Much depends on the balance which Pentecostalism maintains between its ability to expand among the masses, by remaining of the masses, and its ability to advance their
condition. If the former remains powerful the latter must operate at the margin.

Martin here is referring specifically to the Pentecostal movement in Zimbabwe and by speaking of the faith’s capacity to ‘advance their (the masses) condition’ he means this primarily in a very tangible, material sense. In the case of Hillsong, this tension between the need to remain among the members and advance their condition can also be witnessed, though the ‘condition’ which needs to be advanced is not solely material.

Rather, members seek development of another, more personal and transformative kind. Hunt (2002, p.100) succinctly describes this desire amongst Pentecostals in the highly developed world as the quest to ‘discover layers of potential expression and to accomplish the needs of self-discovery and self-fulfilment in emotional and psychological terms.’ In essence the development is of a self-actualising kind, one that goes beyond the material and the rational to also penetrate emotional and affective states. This is a task all the more achievable when an institution can foster an insularism and the sense of being part of a privileged ‘elect’. However, Hillsong members also have the task of proselytising – of extending the Church’s membership to incorporate the unsaved. Furthermore, Hillsong and its constituents are bound to the economic ‘mechanism’, to quote Weber, the unalterable conditions of the modern economy which they may either actively rally against, or attempt to ignore, or seek to positively respond to.
This chapter argues that it is the latter option that Hillsong chooses, seeking as it does to integrate and inject meaning and purpose into the unalterable state of conditions. Rather than stubborn insularism, Hillsong’s fervent desire to evangelise has resulted in a pragmatic approach involving the use of modern marketing techniques to reach seekers and methods of capital accumulation normally associated with the commercial sphere. This overt adoption of a capitalist framework of operation poses the threat of a philosophical clash between the secular and the spiritual, a clash that requires an accompanying body of teaching in order to avoid creating an irreconcilable dissonance within the psyche of the devotee or the seeker. The need is essentially for a doctrine that is marketable enough to expand amongst the masses, yet differentiated enough to ‘advance the condition’ of the already faithful, and also incorporate the realities embedded within the unalterable conditions of the modern economy.

This chapter will demonstrate how Hillsong has achieved this unique mix of marketability, psychological ‘advancement’, and pragmatism within binding structural conditions through its particular doctrine. I will show how the ‘Hillsong Ethic’ draws upon the broad doctrine of ‘Prosperity Theology’, a teaching that aligns perfectly with notions of the ideal consumer in modern capitalist society. This mix of faith and commerce has not always been so
seamless, yet today in Hillsong we are witnessing a new synthesis of these two spheres that I argue is unprecedented.

Religious Movements and the Synthesis of Idealism and Materialism in the Economic Sphere

Diverse religious groups, whether they are broad-based ‘mainline’ associations, large sectarian followings or even totalising cults, necessarily enter into a dialectical relationship with the dominant economic relations. In previous historical periods and societies this may not have resulted in undue tensions, as the clergy exercised almost complete control over the constitution of societal functions. Over time, as mercantilism and trade flourished in part due to the steady collapse of distance and the philosophical movement of the Enlightenment, the clergy no longer held its power and esteem as the ‘first estate’ (Bruce, 2010, pp.125-128). Today, in late modernity in the Western world, most religious institutions can neither wholly determine the nature of economic relations, nor ignore them. Therefore a dialectic tension between material conditions and spiritual (idealistic) perspective comes into play, a tension that has been resolved in different ways by various religious groups.

22 For instance the extremely insular can attempt to completely remove themselves from the corrupting economic sphere, such as the Amish attempt to do with varying success against impulses to acquiesce to various forms of acculturation (Savells, 1985, pp.85-103). Alternatively insular movements may orient their faith around exerting influence and power
The success and sustainability of diverse religious movements rests largely on their ability to foster a sufficiently insular existence, which provides the assuredness that members are of some kind of ‘elect’ or privy to a divine truth, whilst not requiring of its followers lifestyles and behaviours that would create an unbearable tension with unalterable societal conditions. Bernice Martin (1995, p.102) posits that ‘the innovating religious movement carves out a “free space” outside the control of the traditional politico-religious powers, within which it can institute a new “life-world” based on its radical religious insights’. Certainly, as the previous chapter demonstrated, Hillsong is very effective in carving out a free space to create a lifeworld.

Yet, it may be that one of Hillsong’s distinctive characteristics is that, contrary to Martin’s generalisation, the Church does not feel compelled to step outside the control of ‘traditional’ powers, in this case, existing politico-economic relations. Rather, their teachings align perfectly with the ‘traditional’ power of late capitalism, and it appears that no cognitive dissonance is felt on the part of Hillsongers between being located firmly within the secular world, on the one hand, and their sectarian belief that they are not of it, on the other. This navigation of seeming incongruence alludes to what Jackson (1987, pp.20-21) through domination of the economic sphere as a means to achieve their ends as Bachelard (2008) demonstrates in his investigative account of the hugely disproportionate influence of the tiny ‘Exclusive Brethren’ sect in Australia. Other more ‘mainline’ religious institutions will usually take the current economic state as a fixed reality and will either sidestep, remain silent or provide broadly agreeable teachings on economic relations.
dubs the ‘dualistic foundation of prosperity theology’. This is the belief that the ‘material’ and the ‘spiritual’ constitute two mutually exclusive and eternally conflicting realms, with the desire of the faithful being to transcend the former to the latter. However, the path to perceived transcendence relies upon some form of guidance from the spiritual realm, a guidance which can only be collectively recognised by manifesting itself in the material. As a result what were previously deemed mutually exclusive realms have, in the case of Hillsong, become thoroughly enmeshed and, one might add, conveniently aligned with the overriding structural conditions.

The previous chapter demonstrated that Hillsongers’ fervent desire to evangelise to the unsaved masses generates another apparent incongruence, namely that between an evangelical sect’s natural inclination towards insularism and Hillsong’s seeker-focused pragmatism. Thus Hillsong has to contend with two interrelated dialectic tensions. The first concerns the question of how the Church might evangelise and proselytise to an increasingly individualistic unsaved mass, whilst retaining the cohesion considered proper to members of an elect sect (Roof, 1999, pp.46-76). The second concerns the problem of how to incorporate dominant and inescapable economic realities and accepted outcomes of secularisation processes into Church doctrine in a way that is not jarring to current adherents, nor to potential seekers (Varga, 1995, pp.231-247). These two tensions are interrelated and while the first is a running theme throughout this study and a particular focus of Chapter Two, it is the second of these tensions that is the focus of this chapter. Hillsong’s
reaction to this dilemma, it will be argued, has been a willingness to embrace the irresistible mechanism of economic forces and invert, simply through a repositioning of perspective, what was originally overwhelming and enfeebling into a divinely determined structural ordering within which the faithful can prosper.

This strange inversion and embrace of paradox and contradiction within Hillsong elicits parallels with Max Weber’s (1948) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. This study is not concerned with the socio-historical debate over the degree of causality attributable to the ‘material’ or the ‘ideal’ taken up by Tawney (2000) and others. Of more import to this study is the question of how a religious group might perceive material realities, and in turn how certain perceptions might change the lived experience of the faithful. As Weber himself eloquently states in the above epigraph we are now bound within the ‘iron cage’ of capitalism and thus the material appears to have won over the ideal, contributing to the cultural and social malaise found in hollow consumption (Hamilton, 2005, 2003, pp.62-97, Mackay, 2007, pp.263-268) and the Marxian alienation of labour (Hughes et.al., 2003, pp.40-42). But what if, by drawing on powerful insights from the ‘spirit’, a religious group, such as Hillsong, can figuratively reposition themselves and become not victims but divinely destined victors within the dominant order? Indeed, Hillsong embraces the dominant order, arguing that ‘many people feel frustrated about working according to the world system, but in actual fact, it is an incredible opportunity to finance the work of the Kingdom’ (Houston, 1999b, p.74).
Preliminary inquiries into this postulation and how Hillsong approaches the dialectic tension between sectarian insularism and the increasingly pervasive economic sphere will be initially filtered through Weber’s so-called debate with the ‘spirit’ of Marx.

The crux of this oft-invoked socio-historical ‘debate’ (see, for example, Lowy, 1989, pp.71-83) centres on the role of ideas in provoking social change and determining an individual’s view of the world. In a simplified version of this debate a dichotomy is drawn between the materialism of Marx, which treats ideas as mere epiphenomena with respect to the overwhelming determining power of the economic base (Giddens, 1971, pp.18-34), and Weber’s idealism, which suggests that ideas can be causal of social change, even to the point of reconfiguring economic relations (Giddens, 1971, pp.119-132). Yet, as Hughes et.al (2003, pp.97-99) argue, this dichotomy is often overdrawn and requires a subtle but substantive restatement. They argue that Weber did not deny the pervasiveness of material realities and its role in determining social relations, nor the role of self-interest in orienting the life of the individual. The crucial difference lies in Weber’s argument that the individual may not only be guided by practical, economic interests, but also by their beliefs and ideals, which are often of a religious quality and can at times even override their material interests.
The point of introducing this perceived dichotomy between materialism and idealism and their determining role in the economic sphere is to suggest that within Hillsong and other proponents of ‘Prosperity Theology’ we are witnessing a synthesis of these two opposing determinants into a single, overarching, Weberian-type rationalisation of all spheres of life (Kalberg, 1985). Furthermore, it is a rationalisation that still retains self-interest both from a material and idealist standpoint, but also imbues all aspects of life with a meaning and purpose that is perceived to be greater than the individual. This perception determines experience, regardless of the actual degree these spheres of life are material or ideal-driven. Thus although the Hillsonger may remain within the unalterable conditions of economic realities his/her faith and lived experience can rarely be characterised by Marx’s ‘sigh of the oppressed creature’. This argument will be returned to at the conclusion of this chapter. The following sections elaborate on the basic elements of Prosperity Theology in order to explore the Hillsong adaptation of this worldview.

*Prosperity Theology*
The origins of the broad doctrine of Prosperity Theology lie in the United States and can be analysed in two broad strands, both being derived in different ways from the Protestant Ethic, with the latter strand being a related development, but not replacement of the first. The first strand can be found in the ‘bootstrap’ teachings epitomised by businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in his ‘Gospel of Wealth’ (2006). The essence of these teachings is the emphasis on equality of opportunity, but following this equal footing subsequent divergence in wealth duly reflects the character of the individual, both in a spiritual and worldly sense. These teachings represent a distinct evolution of the Protestant Ethic in the highly industrialising (and individualising) United States beginning in the 19th century. Teachings espouse an ethos of self-help and hard work geared towards the most economically productive ends, combined with a generous but restrained stewardship of wealth. Koch (2009, p.3) also suggests that the Gospel of Wealth is in part an apologist rationalisation for economic inequalities through its absolution of direct responsibility via the concept of ‘divine hierarchies’. Coleman (2004, p.425) and Bromley (1995, p.136) similarly tie this doctrine to the also apologist and rationalising principles of ‘Manifest Destiny’, thus tying together

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23 Other terms that are equated with ‘Prosperity Theology’ or similarly derived from the antecedent ‘Faith Movement’ include the ‘Prosperity Gospel’ (Hasu, 2006), the ‘Health and Wealth Gospel’ (Hunt, 2000a), the ‘Name It and Claim It Gospel’ (Van Biema & Chu, 2006) or more disparagingly as the ‘Blab It and Grab It Gospel’ (Hunt, 2002, p.93) or ‘Slot-Machine Theology’ (Wilmington, 1987). In ‘For This I Was Born’ (2008, p.129), Brian Houston, in a nice example of evasive argumentation, states that there is only one ‘Gospel’ and consequently no such thing as a ‘prosperity gospel’. In order to avoid a stultifying debate over semantics this study adopts another commonly used term: ‘prosperity theology’.

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a powerful combination of wealth acquisition, fervent patriotism and divine grace.

Though the ‘bootstrap’ ethos and its forebear the Protestant Ethic have without doubt influenced the ‘Hillsong Ethic’, the second strand of Prosperity Theology is of a more overtly religious type and provides the primary inspiration for Hillsong’s particular adoption of this doctrine. This strand takes its origins from the ‘Faith Movement’ that began post-World War II amidst Pentecostal and Charismatic revivals in the United States (Coleman, 2002, pp.6-9). This movement espouses an ideal that ‘all Christians who make their faith active and put it into practice can achieve individual freedom from illness, poverty, and other afflictions’ (Kramer, 2002, p.24). The theological rationale is that ‘God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of


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24 Though not an explicitly theological work Carnegie argues that his conception of the ‘Gospel of Wealth [all] but echoes Christ’s words’ (Carnegie & Nasaw, 2006, loc. 669) and that there is no theological basis to justify self-inflicted asceticism, deprivation and paucity. To the contrary such acts of needless humility belie a poor work ethic. Salvation, Carnegie suggests, lies in exploiting one’s most economically productive capacities and accumulating wealth towards acts of philanthropy conducted prior to death. In so doing the philanthropist will become ‘rich, very rich...in the affection, gratitude, and admiration of his fellow-men...’ and ‘against such riches as these no bar will be found at the Gates of Paradise’ (Carnegie & Nasaw, 2006, loc.669-675).

25 Protestantism, and particularly the subset of Pentecostalists, rarely orient themselves around a centralised governing authority compared to other mainline faiths, such as Catholicism (recall that the Assemblies of God is merely an association used for pragmatic purposes). The various Protestant denominations and churches natural inclination towards independent functioning (they are, of course, following in the footsteps of that great act of dissent, The Reformation) entails that the idea of collective Pentecostal ‘movement’ may appear unfeasible, and justifiably so. Hence though ‘The Faith ministries do not constitute a single, tightly structured movement, and there is no official membership as such... on an international scale their organisational frameworks tend to be very alike in form and genre’ (Hunt, 2002, p.92). Therefore though it is not a formal movement the consistency and consonance of its application allows us to analyse it as such.
Christ, and every Christian should now share Christ's victory over sin, sickness and poverty’ (Gifford, 1991, p.13).

These teachings were particularly appealing to the burgeoning and upwardly mobile middle classes during the ‘long boom’ post-World War II as rationalisations for their success, but were also appealing to those who aspired to greater success as they provided a harbinger of hope outside of themselves (Hunt, 2000a, p.76). Through the Faith Movement religiosity and capitalism become synonymous with each other and fused into a single framework that bridged the spiritual/material divide (Hunt, 2002, p.92). Its offshoot ‘Prosperity Theology’ further subverts the typical antinomy between the sacred and the profane. These teachings argue that through genuine faith, ‘believers are destined to be “prosperous”, “healthy”, “happy” and “victorious” in all their worldly undertakings’ (Lima, 2006, p.5). Prosperity Theology frees its adherents from both the asceticism of the ‘Protestant Ethic’ and austere traditions of more mainline Pentecostal denominations and instead proclaims a life of abundance here on earth.

Koch (2009, p.8) suggests that the Faith Movement was the ‘source and incubator’ of Prosperity Theology, but it should be noted that the latter is of a substantively more radical nature, with the difference lying in a shift of emphasis. Whereas the earlier Faith Movement primarily emphasised the importance of faith with material wellbeing merely a welcome by-product,
Prosperity Theology emphasises a guaranteed reciprocity between God and the faithful, and duly advertises itself to seekers on this basis rather than proselytising over the obligations of genuine faith. This is epitomised in the practice of ‘positive confession’ which ‘seems to embrace a law of metaphysical causation in that what is spoken by the believer in faith operates the spiritual law of faith itself and brings what is “confessed” into material reality’\(^{26}\) (Hunt, 1998, p.276).

Another contrast can be made between this type of metaphysically-based Prosperity Theology and Carnegie’s Gospel of Wealth. Whilst the Gospel of Wealth’s ethic of work and acquisition stressed the importance of using wealth ultimately in the service of others, Prosperity Theology born out of the Faith Movement only seeks the virtue of a strong work ethic in order to realise first and foremost for its own adherents the ‘fruits’ bestowed by ‘divine grace’. Indeed these fruits, given by the grace of God, are expected to be enjoyed, and to do any less would be to dissent from divine will. Thus Prosperity Theology as widely practised today has shifted from what was originally a call to good stewardship of wealth and observing obligations of faith (albeit classist and patronising). In its place is an expectation of reciprocity and a work ethic

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\(^{26}\) Although belief in the ‘positive confession’ is widely derided by opposing theologians as ‘Slot-Machine Religion’ (Wilmington, 1987), for a non-Christian equivalent of this idea of harnessing a metaphysical impetus to impact material causality one need only look to the hugely popular (and much-criticised) book, *The Secret* (Byrne, 2007), and its affirmation ‘Ask, Believe, Receive’ (pp.47-46). This affirmation is another incarnation of the positive confession, readers are told that there is a power to the universe which they can harness, and thus solely through visualisation techniques and positive thought they can ‘will’ a metaphysical force to impact material reality.
motivated by receiving ‘fruits’, rather than stewardship. Amongst followers Prosperity Theology has led to the formation of a ‘charismatic economy’ (Coleman, 2004, p.426) whereby charismatic leaders proclaim the ability to lead followers to a metaphysical bridge between divine will and material acquisition. This perception of metaphysical bridging becomes affirmed and reinforced through the exchange of words (eg. testimonies) and objects, all of which is designed to mutually reinforce and rationalise the divinely graced enjoyment of their fruits.

A sizeable corpus of scholarly work in recent decades has been dedicated to documenting the spread and globalisation of Prosperity Theology across the globe. Of particular interest has been the varying degree of adoption and modification of the doctrine, in essence the ‘glocalisation’ of Prosperity Theology (Hunt, 2000b). The overwhelming bulk of this literature is focused on the emergence of forms of aspiration-based dogma in the less developed world, particularly Africa and Latin America, and its apparent capacity to empower and effect social change from below through insights given from ‘above’ (Garner, 2000 & Nwankwo, 2009). In the Eastern world adoption of

27 This ‘fruits-based’ prosperity theology began with televangelism pioneer Oral Robert’s ‘seed faith’ (Kramer, 2002, p.24), an exchange attributed to divine mediation through which ‘Subscribers who contributed $100 to his work were promised a refund if they did not receive the gift back from a totally unexpected source within one year’ (Coleman, 2000, loc.517-519). Successors to Roberts include Jimmy Swaggart with his sales pitch ‘expect miracles’ (Brouwer et.al., 1996, pp.59-62) and today’s most prominent televangelist Joel Osteen (a regular guest at Hillsong Conferences) who preaches a thinly veiled Prosperity Theology ‘framed in a kind of Tony Robbins positivism’ (Van Biema & Chu, 2006).

28 Alternatively from a functionalist perspective in the same way that eschatological beliefs can serve to console and placate the downtrodden Prosperity Theology through its conflation of
Prosperity Theology has largely been a means through which to accommodate the growing influence of Western culture and rapid economic change\(^\text{29}\) (Kim, 2002, Debernardi, 2002, Goh, 2009). In Europe Prosperity Theology manifests itself in a more subtle form\(^\text{30}\), though it has also been tied to populist and nationalist movements\(^\text{31}\).

Aside from very brief treatments in various academic and journalistic studies (Lohrey, 2006, pp.50-53, Maddox, 2005, pp.276-277, Levin, 2007, pp.208-209) wealth and worldly success with virtue and grace can be used as a rationalisation for gross inequalities (Gifford, 2004, p.171 & Brouwer et.al, 1996, pp.151-178). Prosperity teachings in Africa and to a lesser extent Latin America are often tied to visions of ‘deliverance’ and ‘liberation theology’, though Gifford (1990, p.381) argues that the melding of the two can be counter-productive to those seeking liberation ‘...as it distracts attention from any economic system and merely fosters the intention to be among those who prosper within it’. Maxwell (1998, pp.369-370) offers a rebuttal to Gifford, stating that although Prosperity Theology is unlikely to ever lead to the overthrow of an exploitative dominant order it at least provides a pragmatic, but also fulfilling, framework within which one can respond to the pressures of rapid modernisation.

\(^{29}\) Kim (2002) provides empirical evidence of the effect of Prosperity Theology towards a syncretism of religious belief and this-worldly orientation in South Korea. Kim (2002, p.302) suggests that the rapid emergence of Christianity in South Korea since the 1960s can be attributed to Christian faith acting as a kind of conduit of Western culture and worldviews that aligned closely with and made sense of the rapid economic change the nation was undergoing. Also, Debernadi (2002), in her analysis of Prosperity Theology in Singapore and Malaysia also highlights the unusual melding of Western dogma with a pre-existing culture undergoing rapid socioeconomic change, likening it to ‘a kind of cargo cult of Christian religiosity’ (p.125).

\(^{30}\) See, for example, Jackson (1987), who suggests that this more subtle use of dogma is due to the fact that, unlike the US, the UK shows an aversion towards tying wealth, nation and virtue to the blessings of God, along with an inclination bestowed by their cultural heritage that deems the flaunting of wealth an unsophisticated act. Consequently ‘the prosperity component is often suitably diluted and stands merely as a fringe doctrine’, one that ‘is often made palatable to UK cultural tastes’ (Hunt, 2002, p.96).

\(^{31}\) See Coleman’s (1995) analysis of the ‘Word of Life’ prosperity movement in Sweden. Long held up as the exemplar of a functioning social democracy that has steered a path between laissez-faire capitalism and state socialism, Sweden is now experiencing a period of political upheaval in which the Charismatic and Prosperity Theology-driven ‘Word of Life’ movement is both a product of and contributing factor towards societal change (Coleman, 1995, pp.161-179). Latching on to the ascendance of a general and widespread populist and nationalistic political movement, the Word of Life movement imbues Prosperity Theology with localised salience and avoids accusations of importing American-style economic imperialism by tying their teachings to Swedish national identity (Coleman, 1995, pp.171-175).
there has been a distinct neglect of analysis of Prosperity Theology within Australia. This is surprising given that Assemblies of God churches are by far the fastest growing Christian religious ‘denomination’ in Australia (NCLS, 2009, <www.ncls.org.au...213>) and that Hillsong exerts a significant and growing influence on the core doctrine of many Pentecostal churches. The following seeks to redress this neglect by showing how Hillsong treads a path between the virtue and grace of work in the Protestant Ethic, the self-help ‘bootstrap’ ethos and philanthropy of the Gospel of Wealth, and lastly the expectations of reciprocity, material reward and a divinely guided destiny of success found in current Prosperity Theology.

‘Blessed to be a Blessing’ – The Hillsong Consumer Ethic

Zygmunt Bauman (1998, p.19) put it succinctly when he posited that ‘Ours is a consumer society’. Whereas previously individuals were chiefly engaged, shaped, and normalised through their productive activity, today we are engaged by society primarily through our capacity as consumers, with our willingness and ability to play this role determining our relative status (Bauman, 1998, p.24). Thus, today the individual is both shaped, and shapes themselves, through their patterns of consumption, and as the consumer market grows so (we are told) does the potential of the individual. Society thus becomes
characterised by fluidity, flux, and flexibility and our success in this environment depends on our ability to adapt ourselves to the consumptive mindset:

‘Ideally, nothing should be embraced by a consumer firmly, nothing should command a commitment forever, no needs should ever be seen as fully satisfied, no desires considered ultimate. There ought to be a proviso ‘until further notice attached to any oath of loyalty and any commitment.’

(Bauman, 1998, p.25)

However, ‘fluidity, flux and flexibility’ are also just the positive spins on a society increasingly characterised by volatility, fleeting and shallow exchanges, and aimlessness. Furthermore the relentless expansion of the market (and hence expansion of ‘potential’ and ‘possibility’) creates a kind of Hedonic treadmill for the consumer, a perpetual and never truly satisfying project of self-creation (and creative self-destruction). Yet despite this there generally remains an unswerving belief in the potential of the market and our autonomy within it. This becomes manifest in a compulsion to consume, described by Bauman as ‘that internalised pressure, that impossibility of living one’s life in any other way, reveals itself to them in the form of a free exercise of will.’ (Bauman, 1998, p.26). Thus consumption becomes a vocation, albeit one that is constantly shifting beneath our feet. In this new vocation our conception of ourselves has become so enmeshed with consumerism that ‘the roads to self-identity, to a place in society, to life lived in a form recognizable as that of
meaningful living, all require daily visits to the marketplace’ (Bauman, 1998, p.26). The social malaise caused by our inability to firstly evade this vocation, and secondly satiate, render stable, and make meaningful our consumptive activity presents simultaneously a dilemma and opportunity for the ‘seeker church’.

Hillsong confronts two challenges presented by the ‘consumer society’ in their adoption and adaptation of Prosperity Theology. Firstly, through pragmatic ‘self-help’ teachings and dogma based on tenets of Prosperity Theology, Hillsong validates and supports the ‘consumer society’ and accompanying role expectations. Secondly, Hillsong provides for devotees a panacea to the loneliness and aimlessness of wealth accumulation and consumption through the teaching that they are ‘blessed to be a blessing’. Within Hillsong consumption becomes a vocation held in high esteem, one that raises several disconcerting ethical implications.

Hillsong’s attempt to transform hollow wealth accumulation and material consumption into a virtuous vocation is typified most in Brian Houston’s (1999b) book, You Need More Money. This provocative title comes with the subtitle ‘Discovering God’s Amazing Financial Plan for Your Life’, and Houston here is at his most frank and forthright. Witness the book’s opening:

‘I’m going to get straight to the point: YOU NEED MORE MONEY! You may think this is provocative, presumptuous
or even prophetic coming from a pastor but the fact is that it is true. Whoever you are, you need more money.'

(Houston, 1999b, p.1)

Houston (1999b) decries what he describes as ‘impoverished thinking’ (p.8) and a ‘poverty mentality’ (p.7), insisting that they are not what God intended for his followers and church, nor are they beneficial to wider society. Rather, through very selective reference and unorthodox interpretation of scripture combined with simplistic argument, Houston (1999b, p.3) implores the reader that ‘if you and I can change our thinking and develop a healthy attitude towards money, I believe we can all walk in the blessing and prosperity that God intends for us’.

Houston (1999b) states that ‘there is nothing noble about poverty’ (p.9) and instead urges his followers to ‘break any poverty thinking and guilt that has a hold on you’ (p.13). The devotee is encouraged to become comfortable around signifiers of wealth, as evidenced in the suggested exercise of ‘putting on your best clothes and ordering coffee in a fancy restaurant or hotel lobby’ (Houston, 1999b, p.13). Hillsong’s consumer ethic is therefore not just a rationalisation for wealth, but indeed a call to aspire to greater wealth and consumption. Houston (1999b, p.17) even invokes ‘the enemy’ in justifying wealth, stating that ‘one of the enemy’s greatest tactics is to stop God’s people desiring more money’. The purpose of these teachings is to dissolve the barriers between capitalism and the sacred, and ultimately to provide a dogma that renders these
two spheres synonymous. This is characteristic of Prosperity Theology teachings whereby some sort of reconciliation is sought between the consumer culture, perceptions of the self, and religious belief, which lead to similar personal narratives worldwide regarding the confluence of the material with the meaningful (Mora, 2008, p.416). Hence Hillsong teachings are geared towards those seeking a validation of sorts for operating, desiring success, and seeking personal development within the consumer sphere.

The divine enters the material realm (and hence partially negotiates the ‘dualistic tension’) through the aforementioned concepts of positive confession and reciprocity. The idea of the positive confession (though never termed as such) features prominently in Houston’s (1999a, 2000) advocacy of visualization and positive thinking techniques. Furthermore, during his opening address of the 2010 Hillsong Conference (2010, Session 1) Houston constantly invoked a mantra of ‘blessing, fruitfulness, increase, abundance, multiplication, growth, supernatural strength, influence!’ The positive confession also becomes imbued with ideas of metaphysical causation through Houston’s emphasis on the power of ‘choice’; ‘YOU make the choice. You choose whether money will bless or damage your life.’ (Houston, 1999b, p.43).

Similarly, the reciprocity principle is blatant in Hillsong publications. The teaching is that with genuine and faithful commitment ‘the fruit will follow’ (Houston, 1999b, p.10) and indeed this ‘fruit’ is ‘clear evidence that God is
working in your life’ (Houston, 2002b, p.13). Furthermore these ‘fruit’ are most definitely of the earthly kind and indeed ‘anyone who puts the Kingdom of God first… can expect Bible economics to work in their life NOW’ (Houston, 1999b, p.23). One must acknowledge the appeal of these teachings to ‘seekers’. The offer of a combined package of personal empowerment and validation bought through only a reorientation of perspective may be too much to for the yearning will to resist and overcome, regardless of whether one was aware on some level of the self-deception involved.

For Hillsong’s Prosperity Theology to be wholly effective, however, requires a kind of tempering of the egotistical self, that self-interested wealth accumulation and consumption be subsumed into something greater than pure self-interest. This is achieved through Hillsong’s philosophy that the faithful are ‘blessed to be a blessing’ (Houston, 2008, p.166, 2002b, p.35). The essence of this rationale is that ‘...if you have nothing there is nothing you can do’ (Houston, 2008, p.142) and hence the faithful are urged to position themselves in relative positions of economic and financial power (Houston, 1999b, p.91). Indeed, Hillsongers are called to live in such ‘abundance’ where ‘besides having all you need, God’s will is for you to have more, so you have plenty to sow into good works’ (Houston, 1999b, p.64).

32 Further investigation into Hillsong writings have elicited no insight as to precisely what is meant by ‘Bible economics’.
One of the chief metaphors utilised to justify this material abundance is the idea of first building a ‘platform’ for oneself before looking to serve others (Houston, 2007). This platform is meant quite specifically in a financial sense, evidenced by statements such as; ‘ownership increases your platform; debt decreases it... I believe the Lord wants you to build a platform in your life that debt will always, always limit and contain’ (Houston, 2007). Houston (2008, p.167) rationalises a containment of this platform, to ‘leave room on the edges’, so that there is always a residual capacity to utilise when a need is recognised. The disquieting aspect of this is the potential for rationalisation of a self-serving existence, justifying keeping a residual but never acting upon this capacity through a psychological partitioning of the mind and absolution of moral duty to a greater authority. Furthermore the expectation of divine reciprocity even emerges in the act of ‘blessing’ others, with Houston (1999b, p.78) espousing biblically-derived (and unorthodoxly interpreted) teachings such as ‘he who waters will be watered himself’. This raises questions over the intentionality of generous acts conducted by Hillsong members. Though there is usually a reflexive by-product of to any act of kindness (eg. a greater regard for oneself) Hillsong’s ability to simultaneously also instil a transactional ethos within adherents in regard to charitable acts without generating feelings of disingenuousness or artificiality is testament to the slippery quality of the Prosperity Doctrine.

The call to benefit others through first experiencing ‘abundance’ for oneself is self-evidently alluring, in part because it parallels what is a common process of
first meeting one’s own needs for comfort and enjoyment, followed by seeking a form of self-actualisation through contribution to a cause greater than the self. This can be considered akin to Maslow’s (1943, pp.370-396) concept of self-actualisation in his ‘hierarchy of needs’ which Bell and Taylor (2004, pp.445) argue is imbued by Maslow with a desire for transcendence of the self (see also Morris, 2009). The consequence of satisfying these two needs - material satisfaction for the self, and the desired transcendence of the self through beneficial acts towards others - is that Hillsong members gain a perception of moral superiority in these two seemingly inconsistent acts. This is largely because the first act already possesses for the believer an element of transcendence, for on the one hand, material accumulation is commended as ‘it is scriptural for you to enjoy some of the blessing He [God] pours out on your life’ (Houston, 1999b, p.102). Yet, on the other hand, the moral ascendency is also present in any subsequent acts of philanthropy, as the divine grace evidenced through their material success is now being used to advance a divine will. Such acts of charity bring the additional sensitivity to members that they are part of an ‘elect’, for in the act of ‘blessing’ others they acquire the conviction that they are themselves ‘blessed’.

A perturbing dilemma arises when viewing this perceived moral standing though that the Hillsong Church’s teachings as a whole conveniently fail to confront. That is, when does abundance simply become excess? How much should the adherent ‘leave on the edges’? For a body of teaching that places so great an emphasis on material blessing for both the self and as a vessel of
divine grace, there is a distinct lack of guidance as to exactly how these ‘blessings’ should be made manifest. The corollary of this is that if bridging Jackson’s (1987) aforementioned dualistic divide is achieved through recognising material signs of spirit-given grace, and similarly the blessing of others is dependent on first experiencing material abundance for oneself, how do the faithful discern between what is a blessing for themselves to enjoy, relative to a blessing that should be directed to others? Houston’s (2007) evasive response is that the devotee should bestow ‘Blessing where we believe God has called us to bless’.

The usual consequence and outcome of this is that adherents decide for themselves, and whilst in a liberal-democratic society we would certainly not deny citizens this right it may be grating to outside observers that Hillsong members have conveniently sidestepped a challenging reality of the modern condition. Absolving the responsibility of extending charity by making it dependent upon ‘hearing the call of God’ opens up an ethical vacuum that Hillsong members may willingly shield themselves within, creating a mindset that for outsiders is patently difficult to observe and study, let alone attempt to analyse and negate through reasoned argument.

Any felt moral quandary for cognizant Hillsong members can be partially resolved, though certainly not in a less unnerving sense, by the Church’s directive to orient blessings for others through the ‘cause of the King’
(Houston, 2008, p.38). It is here that we see the real nature of the welfare and ‘blessings’ of the Hillsong Church. Simons (2005, p.45) pithily summarises this mindset; ‘If you believe that the only true welfare comes from God, how can you draw boundaries between ‘welfare work’ and the work of bringing people to Jesus?’ Hence for Houston (1999b, p.58) ‘this is WHY we need to prosper [financially], so we can invest in preaching the Gospel and fulfil our God-given mandate to reach and influence the world’. This is not mere grandiose rhetoric. Rather, Hillsong’s overwhelming drive to evangelise first, and provide charity second, is reflected in the ‘…piffling sums [dedicated to charitable causes and social welfare] compared to the amounts that are going to the expansion of the church itself, and on its own programs’ (Simons, 2005, p.44). Above all else, Hillsong members are deemed to be ‘blessed’ so that they may attract ‘seekers’. Consequently the act and call to be ‘blessed to be a blessing’ is made manifest by many Hillsong members solely through total commitment (see Chapter Two), monetary contribution, voluntary labour, as well as affective (see Chapter Four) contribution to the Church. It is the monetary element to modern evangelisation to which we now turn.

**Funding ‘The Great Commission’ and the Fetishisation of Growth**

The previous two chapters have gone some way towards highlighting the scale and breadth of Hillsong’s reach into the life of its adherents, as will the next
chapter on affective labour. Ultimately though, whether motivated by heartfelt intention or ulterior purpose, all operations within Australia’s largest megachurch are driven by The Great Commission, the biblical call to evangelise to the ‘unsaved’. Hillsong’s no-nonsense approach to this decree manifests itself in a ‘seeker-friendly’ style of evangelism, one that emphasises wellbeing, personal development and positive emotional engagement over impassioned, fear-inducing ‘fire and brimstone’ strategies (Lohrey, 2006, p.15-29). Sustaining this consumer market-based method of evangelism requires a large and consistent source of revenue willingly drawn from Hillsong members. This is achieved by stoking members’ desire to evangelise, and subsequently funnelling this desire through a framework that legitimates and satisfies this mission via the continual pooling of resources (advocated explicitly by Houston, 2008, p.51), so that their collective duty can be conducted on a large scale through the operations of the Church. Combined with their desire to evangelise are promises of reciprocity to monetary contribution and teachings that effectively link Church growth to divine grace.

Prosperity Theology, with its focus on material ‘fruits’, is espoused to operate in two directions that cannot be achieved separately. As already discussed the positive confession expresses a belief that material rewards will come with good intentions and acts. The other necessary side to this, however, is that Hillsongers are urged to demonstrate their faith through the offering of ‘first fruits’ (Houston, 2008, p.155), and this is meant in a quite material, rather than spiritual, sense. When dogma-driven giving is of this purely material kind, the
result is that ‘giving to God normally means giving to his [earthly] representative’ (Gifford, 2004, p.174). This giving, however, is based on the dual understanding that it will be directed towards the overarching evangelical aims of the Church, along with the added motivation that they are contributing to and sustaining a project from which they derive various benefits.

The primary method of drawing funds from devotees is through the (tenuously) biblically-derived concept of ‘tithing’ whereby a proportion of the devotee’s income is donated to the Church. The proportion is usually ten percent of income (‘tithe’ literally means ‘a tenth’), before tax (confirmed by Brian Houston, 1999b, p.67). Simons (2007, p.38) points out that tithing is not compulsory and is not perceived as such by attendees, nor is any explicit coercion used to extract tithings. Rather, the act is construed as a test of faith. Levin (2007, pp.204-205) argues this rationale is often invoked through very specific scriptural reference which renders tithing as a divine test, one that Brian Houston (1999b, p.75) describes as ‘almost a dare…you are being challenged by God to see tithing as a faith adventure!’ Furthermore, Hillsong teachings attempt to shape the primary emotion that drives the bequeathing of tithes. By emphasising that ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (Roels, 1997, p.116)

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33 Simons (2007, p.44) states that according to Hillsong’s 2005 annual report (the last to be released publicly) tithing and other offerings contributed around $13.5 million to their total revenue of $43.3 million.

34 Thus it seems Hillsong members, by way of their ‘first fruits’, are subtly instructed to ‘render unto God’ before they ‘render unto Caesar’.

35 The specific Bible verses that justify and venerate tithing are drawn from the Book of Malachi. Very few other references are made to tithing in scripture, and Levin (2007, p.204) cannot help but note the bizarre occurrence of ‘An international revolution based on five verses of Malachi’, one of the shortest books of the Bible.
the Church wards against a begrudging mentality that may impact the likelihood of others offering tithes. Although the call to tithe is commonly portrayed in Hillsong teaching as a test of faith, specifically it is actually a challenge to test the reciprocity principle of Prosperity Theology. Brian Houston (1999b, p.68) is unabashed in his endorsement of tithing as a self-benefitting act; ‘the reason why I teach on tithing and putting the Kingdom first, is because I can testify personally that it works’. Rather than a cumbersome obligation, Houston (1999b, p.74) urges the faithful to ‘see it [tithing] as an opportunity’, one that, if forgone, will have the consequence that the devotee ‘will never know the fullness and abundance of life in Him.’

Other ‘tests of faith’ come in the form of collections of offerings, conducted regularly along with other spontaneous collections during certain occasions36, as well as the incessant spruiking of Christian ‘resources’. Due to Hillsong’s success in aligning the material with the spiritual there are no obvious qualms felt when in services the level of offerings bequeathed are equated by leaders to the ‘degree of one’s love for God’ (Simons, 2007, p.38). Similarly there

36 The collection of offerings has attracted some controversy. Hillsong has been accused of using collection buckets with holes in the bottom so that only notes, cheques, or credit card slips can be given (Simons, 2007, p.38, Lohrey, 2006, p.21). Coins simply fall through the bottom in what one imagines is an embarrassing affair and may result in a poor reflection in the eyes of others. During the week-long 2010 Hillsong Conference six collections of offerings were conducted, all preceded by either Brian Houston or one of the visiting preachers making a brief pitch on the benefits (read: reciprocity principle) of generosity. Amongst a crowd of 21,000 attendees (who have already paid somewhere between $180 to $300 for the privilege of attending the conference) it is clear that the monies collected just from offerings are likely to be quite staggering.
appears to be no awkwardness felt by Hillsong leaders or devotees in the hawking of ‘spiritual product’, though it is certainly jarring for other observers:

‘We finish for a second time, waiting for Brian’s praise. We have worked hard. Surely we are worthy. He recovers his breath and we all lean forward, eager for his words of wisdom … instead we are met with … “Ahhh … the DVD. I pray you buy this for your family. I pray that you buy this for your friends. Amen.” My mouth drops. He just “amen-ed” a DVD sale! This is a glorified infomercial! Brian apologises for going on about the DVD packs (I assume this isn’t the first time) but he’s just “excited because it’s so great!” The crowd claps again. DVD! CD! Featured extras! Yay!’

Alice Bell quoted in Lohrey (2006, p.21, no further citation provided)

Due to the effectiveness of Prosperity Theology in fostering the perception of reaching the spiritual realm through material donation or acquisition no restraint is necessary when it comes to providing Christian resources at a consumer market price. Rather, in the Prosperity Theology-based church, ‘even the most apparently commodititized of these transactions partakes of a sacralized quality in that it contributes to the global faith nexus of production, distribution, and associated missionary activities’ (Coleman, 2004, p.431). Hillsongers are thus not just buying a DVD with an inspirational message, or a CD with evocative music, they also gain the added feeling that they are
contributing to a cause greater than themselves, fomenting a curious form of self-actualisation through the market.

However, this method of self-actualisation requires that devotees have the means to actually participate in the consumer market. This essentially requires instilling a particular work ethic, which also sustains Hillsong’s chosen means of fulfilling The Great Commission. This work ethic is fomented and sustained by Hillsong through pragmatic teachings based on the idea of ‘what is in your hand?’ (Houston, 2008, pp.72-78). The essence of this teaching is that devotees should first recognise and utilise whatever productive capacities they immediately have at their disposal, rather than seeking work they may consider to be more fulfilling. The argument is made that whatever capacities the individual possesses, ‘those things have been given to you for a Kingdom purpose’ (Houston, 2008, p.73). Though the devotee should always seek improvement and fulfilment in their work life, they should always value first what is their ‘hand’ over what is in their ‘heart’ (Houston, 2008, p.76). This self-imposed diligence over romanticism creates a work ethic perfectly suited to the impersonal nature of the labour market in late capitalism and similarly creates an ethos suited towards sustaining the Church. Though this ethic is largely an endorsement of maintaining the status quo it does inject a sense of meaning and purpose that may have previously not existed within the devotee in regard to their labour. Thus this ethic, commonly found in Prosperity Theology-based teachings, can serve as a ‘distinct survival aid’ as it imbues the
devotee with an approach ‘not easily discouraged even by poor results’ (B. Martin, 1995, p.110).

**Affinity to the Unalterable Mechanism**

Towards the beginning of this chapter I argued that although Weber lamented that the individual is now bound to the material ‘mechanism’, such a perception is not held by the ideal Hillsonger. Instead, what this chapter has demonstrated through the ‘Hillsong Ethic’ is that material realities need not determine perception if one can invert what was previously the ‘unalterable’ to the now divinely ‘willed’ and ‘destined’. Hillsongers have ‘elected’ into the ‘spirit’ of capitalism, largely by way of the simultaneously consoling and empowering belief that it is a divinely ordered system within which the faithful can prosper.

Through Hillsongers’ declared goal ‘to fund and finance the salvation of the Earth’ (Houston, 1999b, p.11), tithing and other acts of giving directly to the Hillsong Church, aided by the Church’s very pragmatic work ethic, signify the very peak of their synthesis of materialism and idealism. This goal also highlights Hillsong leaders’ self-assigned role of mediator between the material and the spiritual, and illuminates Hillsongers’ affinity to the current economic order. This chapter has shown that in Hillsong teachings ‘bridging’ the
metaphysical/material divide in either direction necessarily manifest
themselves in some kind of tangible form. Material input in the form of
offerings is imbued as an affirmation of belief. At the same time, expectations
of reciprocity of material ‘rewards’, however they are recognised as such, are
construed as being divinely given, rather than simply being the unexpected
benefits of a life immersed in the sphere of capitalism. The ideal and the
material have thus become inseparable in the minds of devoted Hillsongers, an
inseparability they would elect to have no other way. This raises the worrying
spectre of obfuscated dispensationalism37, of a life lived in a manner that is
always, but not knowingly, self-interested and impervious to change, primarily
because other ways of living cannot be conceived once an individual submits to
the totalising teachings of a certain doctrine. For example, in Hillsong the act
of ‘giving’ treads a fine line of intentionality, where devotees engage and
sustain a type of doublethink that renders giving simultaneously “...’free’ and
‘interested’” (Coleman, 2004, p.432). With this duplicitous logic it is no
wonder then that the fruits of God seem to be found everywhere, and always in
abundance, yet are only bequeathed to the faithful.

37 This is in contrast to Hillsong’s more ‘self-aware’ type of dispensationalism, that being their
millenarian beliefs and their consequent desire to fulfill the Great Commission above all other
aims.
Chapter Four – The Affective Labour of the Hillsong Church

‘Why should the Devil have all the best tunes?’

General William Booth, Founder of the Salvation Army (quoted in Gariepy, 2009, p.247)

The preceding chapters have demonstrated Hillsong’s ability to provide a sense of order and stability to the daily lives of its constituents by operating as a consumer-oriented Total Institution, and through the ‘Hillsong Ethic’ also provide a set of teachings that perfectly aligns with the dominant order of capitalism. The act of consumption, today’s primary method of engaging in the vocation of the self, has for Hillsongers become imbued with an unusual depth of meaning and purpose through the rationale that they are ‘blessed to be a blessing’. This chapter will now discuss a third ‘product’ or means of development of the ‘self’ that Hillsong can satisfy, namely, the production and provision of affect.

Affect is characterised by a felt and desired, but not consciously thought, potential or capacity, a bodily (rather than rationally) sensed empowerment
operating in the present and oriented to the immediate future (Bachmann & Wittel, 2009, Massumi, 2002, pp.6-7). For an expression of this notion of affect as felt potential we can cite one Hillsong attendee who described being part of the Church as the feeling of ‘being on the cutting edge of something’ (Connell, 2005, p.322). The inability to articulate exactly what this ‘something’ represents, yet recognising the benefit one derives from it regardless, is characteristic of the embodied, rather than cognitive, quality of affect. Affect is thus more than the surface recognition of ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’ as drivers of action (Massumi, 2002, p.4). Rather, affect can be likened to a kind of physics of experience, the potential energy of the social world residing in ourselves, others, and the interplay between the two (Massumi, 2002, pp.13-14). Affect is also always relational. The potential and empowering aspect to affect is that we possess the dual capacity of affecting and being affected and in this constant interplay our felt potential is in flux, reacting and shifting according to changes in our capacities, and then again in our felt recognition of these changes (Hardt, 2007, p.ix-x). This, as Massumi (2002, p.4) puts it, constitutes the ‘doubling of affect’.

Let me assure the reader that the working concept of affect outlined above does have a critical purpose in this study. Two distinctions outlined above are particularly important to the following discussion. The first is that of the difference between affect and emotion. It would be relatively easy to discuss the fervour and ecstasy of a typical Hillsong gathering and to explain it as simply outward manifestations of the evangelical mindset, the joy one feels to
be part of an ‘elect’. This, however, would simply be to explain one latent indicator by way of another, rather than properly investigating the cause. In this case, this is the desire for, and subsequent creation, of meaning at a felt level, rather than through acts of rationalisation, as has been the case in the previous two chapters.

The second important distinction is the doubling and relational aspects of affect, the experiencing of experience and the interplay of affects. Many Hillsongers are drawn to, and sustained within the Church through a vaguely felt sense of potential, not just for themselves on a resolutely personal level, but of the potential for a superior kind of self-actualisation through the subsumption of the self within a cause greater than themselves. The previous chapter demonstrated that Hillsong satisfies this desire on the rational, cognitive level, through a doctrine that effectively conflates the material desires of the self with the greater cause of The Great Commission.

At the same time, however, these personal experiences, whether they be driven by pure self-interest or the desire for subsumption, feed back into Hillsong as a whole, both changing and contributing to the Church’s production of affect. Most marketing-driven organisations today rely on the production of affects, sometimes through their own production or by grafting their products to the affects produced by others, though more often it is a combination of the two (Lazzarato, 1996, pp.133-150). Hillsong, a Total Institution for the consumer
society, uses the latter method by harnessing the potential of affect within a congregation actively searching for meaning, and subsequently tying it to a collective and malleable form of affect. Thus in devotees’ collective yearning for meaning through subsumption of the self their presence and engagement aids one another in this personal quest through the mutual validation of felt experience and behaviour. This, in turn, serves as an underlying collective validation of their faith and beliefs. This constitutes a form of affective labour, a concept which Hillsong makes great use of in the production of meaning.

The Affective Labour of the Seeker Church

Affective labour is an element of ‘immaterial labour’, a concept developed to recognise that increasingly the ‘real’ substance of commodities is determined by its cultural content, that which is intangible but vital to the creation (and consequent continuous manipulation) of subjectivities (Hardt, 1999, Lazzarato, 1996). Affective labour is therefore acts undertaken towards the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities.

The beginnings of Hillsong’s use of affective labour are found in the spatial organization of the megachurch setting, which tends to resemble a mall,
corporate headquarters, and/or convention centre\textsuperscript{38} with its sparse and modular design (Goh, 2008, p.292) and various other idiosyncrasies typically equated with the corporate world (Connell, 2005, p.328). There is an explicit rationale for this design within the seeker-oriented megachurch, driven largely by ideals of modern marketing, and in particular the desire to foment a certain affective state in the ‘consumer’. Rather than immediate proselytizing to the ‘unsaved’, the aim is to first gain the attention, and then the respect of the seeker (Twitchell, 2004, loc.1590-1592, Einstein, 2008, loc.2585-2595), whilst also avoiding any kind of ‘cultural shock’ that may deter further inquiry (Ellingson, 2010, p.254). The megachurch can then move towards fostering a more emotional commitment and affective loyalty from the seeker. Hillsong achieves this through the use of contemporary music styles, dazzling theatre, and charismatic speakers, which are medium, at least as much as message, focused. Altogether this creates a complete performance and spectacle consciously designed to impress the seeker. Hillsong is quite explicit in this orientation:

‘What we wanna do is bring something excellent, and the whole aim is to make sure that our worship services are fantastic, and they’re ALL seeker-friendly... a lot of church settings have a 100 songs, a 100 songs! But it’s probably good to just cut it back down to five, or just six songs, so that your whole small team can

\textsuperscript{38} Evidence of the extent to which Hillsong has adopted this strategy of mimicking the commercial sphere can be found in the fact that their 3,500 seat ‘Hillsong Convention Centre’ at the ‘Hills’ campus is available for hire (Hillsong Church, 2010, <http://www.myhillsong.com/facilities>
learn those songs really, really, really well.... Now, remember we’re not singing to the congregation, we’re singing to people that are coming in... We’re trying to make sure that the next person that comes in, the next visitor that comes in, is seeing that what we’re doing we’re doing GREAT...’

(Hillsong Conference, 2010, Session 72)

This reflects the philosophy of the seeker church that ‘there will never be a dull moment … never a silent moment’ (Sargeant, 2000, p.31). This market-driven approach to evangelism (remember, Hillsongers fervently believe they are offering salvation, not just an enjoyable experience) is reflected in the overriding focus of using spectacle to cultivate a desired affective state, one that is conducive to greater commitment. The interwoven goals of evangelising and creating commitment through the affective labour of spectacle results in the production of a form of ‘edutainment’ (Ellingson, 2010, p.254), which can be very effective in capturing the loyalty of the seeker.

The Affective Spectacle
Hillsong’s use of affect reaches its zenith in aspects of performance during a service. Even the typical 3,500 capacity weekend services of Hillsong, let alone the 20,000 strong ‘rallies’ during annual conferences\textsuperscript{39}, are spectacular affairs, rivalling in sensory stimulation any other contemporary form of ‘entertainment’. Furthermore, although services give the appearance of informality, they are actually very tightly structured (Connell, 2005, p.322). Lighting and stage effects are abundant, and the live band leading worship are highly rehearsed and supported by a choir numbering at least two dozen, more during special events. Services begin with a series of worship songs, which are highly produced, ‘catchy’ numbers, contemporary pop/rock in style. The songs segue into each other, gradually stoking the excitement of the congregants.

Following twenty to thirty minutes of music a pastor will enter the stage, further stoking the excitement of the congregants with evocative invocations such as ‘Are you desperate for God to move in [sic] your life? In your family? In your Health? In your Finances?’ (Connell, 2005, p.322). Throughout these impassioned pleas the band continues to play in the background, increasing the intensity of the music as the pastor nears the climax of his/her speech in a method so seamless and synergistic one can only assume it has been planned.

\textsuperscript{39} For the reader curious about the scale of these rallies during conferences, one need only look to videos provided by the Hillsong Church itself, see <www.youtube.com/user/hillsongchurchsydney...ks> for self-proclaimed ‘highlights’ of the 2009 Annual Conference and also <www.youtube.com/user/hillsongchurchsydney...MNE>, highlights of the 2009 ‘Colour’ (Women’s) Conference. Not only do these videos demonstrate the breathtaking lengths the Church goes to in order to engender an affective response, but the tightly edited, effect-heavy and intentionally evocative videos also underscore the Church’s ultra-modern approach to evangelism through slick audio-visual production techniques, modern marketing and promotion strategies and overall consumer-driven focus.
down to the finest detail. Eventually the collective cacophony of the pastor and the music, together slowly building up the collective tension of the audience in a gradual and controlled method, reaches a crescendo of emotional outpouring. A state of ecstasy is observed in many congregants, which after the ‘crescendo’ is replaced by an austere calm, seemingly felt throughout the congregation, aided and tacitly encouraged by the now slowed tempo of the music.

In the convention centre-style setting and décor, dark colours and low lighting dominate, particularly during musical interludes, thus aiding the individual in the quest for transcendence to a spiritual plane (Goh, 2008, pp.293-294). During ‘worship’ the audience heaves, swells and sways rhythmically to the music, often with one or both hands in the air and eyes closed. Individual faces are not seen in the dim interior, aiding the impression of an individual relationship with God, yet the presence of others is crucial as each participant serves to mutually reinforce the validity of belief in the establishment of this personal connection. Thus the personal relationship with the divine, manifested on a felt level in a manner characteristic of Pentecostalism, is expressed in a unified way. Hence, in a method similar to that shown in the previous two chapters, but of a different form, Hillsong manages to concurrently promote individualism whilst subsuming the individual within the cause of the Church.
Modern commercial branding is often an attempt by marketers towards escaping the limiting corporeal bounds of their product by associating it with a greater ideal through ‘a colonization not of physical space but of mental space’ (Klein, 2000, p.66). This is a distinctly modern form of affective labour. Einstein (2008, loc.1765-1774) describes this targeting of ‘ideals’ as ‘psychographic segmentation’, referring to marketing adapted to the consumer and aimed directly at their drives for self-actualisation. The ‘branding’ process in megachurches is somewhat reversed. For Hillsong, the ultimate product on offer is meaning and salvation, and the aim is to attach this transcendent product to their also transcendent and immaterial ‘brand’, and ultimately to the physical church itself and the material products they produce, so that all aspects become synonymous with each other. As discussed in Chapter Two, the ‘New Voluntarism’ (Roof, 1990) of spirituality and faith has entailed that megachurches now compete in the secular sphere for the attention and loyalty of ‘consumers’, and consequently, as Twitchell (2004, loc.861) states, ‘you’d better make church compelling’. The growth of the ‘branded’ megachurch has made clear that the mere promise of salvation has become a hackneyed product in today’s consumer society. Consequently there is a growing recognition amongst purveyors and proselytizers of faith that they must adapt to this changing context if they wish to ‘save’ the ‘unsaved’.
One of the responses of Hillsong, and other megachurches, has been the attempt to bring greater ‘palpability’ to the spiritual and the divine through aspects of spatial logic, semiotics, and performativity used in liturgy. In Catholic and Orthodox traditions this has tended to be achieved through 1) rigid, elaborate, formalised liturgy 2) ornate, awe-inspiring architecture and 3) iconographic or heavily symbolic imagery (Goh, 2008). Hillsong eschews such iconography or morbid symbolism:


Trueheart here is specifically discussing an American megachurch, but the description is equally applicable to Hillsong. Essentially all characteristics of a ‘church’ that may be unappealing to the ‘seeker’ demographic are discarded. This, however, raises the dilemma of how they can make their faith ‘palpable’, outwardly manifested to reinforce the beliefs of the already inculcated whilst also serving as a kind of advertisement for the seeker.

Goh (2008) demonstrates that this is achieved through Hillsong’s constant reference to its own growth, in a manner similar to the ‘Growth Fetish’ of the
business sphere (Hamilton, 2003), and by then tying this growth to a divine will and grace that becomes inseparable from the physical church itself and its functioning. Hence, (in a manner similar to the synergy of ‘materialism’ and ‘idealism’, demonstrated in Chapter Three) for the faithful all material success is imbued with a sense of divine purpose. ‘Growth’ here is not meant in any spiritual or personal development sense (though if the devotee does agree with the premise then it may certainly contribute). Rather, it refers to distinctly ‘earthly’ elements such as the growth of the congregation or acquisition of new facilities, amongst other things:

‘1986 - First Year of Conference... 150 - Delegates in 1986... 261,250+ - Total Delegates Since 1995... 18,960+ - Decisions for Christ at Conference since 1999... 10,000+ - Number of Churches Represented at Conference since 1995... 671,210+ - Night Attendance since 1999... 4521 - Volunteers in 2009... THE BEST IS YET TO COME...’


Hillsong’s fetishisation of growth as a sign of divine grace renders the tangible qualities of the Church ‘an index of God’s tangible (if still invisible) presence’ (Goh, 2008, p.296). Also, in a manner analogous, but not as forthright, as the blatantly populist and nationalistic Prosperity Theeology-based ‘Word of Life’ movement in Sweden (Coleman, 1995), Hillsong attempts to make synonymous the values and purpose of the Church with the city of Sydney and
the nation as a whole. The Church is often evocatively and emotively paired with the city of Sydney or the nation, in particular via the use of imagery of iconic landmarks like the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge in Hillsong-branded publications. The intention is to embed the Church within the cultural landscape of the city (Goh, 2008, pp.301-302), further reflecting the tension Hillsong navigates between insularism and marketability.

Mobilising Affect through the Production of Enthusiasm and Ecstasy

An important element of Hillsong’s use of affective labour is the production of enthusiasm and spectacle. Combined with this is the ability to then mobilise the affective capacities of devotees in another form of the ‘doubling’ of affect. Bachmann and Wittel (2009) point out that a typical contrast has been made throughout history between enthusiasm and reason, but that the divide is disappearing in today’s media-saturated consumer society. Similarly, in Hillsong there is genuine reasoning behind devotees’ enthusiasm. As evidenced in the aforementioned quote from a Hillsong worship leader on being ‘seeker-friendly’, both leaders and adherents are acutely conscious of their overarching goal given by the Great Commission, and the fact that their success in this mission is determined largely by their ability to engage ‘seekers’. Thus with the mentality of always being ‘seeker-friendly’ Hillsongers attempt to outwardly display the worldly benefits of the Church to
others, to show that ‘it works’ (Hillsong Conference, 2010, Session 39). This is stressed to be a more effective form of evangelism than immediate proselytising. Furthermore, subtle judgments are made of those who do not contribute to the affective labour of Church, either by not contributing to the fervour and ecstasy of seeker-driven services, or by failing to act as a walking advertisement for the benefits of being ‘saved’ during their daily lives (Houston, 1999b, p.42).

Enthusiasm has to be generated, acted out, but also controlled (Bachmann & Wittel, 2009, p.90). Hillsong achieves this partially through fostering genuine affect, or alternatively through pressuring the production of more calculated affective labour of others. For example, there are the subtle judgments made by leaders mentioned above, but there are also the ‘contagious’ elements of affect (Bachmann & Wittel, 2009, p.92), the mutually perpetuated desires within individuals to participate in singing, dancing, joining hands, and so on. In addition to this, though, is affective labour driven by the compulsion to participate in this collective outpouring even if one has not been ‘infected’ by the enthusiasm. An example of this is the overwhelming pressure felt by one Hillsonger during one of his first services to raise his hand in unison with the congregation (Simons, 2007, p.4). It is quite understandable that for many attendees the conscious decision to not participate in these emotional crescendos is akin to denying the affective labour of those immediately surrounding the dissenter. This undermines their felt affect and by extension their feelings of capacity and potential, and on some level the ‘dissenter’ may
be aware of his/her impact on the affect of others and thus may feign the production of affect. Thus, through this socially pressured, etiquette-driven enthusiasm one can easily become implicated in the end product of the affective labour. The upshot is that the seeker cannot readily tell who is genuinely affect labouring and who is self-consciously feigning the production of affect.

As Hillsongers become more enthused they become more committed to the Church. This commitment to the ‘cause of the Kingdom’ (Houston, 2008, p.38) brings with it the joy of being part of an ‘elect’. Furthermore, as their membership of the ‘elect’ is ordered around basic millenarian and evangelical beliefs, it is always future oriented and thus (theoretically) perpetually sustainable. This commitment brings with it the willingness to concretely contribute to the ‘cause’, a readiness Hillsong fosters through the ethic of ‘using what is in your hand’, discussed in the previous chapter. Consequently this ethic is generative of both creativity and sheer doggedness which together are crucial to sustaining Hillsong’s large scale market-driven operations.

Bachmann and Wittel (2009) argue that this future-orientation of enthusiasm even brings with it the anticipation of future power and potential, and consequently makes this kind of affective labour to some extent self-fulfilling. When all functions of an institution are driven by a vaguely defined ‘end-time harvest’ (see Hillsong Vision Statement, Chapter One), the quality of affect as an intensely felt hope (Massumi, 2002, pp.2-9) becomes one that, in theory, Hillsong can sustain indefinitely.
Ontological Affinity

This chapter has gone beyond discussing management of the daily round of life found in the new style of Total Institution (Chapter Two), and the consoling and uplifting rationale for a life immersed in the consumer market (Chapter Three), to address a third project and affinity of the self with the Church, namely, the desire for affect. Modern marketing increasingly aims to transcend the constricting corporeality of a product by associating it with an ideal the consumer possesses, or, just as often, an ideal they aspire to possess. As such affective labour is not simply the manipulation of emotion, rather, through the production of ideal selves affective labour comes to produce subjectivities. This gives affect a distinctly ontological quality (Hardt, 1999, p.8). Recognition of this ontological quality of affect is present in the conscious, targeted use of affective labour, whereby ‘the product, ultimately, is us’ (Massumi, 2002, p.20). Hillsong, in its use of affective labour, goes further than just harnessing the desire for ‘reinvention’ as discussed in Chapter Two. Rather, the Church is harnessing and moulding the desire for desire itself, and furthermore rendering this form of longing synonymous with the Church itself.
Hillsong is adept at using affect to satisfy ‘an ever-present ontological crisis within consumers’ (Pybus, 2009, <www.politicsandculture.org...>). Through evocative spectacles serving as collective validations of Hillsongers’ shared beliefs, the Church is incredibly effective in generating ‘loyalty beyond reason’ (Pybus, 2009, <www.politicsandculture.org...>). This type of loyalty is a primary goal of affective labour, characterised by an intensely felt sense of inseparability between the subject and the object of consumption. In this case, this is the Church, the medium through which devotees direct their new found ‘ideals’ and realise their accompanying benefits (membership of the ‘elect’) and obligations (evangelism). Thus for the committed Hillsonger, the desire for the felt potentialising and capacity enlargement of the self found in affect becomes oriented through the ‘cause’ of the Church, leading to an affinity between the Church and self that is not just constitutive of lifestyle, or a rationale for living, but of a more embodied, felt, experience. The greater the realisation of this affinity within devotees, the greater their commitment. This in turn leads to their own production of affective labour oriented to the purposes of the Church, resulting in a cyclical feedback of affective labour that other capitalist and religious organisations would be right to envy.
Chapter Five – Conclusion: Inverting the Void

‘I am always most religious upon a sunshiny day.’

Lord Byron, quoted in Sherrin (ed.), 2005, p.272

The Three Life Projects

This study has focused on the role and impact of the Hillsong Church in the life and mindset of the committed adherent. It has contributed particularly to an understanding of the Church’s ability to aid in the realisation of several projects of the self, which the Church has concurrently been able to direct through its own ends. This concluding chapter will tie together these different projects, showing how the creation of multiple affinities between the self and the Church coalesce into the formation of identities, perceived to be fully autonomous, yet also subsumed within a greater, self-actualising purpose. In each frame of analysis applied to the Church (the Institution, the Ethic, and the Affective) we can observe an inversion of a void, whereby what was once
characterised by shallowness and self-interest is now imbued with meaning and nobility.

Chapter Two demonstrated how Hillsong has filled a civic void, replacing institutions of old and functioning as a tightly-bonded community, one so encompassing of the individual that any previously felt sense of social disconnection all but disappears. Here I showed how Goffman’s concept of the Total Institution can be adapted to aid in the analysis of Hillsong, as a way of grasping the void filled by the church in terms of institutional life. In time, the daily round of life becomes practically inseparable from the functional operations of the Church.

Chapter Three drew upon a single lament each from Weber and Marx. For Weber it was the ‘unalterable mechanism’ of the economic sphere, which inescapably determines the lives of those trapped within it. Marx’s lament, on the other hand, was that religion was merely a consoling coping mechanism, with faith being ‘the sigh of a heartless creature’. Alternatively, I argued that Hillsong’s repositioning of perspective through the embrace of market friendly dogma represents, for many, a convincing resolution of any tension between material and ideal forces. The perspective of the Hillsonger is that the ‘unalterable mechanism’ is there for a reason, a divinely willed purpose, and they should therefore aim to prosper within this dominant order. This affinity to capitalism inverts the void of nihilism so often felt in the endless pursuit of
personal perfection in the consumer market, and also imbues the daily drudgery of work with a greater sense of purpose.

Chapter Four explored an affinity that differed from the rational bent of the previous two chapters by looking at the Church and its devotees’ collective production of affect. The production of subjectivities irrevocably tied to the Church is evidence of an inverting of the void of fleeting, unsatisfying forms of affect given by the marketing-driven consumer society. Ultimately, the Hillsong Church foments multiple affinities between the self and the Church; the ordering of daily life and practice within the overarching purpose of the Church; a rationale for flourishing within the dominant economic order; and finally a felt sense of hope and potential that over time becomes inseparable from the Church.

The end product of these multiple affinities is a sense of identity fulfilled on several different fronts. Clive Hamilton (2008, loc.465-512), drawing upon and distilling the work of social psychologist Martin Seligman (2002) on ‘happiness’, argues that there are three general approaches to wellbeing – the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life. The ‘pleasant’ life is characterised by the quest for positive affect, in essence the maximisation of embodied ‘highs’. The ‘good’ life is focused on the development of capacities, of reaching one’s potential in a very practical sense. The ‘meaningful’ life is described as accessing a sense of permeability between the self and other,
through the conscious commitment of the self to a greater cause. Though one can shift between different ‘lifes’, generally speaking in daily practice they tend to be mutually exclusive. However, by now it should be clear that this study has shown that Hillsong is able to satisfy all three life projects, often at the same time. The production of affect serves the ‘pleasant’ life of the devotee, but also, because their affective labour is a conscious effort towards their seeker-friendly form of evangelism, renders affective labour also a ‘meaningful’ activity, as their outwardly manifested affect aims to induce the ‘salvation’ of others. Hillsong’s modes of affective expression are so prevalent, that were it not for the espoused presence of the divine, the associated behaviours would be perceived by Hillsongers themselves to be acts of pure hedonism. Similarly, the Total Institution of Hillsong provides an element of affect (the ‘pleasant’ life) through the felt potential of personal ‘reinvention’, whilst also satisfying elements of the ‘good’ life through the development of practices. The Total Institution of Hillsong satisfies the ‘meaningful’ life to some degree, by directing all behaviour and practice through the noble, overarching aim of the Church. Lastly, the ‘Hillsong Ethic’ serves the ‘pleasant’ life by justifying the enjoyment of material acquisitions, elevates the ‘good’ life through a pragmatic work ethic, and renders consumption and work in the sphere of capitalism ‘meaningful’ through the teaching that devotees are ‘blessed to be a blessing’.
Further Research

So well oiled is the Hillsong machine that, like most multi-million dollar enterprises, empirical research on the inner workings of the organisation is fraught with ethical and practical difficulties. Whilst greater empirical insight into the Hillsong Church would certainly be welcome, this study has endeavoured to show another method of approach to analysis of the Hillsong phenomena. Through a more theoretical investigation of the Church’s production of multiple affinities, this study has demonstrated the means through which consoling, rationalising, and empowering dogma, combined with consumer-friendly practices, has fomented the creation of ‘selves’ perfectly aligned with overarching structural conditions.

One fertile avenue for further research would give greater focus to the attempt to alleviate the modern crises of the self through the conflation of the spheres of the sacred, of commerce, and identity, raising questions of whether, through a form of self-deception, we may render self-interest as meaningful and of benefit to wider society. Such research would further the analysis of how the phenomenon of Hillsong is positioned in the context of contemporary life. Kant (2009, pp.1-11) challenged us to exercise our reason, arguing that this was the true measure of freedom. Nietzsche (Ansell Pearson, 2005, pp.82-93) proclaimed the ‘death of God’, and dares us to take on the task of creating our values (of revaluing values), rather than merely inheriting determined notions.
of the ‘right’ and the ‘good’. Erich Fromm (2009) observed our failure to embrace these hard won rights and responsibilities, arguing that many groups and societies are characterised by a ‘fear of freedom’. In light of these conceptions of the responsibilities of identity in modernity, I shall give the final word to Brian Houston (2003):

‘Human nature tends to “spin” things… even in scriptures, a person who sees something one way, will spin the scripture so it looks right to the way they see things… there’s three sides to every story, your side, my side, and the TRUTH…or the way we see it, the way others see it, and the way God sees it…’

These statements pierce the very heart of what makes the Hillsong Church a fascinating, if unnerving, phenomenon. The Church’s ability to denigrate ‘spin’, whilst propagating unorthodox interpretation of scriptures, which are tied to the Truth of divine will, appears to be crucial to its success as a rationale for life, which does not create for its adherents an unbearable cognitive dissonance. The question of whether we have an affinity to ‘Spin’ or ‘Truth’ is a duty for the self in modernity, and it is a question the Hillsong Church goes to great lengths to be seen to address. This thesis goes some way in analysing how it is that the Church absolves its devotees from this dilemma, enabling them to proclaim access to ‘Truth’ through the particular ways – institutional, ethical, and affective – that it claims to free them from ‘Spin’.
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40 Due to the difficulties associated with writing on phenomena previously unseen in Australia this study has had to draw upon many texts in which difficulties were faced in acquiring hard copy versions. As a result the author drew upon more readily accessible versions of these texts, namely electronic versions of texts read on the Amazon Kindle device. These electronic texts are identical in content to their hard copy versions, however, instead of page numbers these texts utilise ‘location numbers’, with a location number generally dedicated to each sentence of the text. This allows for pinpoint referencing, but requires slightly different methods of citation. After consultation with Dr Stephen Milnes from the Academic Skills and Learning Centre at the ANU it was agreed the referencing methods used in this study for these texts are acceptable, and all electronic texts used are duly acknowledged in this bibliography.


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