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Article

# Sincere Performance in Pentecostal Megachurch Music

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**Abstract:** Drawing on the work of Webb Keane and Joel Robbins in the anthropology of Christianity, furnished with the influential work of Charles Hirschkind in the anthropology of Islam, and the ethnographic studies of Tom Wagner and Mark Jennings on Pentecostal worship music, this article critically examines ideas of sincerity in the musical practices of Pentecostal megachurches. Making use of ethnographic data from research on congregational music in South Africa, including interviews with a variety of Pentecostal musicians, this article argues that the question of Protestant sincerity, understood following Keane as emphasizing individual moral autonomy and suspicion of external material religious forms for expressing one's inner state, is particularly acute in the case of the Hillsong megachurch. Employing the full array of spectacular possibilities made available by the contemporary culture industry, Hillsong churches centralize cultural production and standardize musical performance whilst simultaneously emphasizing individual religious experience. It is argued that Pentecostal megachurches seek to realize a form of sincere mimicry grounded in learned and embodied practices.

**Keywords:** Hillsong; megachurch; Pentecostalism; South Africa; worship music

## 1. Introduction

Music is a key medium through which Pentecostalism has grown; Pentecostal worship music circulates in physical and digital formats through formal and informal networks, laying down the cultural and theological infrastructure for new churches and new individual experiences. Drawing on ethnographic research on music in broadly evangelical churches in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2014 and 2015, this article focuses on the particular tension that exists between the intensely subjective nature of Pentecostal experience and the increasingly standardized nature of some of the Pentecostal worship music and worship services designed to facilitate these personal Pentecostal experiences. In studying this tension between subjective religious experiences and standardized musical practices in Pentecostal megachurches, this article makes particular use of the work of Webb Keane and Joel Robbins in the anthropology of Christianity, specifically, Keane's (2007) work on the importance of sincerity in Protestant practice, which he argues emphasizes individual moral autonomy, over and above reference or recourse to external material religious forms, to understand and express one's inner state. Restated by Robbins (2012), the sincere Protestant speaker should not become caught up in politeness, flattery, deference to cultural standards, or mimicry of someone else's beliefs.

In focusing on sincerity, as conceptualized within the anthropology of Christianity, this article refines an ongoing discussion that has predominantly used the language of "authenticity", such as in Adnams' (2013) study of authentic congregational singing. We can think of sincerity as a particular form of authenticity that is prominent, but not exclusive, within modern forms of religiosity in which the autonomous individual subject is conspicuous. Sincerity is further specifiable insofar as the focus is on individual communicative action; the individual speaking subject is the key concern here,

rather than certain aspects of culture which can be collectively judged to be authentic or not, in keeping with generic norms, which has been the focus of work on authenticity in the study of popular culture (Moore 2002; Abraham 2017, pp. 37–60). A good illustration comes from the discussion of the evangelical vernacular called “Christianese” by Berggren (2009, p. 196), an evangelical pastor, and former vocalist in the “Spirit-filled hardcore” punk band Strongarm. Berggren describes Christianese as an example of evangelicals being “sincere without being authentic”. When evangelical youth, in particular, use words like “blessed”, they are expressing their own beliefs, hence their sincerity, but they are expressing themselves in a theological language circulating within their particular subculture that is not comprehensible within broader secular or apatheistic youth culture, and not appreciable as a sincere individual belief, because of the conception of evangelicalism as inherited groupthink, hence, their lack of authenticity.

The case study for exploring the question of sincerity in Pentecostal worship music is Hillsong, an Australian-led network of megachurches well known among evangelicals for their well-produced pop-rock worship music, and the spectacular nature of their youth-focused church services, where the full array of technical possibilities made available by the contemporary culture industry are utilized to facilitate the ecstatic personal experiences of the awareness of God foundational to Pentecostal belief and practice.

Hillsong began in suburban Sydney in 1983 as Hills Christian Life Centre, before expanding around the world, largely on the back of its successful brand of worship music (Riches and Wagner 2017). Its network of churches now includes several “campuses” in Cape Town, centered on the Century City campus: a “megachurch” attracting several thousand worshippers to its multiple Sunday services, housed in what was once Africa’s largest nightclub. Hillsong is very much a “growth church” (Maddox 2012), with a clear corporate-style vision of expansion (Sanders 2016), but since Pentecostals are promiscuous worshippers, especially in the African context this article is focused on, conventional measures of the size of a Hillsong congregation are not necessarily accurate, as Hillsong may not be the primary denominational affiliation of many, or even most, who attend a given service.

As Martí’s (2017) analysis explains, Hillsong is “part of an ongoing elaboration of evangelicalism” in multiple ways, beginning with the blurring of the boundaries around “evangelicalism” and “Pentecostalism”, in part because of the circulation of Pentecostal worship music. Hillsong represents, above all, a particular kind of worship, which is, at once, highly subjective and highly standardized. The services certainly seek to create and inspire born-again evangelical Christians, Spirit-filled individuals living Godly lives, and in order to do this, the church engages with and even seeks to exceed the secular culture industry for “excellence” in pop culture production. The music-focused worship services cannot necessarily be divorced from the other aspects of the Hillsong phenomenon, as Martí outlines them, for Hillsong is also a “worldwide commercial enterprise”, a “philosophy of ministry”, a particular model of networked religious organization, and a style of spirituality, underlabeled by a prosperity theology, emphasizing personal success, in which “spiritual empowerment overcomes just about anything” (ibid., p. 379).

The original research data this article draws upon emerges from interviews and ethnographic observations with musicians from broadly evangelical and largely Pentecostal churches in Cape Town, South Africa, and its hinterland, known as the Cape Winelands. This data was obtained on two ethnographic research visits in the summer and autumn of 2014, and the autumn and winter of 2015. This article is also furnished with data from interviews with evangelical musicians in Australia and the United Kingdom in 2010. All research participants are referred to by pseudonyms, even though this has never been the desire of any of the dozens of Christian musicians I have interviewed (Abraham 2017, p. 11).

This article will begin with an overview of theories of Protestant sincerity and language ideology, also recognizing the imprecise fit between theories of speech and song. This article will then begin to apply these theories to the megachurch as a space, making use of a number of critical empirical studies of Hillsong and proximate churches. The central case study of the standardization of worship

music within megachurches follows, focusing on observations of Hillsong's Cape Town campus and making use of the prior studies of Hillsong by Tom Wagner. It will then be argued, through reference to the work of Charles Hirschkind in the anthropology of Islam, that a particular form of embodied practice that we can think of as sincere mimicry is developed in Pentecostal megachurches, a practice which, in the final substantive section, will be shown to be unsatisfactory from the perspective of some Pentecostal musicians.

## 2. Pentecostalism and Protestant Sincerity

In setting out his basic argument around Protestant language ideology and the concomitant importance of individual sincerity in Protestantism, Keane (2007) suggests that there is a shared Protestant and (nominally secular) modern approach to the construction of human subjectivity that emphasizes individual moral autonomy and a conspicuous rejection of reliance upon reference or recourse to material forms to express subjective moral states. The sincere religious subject experiences a basic tension, therefore, around immaterial beliefs designed to transcend worldly existence, which can only be expressed in a worldly, material form (ibid., pp. 197–98; Wagner 2017b, p. 90). Keane's specific case study is Dutch Calvinist missionary Christianity in Indonesia, particularly the interactions between European missionary ideology and local culture, and he acknowledges that "some of the most popular forms of evangelical Christianity today, such as Pentecostalism, various televangelisms, and the prosperity gospel, may be seen in part as reactions against earlier more austere doctrines" (ibid., p. 200). And yet, the general outline of Keane's arguments apply, and have been applied, to Protestantism in general, as well as religion in modernity in general.

The ideal of a religious subject whose outward character reflects inward conviction is a familiar and foundational presence, as is scrutiny and suspicion around the question of this sincerity (ibid., p. 201). For example, although he does not cite Keane's study, the same dynamic around the ideology of personal sincerity is evident in Martí's (2018, pp. 21–22) analysis of Pentecostal worship as personally "strategic":

Unlike Lourdes, France (a destination for pilgrims founded on apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary), Pentecostal worship authorizes a spiritually dynamic ritual space defined as an assembly of similarly motivated people. Believers take personal responsibility in a gathered, public space to orient their private selves as vessels prepared for the filling of the Spirit. Pentecostal worship moves toward a goal and takes on the quality of an achievement.

Martí acknowledges the possibility that this agentic approach is not uniquely Pentecostal, but argues that what is particularly Pentecostal is, upon my reading of his analysis in light of Keane's work, the tension between the legitimate reliance upon the "promise" of personal ecstatic experience through worship, and the problematic assumption or certainty of such an experience.

Similar concerns can be located in Robbins' (2012, p. 18) analysis and application of Keane's study. He suggests Pentecostal practice differs from the Calvinism Keane is concerned with, insofar as:

On the one hand, it is not difficult to find Pentecostals expressing the need for subjects to speak sincerely. The value they place on spontaneous, heartfelt expression as the only kind worth producing attests to this. Yet on the other hand, their claims that the Holy Spirit sometimes speaks through them in tongues, prophecy, and other forms of charismatic expression also indicate an openness to divine immanence and a willingness to let it override the highly controlled verbal production of the sincere speaker.

What is significant in Robbins' comparison is that in these second kinds of practices, the Pentecostal "openness to divine immanence", spontaneity, and subjective expression are still vital concerns, as in Martí's (2018) assessment of Pentecostal practice. We will see that standardizing of Pentecostal expression through highly technically demanding and regimented worship services, and even a recognition of the foundational "instrumental" or "catalytic" nature of Pentecostal worship music

(Jennings 2014, p. 25; Wagner 2017b, p. 90), aimed at producing religious affect in a reasonably reliable manner, runs the risk of undermining sincere experience and expression.

If we look more carefully at the question of sincerity in modern religious music, compared with sincerity in modern religious speech, one can identify quite similar arguments even in studies of secular music, and secular creative self-expression more generally, passed down through the generations since the Romantic era. Taylor's (1989, 2007) most significant volumes on modern subjectivity touch upon the similarities and differences in these fields at various points, for example. The value of sincerity in secular creative self-expression is often articulated through the rhetoric of "authenticity", most recognizably expressed in some variant of the Romantic formula of the politically, commercially, and otherwise institutionally unencumbered artist expressing their own unmediated subjective truth (Moore 2002). This article treats music, specifically contemporary congregational song, as akin to speech, but recognizes a shift in communication ideology. Song may well be a relative of speech, but as Moore (2015, pp. 184–85) observes, "even if speech were direct, song would not be. Song, per se, requires interpretation to a far greater extent than mere speech, for song is not the first choice for communication, and sung words are moreover accompanied by music that also requires interpretation". The imprecision of song underlies Jennings' (2008) observation that within a Pentecostal church context, if charismatic musical experience is not going to become untethered from Christian tradition and slip into subjective experiences of transcendence, or undifferentiable Durkheimian effervescence, then songs require the interpretation provided by the framework of orthodoxy in a sermon and, more broadly I think, the framework of orthopraxy in quotidian congregational life.

In the missionary context that Keane is concerned with, scrutiny over the sincerity of local believers is particularly intense, given the fear that the colonized and evangelized people are merely engaging in "mimicry".<sup>1</sup> "The nature of iterability means one can never be sure", Keane (2007, p. 288) argues, as even "the most earnest deeds and protestations of faith are in themselves but acting, mere words". On the other hand, even mere words, "uttered by rote" or in a "talismanic" manner may come to be understood and believed by individuals (ibid.). Such a discourse of religious sincerity emphasizes the importance of one's thoughts and beliefs, with a distinct focus on ideas as propositions, and a focus on internal mental states over and above material conditions or acts (ibid., p. 210). This runs counter to a certain trend in the contemporary study of religion that seeks to move the focus away from sets of propositions intellectually adhered to by nominally autonomous subjects, in no small part because such ideas of religion are so conspicuously Protestant.

In the Pentecostal context this article is concerned with, this idea of the autonomous, believing individual is of central importance; it is the foundation for the very proposition-based and experiential evangelicalism integral to Pentecostal worship and daily living. The importance of sincere beliefs as demonstrably free from any coercion, or dishonesty, or even well-meaning mimicry, is, therefore, foundational as well, since sincere words cannot be mere "quotation" or "parroted the words of someone else" (ibid., p. 211). Agreement is not a problem, of course, nor even repetition, which is perhaps one clear point of departure between Protestant and Romantic sensibilities. Two individuals thinking alike, experiencing the same objective truths, can say the same things. The problem is if I am speaking words I do not subjectively believe to be true—and, vital in Pentecostalism, *experience* to be true—and thereby misrepresent myself, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

At the heart of this ideology of sincerity is a basic fear of the deceitfulness of words and actions, which can conceal as well as reveal one's true moral state (ibid., pp. 210–11). Counterintuitive as it may seem in contexts in which conservative Christianity is analogous with good mannered social conventionality, or cheerfulness and self-restraint, politeness is the very antithesis of Protestant

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<sup>1</sup> There is a broader debate beyond the scope of this article, challengingly articulated by Robbins (2003), around the tendency towards "continuity thinking" in the study of Christian communities in colonial and post-colonial contexts, not least in South Africa, favouring a political reading of conversion as an act of what Keane (2007, p. 288) calls, after Homi Bhabha, "sly civility".

sincerity.<sup>2</sup> In Robbins' (2012, p. 16) analysis of Keane's study, Protestant language ideology amounts to a "moral demand" to speak always and only honestly about one's beliefs, and to pay a concomitant lack of concern to conventions of decorative speech. There is something insurgent about this approach to language that looks down upon the idea of flowery language or flattery. It finds a parallel in Barr's (1977) observation of evangelicalism's self-belief in the inherent scandal of its message and that a sinful society should always find gospel values uncomfortable. As Robbins' (2012, p. 16) interprets Keane's account, "Protestant language ideology strongly promotes the need for people to emancipate themselves from the snares of the material and social worlds that surround them in order to realize true Christian personhood and express it through sincere speech".

The challenge for the youth-focused Pentecostal music ministry this article is focused on is that the possibility of attracting and engaging with contemporary audiences rests upon adherence to the norms of contemporary creative self-expression. This has been foundational to the development of contemporary evangelicalism, in particular (Bergler 2012), and is a notable feature of church life more broadly in secularizing societies in which cultural value is principally determined in secular spheres which churches must then adopt or accommodate (Ostwalt 2012). Even in the most "seeker-sensitive" church, this still requires honesty about a church's basic beliefs and practices, and in the case of Hillsong, every service features the opportunity for non-Christians—or, strictly speaking, non-evangelical Christians—to identify themselves and begin the process of conversion. But, honesty and outreach are not coterminous with the kind of direct speech theorized above. A good assessment of this comes from Niz, a South African Hillsong vocalist with experience of hardcore and heavy metal performance as well, who explained that people who enjoy a musician's performance grant them "permission to speak into their lives", but that such permission is predicated on being "good at your craft". The challenge in this approach to communication within Pentecostal music and related forms of contemporary, often youth-focused ministry, is that the kind of sincerity that Keane presents as fundamental to Protestant belief and identity is undermined as "people will find themselves captured by these material forms—the sounds, routines and conventions of speech—and will thus fall short of speaking sincerely" (Robbins 2012, p. 16).

The source of insincerity in the Protestant context is material culture external to the individual, which, giving direction to the individual, undermines the possibility of authentic speech, which must "originate within the speaker" (Keane 2007, p. 187). Hence, the thin line in Keane's Indonesian context between religious practices conceived of as merely ritualized—such as an externally-imposed liturgy, or a creedal recitation, or the routinization of Islamic prayer—and a physical manifestation of idolatrous practice, such as an indigenous fetish object. And, hence the problem in this article's cultural context for evangelical musicians, who are obliged to precisely replicate a worship song during a religious service with as much technical proficiency as possible. It is not that replication or repetition itself is necessarily problematic, so long as what is being reproduced has first been subjectively assimilated such that its repetition is a true reflection of one's internal state. In the language of purely secular music performance, this might be thought of as the boundary between the "cover band", producing their own subjectively refashioned versions of someone else's song, and a "tribute band", attempting a "faithful reproduction in order to recover the reality of originary performances" (Moore 2002, p. 217).

This article therefore focuses in on the worship music produced but also performed by Hillsong's megachurches, recognizing that there are certain challenges around sincere performance that are particular to the way in which the music is reproduced within Hillsong's own services, rather than in the countless other churches that make use of the music in different ways, from pre-recorded CDs and MP3s, to simplified, solo acoustic guitar-led performances. If a song is sufficiently demanding technically, then one's concentration and emotional energy are focused on the technical replication

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<sup>2</sup> Think, for example, of the comical cheerfulness of Ned Flanders from *The Simpsons*, who has become "cultural shorthand for 'evangelical stereotype'" (Feltmate 2013, p. 223).

of the sound, either through intense concentration, technical direction, or repetitive practice and performance, such that it undermines the possibility for the replication of the emotions that ought to accompany the sound. Evans' (2015, p. 183) description of the Hillsong sound gives an indication of the challenges that its reproduction poses for church musicians:

Hillsong releases tightly produced, polished albums that are more reminiscent of the brightness and perfection often associated with Nashville production than rock and pop from Australia. Live congregational albums are meticulously overdubbed to create perfect performance and arrangement. Part of the "victorious" nature of the sound can be attributed to its density of texture. Congregational albums feature standard pop instrumentation, but often with multiple keyboard players, multiple guitarists, and a brass section. Lead vocalists are backed by a team of backing vocalists as well as a full choir. As a result, Hillsong music is marked by a "wall of sound" aesthetic, particularly in the climactic sections, which listeners find rousing and anthemic.

We will see that the challenge of attempting to reproduce this sound live, service after service, to trigger particular effects in the congregation, places worshippers and worship musicians alike squarely within the Protestant problematic of sincere speech and polite accommodation.

### 3. Pentecostal Megachurches as Sincere Spaces

A service at Hillsong church's Century City campus in the northern suburbs of Cape Town may, at first, seem like a chaotic or even profane event. Secular pop music blasts from the sound system before the service begins, and dozens of excited adolescents rush to the front of the stage as soon as the light show begins, welcoming the worship band, which features around a dozen musicians. As the music begins, they imitate the onstage action; not merely clapping and singing along to lyrics of the Hillsong worship songs they have learned by heart, but dancing and jumping in unison with church musicians who approximate pop stars in their dress, and the devotion they can attract from young congregants.

Once the musical worship is over, prayers have been offered, the collection has been taken, and the Stormers rugby team has been celebrated or commiserated, what comes next? An approximation of a sermon, most likely, but one can never be certain if a different kind of religious "edutainment" will be on offer in Hillsong's sermon space instead (Wade 2016, p. 670). Perhaps the sermon will be a pre-recorded video from Sydney, with Hillsong's co-senior pastor Brian Houston dispensing sensible financial advice. Perhaps a visiting faith healer will make an appearance. Perhaps the sermon will be an amusing homily on the importance of giving Jesus "refrigerator privileges" in your life. Perhaps a young rapper in a silver suit will appear, shrouded in a halo of artificial fog, to promote an upcoming youth conference. And, perhaps the sermon will be replaced altogether by a television-chat-show-style panel, featuring minor local celebrities sitting on a couch and dispensing relationship advice, one example of Hillsong's desire to "mirror the surrounding media-savvy popular culture" in their church services (Klaver 2015b, p. 423).<sup>3</sup> Hillsong services may seem chaotic, or at least unpredictable, but they are carefully considered and meticulously planned events, relying upon multiple layers of standardization and replication of both sacred and secular tropes.

Perhaps the most commented upon feature of Hillsong churches' youth-focused services and ministries the world over is their replication of contemporary musical, fashion, and design aesthetics. In Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, for example, Hillsong is presented as a "hipster megachurch" courting secular pop stars (White 2017). The typical Hillsong sound, as Evans (2015) explained, is highly

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<sup>3</sup> This is a sample from services witnessed in 2014 and 2015. The Century City campus hosts five services on Sundays, and while each welcomes the core Hillsong demographic of young people and young families in particular, including people bused in from impoverished townships, each service is branded slightly differently. The 08:30 service is orientated towards more affluent adults who might then "head to one of our beautiful city's brunch spots with friends", while the evening services focus on youth, especially the 17:00 "Power Hour" service, implicitly aimed at exhausting children through song and dance (Hillsong South Africa 2018).

produced, studio-reliant, and guitar-driven pop-rock. It closely resembles the sumptuous and accessible sounds of bands such as Coldplay. The church's related public style is a familiar "hipster" aesthetic distanced from its subcultural origins, and recognizable in global youth fashion, built around skinny jeans and skate shoes.<sup>4</sup> We can surely extend Klaver's (Klaver 2015a, pp. 155–56) argument that successful Pentecostal pastors are "performers who embody their message and posit a resemblance between message content and material body image" to worship leaders and worship musicians as well. Hillsong co-senior pastor Brian Houston may be well known among Pentecostals for his prosperity preaching and ecclesial entrepreneurship, but it is his son, Joel Houston, the "face" of Hillsong's worship music, whose Instagramable lifestyle sets the tone for the Hillsong brand around the world by modelling (quite literally) an image of what Klaver calls a "divinely touched human body" (ibid.).

The church's aesthetic focus is often articulated (sometimes defensively) within the church's discourse of "excellence" (Rocha 2017, p. 134), a belief that churches can and must compete with secular institutions in the cultural sphere. This can be seen as an extension of a belief foundational to youth ministry as it developed in the post-WII era of global western affluence and secularization, in which churches came to compete with secular youth culture for young people's attention and commitment (Bergler 2012). Within the church services themselves, Hillsong worship teams the world over seek to replicate songs which are themselves replications of popular secular trends, written, "field tested", and recorded in Sydney before being distributed globally (Wagner 2014, pp. 64–65). Further, while the constitutive features of Hillsong churches' worship performances are based upon standardized pop-rock tropes, the aesthetic of the megachurches, themselves, is in keeping with contemporary secular commercial architecture, deliberately not signaling themselves as traditional places of worship (Sanders 2016).

Hillsong's Century City campus very closely resembles Sanders' description of the corporate megachurch as a "non-place", replicating contemporary corporate aesthetic and commercial norms by the absence of obvious indicators of affiliation to Christian tradition or assignment as a place of worship (ibid.). Sanders' description of an archetypal North American corporate megachurch applies to its South African analogue as well:

One is not apt to find wooden pews, pulpits, stained-glass windows, statues of saints, or even crosses or crucifixes in corporate megachurches. And from the outside corporate megachurches can frequently appear nondescript. Parking lots connected by shuttle buses surround buildings that could easily be mistaken for medical office complexes. There are typically no steeples, no bell towers, and no lofty crosses. . . . Corporate megachurches, on the surface anyway, have been pasteurized—purged of their historical associations and, for all intents and purposes, uprooted from their local, physical communities. (ibid., p. 72)

In keeping with Maddox (2012) and Klaver's (2015b) recognition of the uniformity of such megachurches around the world, this main Cape Town campus is located in one of the city's commercial entertainment and tourist centers, the upmarket Century City mixed-use development. It sits opposite Africa's second largest shopping mall, Canal Walk, and several midrange and luxury hotels, and between a Virgin mega-gym and the Ratanga Junction amusement park.

The church itself is a former wellness center and, before that, nightclub. Dockside, as the club was called, opened in 1999, but fell into financial difficulty just a few years later, due to the cost of building what was, at the time, Africa's largest nightclub: a three-level venue with multiple bars and restaurants, with capacity for 5000 patrons (Williams 2001; News 24 2002). The building matches Hillsong's culture and Sanders' notion of the megachurch "non-place" sensibility so well that, had I not been told of the building's history by a taxi driver (who attended the venue when it was a nightclub, as well as a

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<sup>4</sup> A minor church controversy developed around this hipster aesthetic approximately five years ago, when male skinny jeans fashion was at its crotch-hugging tightest.



church, and was eager to share the “testimony” of his born-again transformation), I doubt that I would have given the origins of the building a second thought. The only hint of the building’s profane origins are the restrooms, which are covered in black tiles on the floor and the walls—an unusual choice for a church.

In Miller and Yamamori’s (Miller and Yamamori 2007, pp. 135–36) study of global Pentecostalism, they encounter many similarly “functional” church buildings with a “plain appearance”, stripped of most religious art, but featuring “excellent sound systems”—no former nightclubs, admittedly, but certainly repurposed shopping malls and sports stadiums. They put this down to the fact that “[w]orship is an internal experience for Pentecostals. It does not require a lot of external props” (ibid., p. 137). This could well express the architectural logic of the Protestant sincerity Keane (2007, p. 187) is concerned with, as sentiments must not be external to the individual, deriving from religious material objects such as icons, since that would undermine the expression of sincere sentiments, which must “originate within the speaker”. Spaces that appear “purged of their historical associations and, for all intents and purposes, uprooted from their local, physical communities” (Sanders 2016, p. 72) might also be understood as expressing Protestantism’s familiar sense of itself as an agent of historical rupture, something Pentecostalism takes especially seriously if not entirely literally (Keane 2007, p. 129). Robbins (2003, p. 223) articulates a prominent position when he states that “Pentecostalism is at once extremely open to localization and utterly opposed to local culture”.

However, Sanders (2016, p. 72) would argue that the “plain appearance” and absence of recognizable religious decorations in these megachurches follows a different logic. The negation of traditional Christian material culture is not a total negation of religious material culture, so as to facilitate some direct encounter between the Holy Spirit and the sincere souls of the congregants. Rather, the choice of a “plain appearance”, or as Wade and Hynes (2013, pp. 176–77) characterize it, the choice to build an “empty shell” where a church would normally be, is a deliberate choice to mimic contemporary secular sensibilities. Sanders’ (2016, p. 76) argument that the corporate megachurch is “homologous with sites commonly recognized as sources of consumptive amusement and entertainment” is almost too obvious in the case of a church that sits opposite a shopping mall, between a gymnasium and an amusement park, and occupies a building designed to be the largest nightclub on the continent.

The deeper logic of the megachurch non-place also seems to apply here, beginning with the fact that, while the non-place may be stripped of obviously identifiable cultural referents, one is a cultural participant nevertheless. A foundational concern in Keane’s (2007) study, echoed in Wagner’s (2017b) neat overview of debates around congregational music, is that, while Protestant approaches to the construction of human subjectivity emphasize individual moral autonomy rather than reliance upon material forms, one cannot escape from the inevitably material nature of human expression and embodiment. As such, Wade and Hynes (2013, pp. 176–77) recognize Hillsong’s reliance upon music to make their religious beliefs “palpable [and] outwardly manifest”. This is perhaps the point at which the megachurch non-place critique exhausts itself; for while it describes the physical space of megachurches like Hillsong’s Century City campus almost perfectly, a church is not only, or primarily, the physical space it occupies. Hillsong’s services use terms such as “welcome home” and, somewhat oddly, the use of the collective noun “church” is often heard from the stage: “Welcome home, church!” Hillsong also encourages the formation of small Bible study groups that meet in people’s homes and other settings. The extent to which this undermines the “non-place” thesis is not certain. There is an obvious desire to create a faith community, beyond mere brand loyalty, but the nature of the megachurch service makes this difficult as the experience of late-capitalist spectacle and the experience of fellowship, conventionally understood, are not synonymous.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One way to work through these seeming contradictions in the megachurch experience might be to make use of the notion of the neo-tribe, a way to theorize identity formations created through emotional connections rather than long-term shared structural similarities (Maffesoli 1996; Abraham 2017, pp. 28–29).

Drawing on the ideas of Guy Debord, Sanders (2012, 2016) suggests that, with its emphasis on technologically facilitated bodily experiences and visual excitement, the modern individualist consumer culture of the “spectacle” most aptly describes the culture of the megachurch. This is the same approach taken by Wade and Hynes (2013, 2016), along with the critical Pentecostal insider Harrison (2017), trailing behind at a rather nervous distance. The worshipper is a born-again blank slate within this consumerist culture, rebuilding their identity and morality through the accumulation of spiritual experiences, particularly those facilitated by the music, and the accumulation of religious goods, particularly the church’s music CDs and DVDs, as well as the prosperity-oriented literature on offer. In South Africa, the Faith satellite television channel features numerous Pentecostal megachurch ministries’ personal development series, motivational self-help seminars facilitating prosperity by teaching people to pray, to visualize success, to “reign like kings”, and so on. Indeed, Sanders’ (2016, pp. 81–82) basic criticism of Hillsong-style corporate megachurch culture is that, whereas these churches attempt to convince worshippers that their faith is purely personal, separate from the baggage of institutional Christianity or the worldly vanity of consumerism, in other words, precisely what a sincere Protestant experience should be in Keane’s (2007) study, they are actually participating in predictable capitalist rituals.

The threat to the sincerity of the experience of worship at a megachurch, such as Hillsong, therefore lies in the recognition of the highly regulated nature of the service and the broader experience—the enveloping culture of the “spectacle”. As Wade and Hynes (2013, p. 175) argue, if one pays close attention to Hillsong services and music, one begins to notice “a seeming informality and looseness that is actually choreographed down to the smallest detail in order to best extract your affective capacities”. The desire is for the technology of the culture industry deployed by Hillsong to be dissolved in the ecstasy of religious experience, something Busman (2015) calls the “vanishing mediator” model of worship music. But, if this is not achieved, then the worshipper may become aware not just of the specific religious values being communicated in the worship service, but also of the broader values of consumer capitalism upon which Hillsong’s services are arguably founded (Wagner 2017a, p. 264). The threat here is that the sincere space is disrupted by politeness through a realization of deference to the norms of the consumerist individual, who may not wish to be burdened with the historical weight of institutional Christianity, and opts, instead, for a familiar and low-commitment “modular” spiritual life focused on self-improvement (Sanders 2016, pp. 80–81; Wade 2016, pp. 668–72). Following Harrison’s (2017) insider critique, Hillsong can be seen to meet the need for “novelty” and experiential “wow moments”, but in doing so, it can be argued that it reproduces an individualistic late-capitalist subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Standardizing Sincerity

One area where Wade and Hynes’s (2013, p. 175) notion of a Hillsong service as a carefully “choreographed” spectacle is most apparent is Hillsong’s worship music. In a Pentecostal church service, the music serves a particular function; it is “instrumental” or “catalytic” (Jennings 2014, p. 25; Wagner 2017b, p. 90), designed to facilitate personal ecstatic experience. While Miller and Yamamori’s (2007, pp. 129–59) global overview of Pentecostal worship illustrates the diversity of worship styles, which can often be very basic, Hillsong deploys the full effects of the contemporary culture industry to elevate worshippers beyond the mundane. For Wagner (2017b, p. 93), this tension between secular and sacred musical cultures is just one of Christianity’s foundational “dialectical tensions”, along with the tension between emotion and intellect, and the tension between the demands of individuals and collectives within churches. The specific tension in worship music, Wagner argues, is the desire to

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<sup>6</sup> Bielo’s (2011, pp. 51–55) ethnography of “emerging evangelicals”, a broad movement that partly overlaps with what has been called “post-evangelicalism”, includes similar insider critiques from emerging/post-evangelicals who are critical of the “spiritual technologies” employed, in particular, by evangelical megachurches.

“transcend the earthly plane through practices rooted in the world” (ibid.). As [Martin 2016](#) illustrates, this tension around the use of music is observable throughout Christian history. Augustine, for example, loved music but feared its allure, and Martin locates arguments across the centuries over the incorporation of forms of music from the profane world into sacred services, with the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable music constantly shifting.

The “classic Evangelical critique” of standardized music in worship services is that an emphasis on liturgical form and repetition—in emic evangelical terms, “ritual”—reveals spiritual insincerity, where spiritual sincerity is understood in the affectively individualistic evangelical manner that this article has been focusing on (ibid., p. 650). This critique has more than a passing similarity to the highly influential culture industry critique, first articulated by [Adorno \[1941\] \(1990\)](#), which is also concerned with the negative consequences of the standardization of creative expression upon the human spirit. Standardized music was also a way of creating standardized societies and standardized people for Adorno and the heirs of his radical critique, although little agency was granted to individual cultural actors in Adorno’s approach, other than scholars and romantic geniuses. I think the circulation of both these critiques of standardization, the first familiar within evangelical Christianity, the second familiar (in a much watered-down form) within rock music culture, helps explain why most of the Pentecostal worship musicians I have spoken with have been reluctant to discuss the planning of music in worship services in great depth; rather, virtue is to be found in many churches via spontaneity in worship. For example, Adriaan, the leader of a worship team at a moderately charismatic evangelical church in Cape Town, deflected my suggestion of “success” in his approach to music. I observed the compatibility between his multicultural congregation, which includes a large proportion of people from central and western Africa, and the approach taken to contemporary worship standards, which were performed much faster than in most other churches. This stands in contrast to secular popular music, which is often slowed down when imported into South Africa, such as the electronic dance genre *kwaito* or lachrymose Afrikaans roots rock.

Far from being something planned with the specific congregation in mind, for Adriaan, the unlikely compatibility of his punk rock style with central and western African sensibilities is a matter of God bringing the right people together:

At the end of the day it’s the Lord in His wisdom that He can figure out how to make things work together. We are an African church, and at the end of the day we want that in our worship, and it’s interesting how coming from a punk rock background has met with that. We’re used to playing fast and the way I play guitar is probably bad because it’s so strumming-driven. That’s just the Lord knowing which different roads are going to meet. There was no intentional Africanization, not even an intent to do it faster, it’s just what happened because I’m used to fast music. I’ve got this gauge in my mind; if it’s too slow for me I speed it up.

In contrast to independent churches such as Adriaan’s, making use of Hillsong’s music but altering it through individual choice or congregational necessity, Hillsong’s own churches embrace the artifice of their music, with “artifice” understood here in the neutral sense of craftsmanship, by standardizing performances as thoroughly as possible. A significant feature of Hillsong’s music is that, as the church has globalized, its musical practices have remained centralized in Sydney. In contrast to the standard strategy of global institutions and brands to “glocalize” products by adapting globally available and recognizable commodities to a local audience, Hillsong has focused on the “consistency of its product” ([Wagner 2014](#), pp. 59–60). This involves worship musicians and the congregations themselves. Worshippers are encouraged to purchase Hillsong’s recordings and learn the songs, and because of this assumed familiarity, musicians seek to replicate the recorded studio sound live during services “in the belief that too much deviation will distract the worshippers’ attention from God” (ibid., p. 65).

The lengths Hillsong worship bands go to in order to standardize their performances are quite remarkable; individual church worship bands replicate the composition of Hillsong's most prominent worship bands, seeking the same number of vocalists, guitarists, and so on, and musicians make use of "click tracks", which function like a metronome to maintain a consistent and pre-determined tempo, "regardless of who is playing the song or where it is being played" (ibid., p. 66). The complexity of the music and the high levels of studio production make reproduction very difficult, especially outside the Hillsong institution itself; Evans (2017, p. 74) offers illustrative examples from online forums where musicians "deconstruct" Hillsong's music to identify the equipment Hillsong musicians use, and discuss how to configure it to replicate the sound.

Although the music is produced in Sydney and then distributed globally in a finished form, the extent to which the music is appreciably "Australian" in the minds of worship musicians and worshippers differs. Wagner cites two worship musicians from Hillsong London, who insist that they play "faster and louder" than the Australian Hillsong worship bands, because the London church is "such a vibrant place", in contrast to what they believe to be the "slower" and "laid back" nature of Australian culture (Wagner 2014, p. 65). Wagner explains that this is incorrect ("in an objective sense") because Hillsong London uses the same standardizing tethers discussed above to make their songs as close as possible to the songs recorded in Sydney, even if the musicians feel that they are playing at a faster pace (ibid.). Rocha's (2017, pp. 134–37) interviews with Brazilian Hillsong members present the opposite view of Australian culture. Far from being "slower" and "laid back", Australian culture is viewed by these young Brazilian Pentecostals as valuing punctuality and discipline; Australians are viewed as scrupulously honest and law-abiding people, and Hillsong's music is viewed as a manifestation of Australia's all-around fabulousness.

The responses I encountered in South Africa contrast once again, insofar as the Pentecostal worship musicians I interviewed felt the Australian origins of the music to be irrelevant, or at least, imperceptible. The South African Hillsong musicians I spoke with were of the view that Hillsong's own church culture is what is apparent in the songs, not any national culture. These ideas are appreciable as an emic approximation of Wagner's (2014, 2017b) notion of Hillsong's "brand", a carefully curated and highly recognizable multimodal cultural language. Further distinguishing themselves from Wagner's British research participants and Rocha's Brazilian research participants, these South Africans did not seem to associate Australian culture with any distinct value system. Niz, a vocalist, said the Hillsong songwriters have "isolated their non-negotiables" over their thirty-year history, and learned to express these values in "universal language like love and encouragement, and things that cross borders". Similar sentiments were offered by the guitarist Franz, who argued that "what Sydney does is not necessarily Australian culture; it's a culture of love, like [Niz] said. They don't bring their Australian culture in".

Although I generally respect the anthropological incest taboo against studying one's own culture, as an Australian who has spent a lot of time in the United Kingdom and South Africa, I generally concur with these observations. I find Porter's (2018) argument that Hillsong articulates a "cosmopolitan" identity more compelling, agreeing with Klaver (2015b, p. 430) that the church's individualistic prosperity theology largely explains this. Since individual salvation is the message, local social struggles and cultural concerns are secondary. This is so much so that members of the Cape Town church with whom I discussed its social programs emphasized the low-visibility nature of Hillsong's local poverty relief efforts, while simultaneously complaining about negative and distorted depictions of the church as socially disengaged. As Hillsong is not a church that believes in structural solutions, such endeavors are not part of the church's core public identity (Martí 2017, p. 380).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> There is obviously much more to be written on this topic, far beyond the scope of this article, but three aspects of an essay by Hillsong College lecturer Christopher Parkes (2017) on the church's social and ethical engagement stand out in the context of this article: firstly, a recognition of the theological underdevelopment of the church; secondly, an emphasis on the

Further to the question of Hillsong's "Australian" character, several non-Hillsong Pentecostal worship musicians were of the opinion that one cannot approach worship music like secular pop music and assume that worshippers are interested in the original performers, composers, or even the origins of worship songs. The musicians that I spoke with are themselves aware of the sources of the songs they select for services, partly because of licensing requirements, and partly because of an awareness of the ubiquity of certain songs and composers, but their (perhaps idealized) view was that this is not a concern for their congregations. Although my research was focused on musicians rather than ordinary members of the congregations, this notion is supported by research in predominantly Zulu churches in Durban, on the east coast of South Africa, which found that "there is a sense in which all the music from 'elsewhere' is grouped together in their minds, irrespective of any brand association" (Evans 2015, p. 188). The use of English in these songs, whether by Hillsong or another global Pentecostal music "brand", offers the same generic quality as Hillsong's theologically "generalist" lyrics (ibid., p. 183), with English the dominant language in a country with no less than eleven official ones, and fluency in English a highly valued cultural commodity.

We can contrast this, once again, with data from Rocha's (2017, pp. 130–34) study of Brazilian Hillsong members, which offers the example of a young self-identified Hillsong "fan" whose appreciation of Hillsong music from the age of ten mirrors that of a typical adolescent pop music fan; she learns the names of the band members, she follows them on social media, she has a clear favorite (Joel Houston), and she tries to get as physically close to the musicians as possible during their concerts. In response to this, students at Hillsong College in Sydney are told not to treat the musicians they may encounter as celebrities, no matter how many hundreds of thousands of Instagram followers a particular performer walking around the campus may have (ibid.). Clearly, this radically differs from the idealized notion I encountered amongst Pentecostal musicians of contemporary worship musicians as self-effacing servants of God, at best, co-equals with the congregations they lead in devotion, and at worst, only reluctant celebrities (Abraham 2017, pp. 130–31; Evans 2017, pp. 70–72). It does, however, help us understand the obvious but controversial comfort with secular celebrity culture, and the "eagerness for Instagram cool", that Hillsong's highest profile young leaders display (White 2017).

A good illustration of the approach Hillsong musicians take to what I am calling the standardization of sincerity in Pentecostal megachurch music emerged in an interview with members of Hillsong's Century City worship band, who also have experience playing heavy metal and hardcore punk. In hindsight, I realize that I should have asked whether their role at Hillsong was akin to that of a "tribute band", rather than a "cover band", for it is tribute bands who seek "faithful reproduction" of an original performance (Moore 2002, p. 217). However, a realization of just how standardized their worship music actually was only emerged during the interview:

Interviewer: Tell me if it's an offensive question, but to what extent could you consider your role in the church worship band as being like a cover band?

Franz: It probably is, yeah. Well, actually, as Hillsong Cape Town we are probably a cover band—Hillsong Sydney aren't. There's a bit of an instruction there, for us as musicians, to try and be as close as possible to what's been written in Sydney, especially if it's a song that's already been on an album. As soon as they [the congregation] hear the beginning of a song, they must think, "OK, this is *this* song", and then they must connect. We don't want them to be distracted by wondering why it's different. Our purpose is not to show that we can be creative musicians. In church, our purpose is for people to connect; in that, we step aside from trying to improvise and actually just do what's already been done. It may seem that it affects us as musicians, maybe it doesn't make us as creative, but it does challenge you in

other ways. Church has developed me as a musician a lot, in terms of being more technical and theory-based.

Niz: An important thing is that there's a musical standard that's set by the guys in Sydney, but even there, the guys who are at church [at Hillsong's Sydney campuses] on Sunday might not be the guys writing the music—they, in a sense, are playing the same songs other people have been writing. Then, at the same time, it's not just replicating the music, it's replicating the spirit that the music came out of. That's the most important part.

Jesse: I would never see it as a cover band. For me, it's lead pastors saying, musically, this is our vision. I've seen a few interpretations, I guess, of some of this stuff. But that's how I feel about it; here's something to work with and everyone picks it up and makes it their own.

When Hillsong's musicians make the music "their own", they claim emotional ownership and subjective identification with the sentiments in the music, both the content and, as Niz said, "the spirit that the music came out of". Making the music one's own is conversely not about incorporating the music into one's own performance style, but shaping one's own performance style around the music as it is written in Sydney and distributed globally in a finished form. Indeed, replicating the "spirit that the music came out of" requires replicating the sense of service necessary within a centralized global institution. It is worth quoting Niz at length once again:

Any time you are committed to a worship team, you have to understand that it's a sacrificial thing; you have to understand that it's not about you. You get people coming in to Hillsong attracted to the platform, and attracted to the big stage and the lights and the opportunity of playing at a big conference. Their motives are quickly found out and they get taken off team; we can see that your heart is not for Jesus, your heart is here for yourself and to be a rock star or whatever. Those guys don't end up going anywhere. It's a sacrificial thing; you've got to be prepared to sing other people's songs, you've got to be prepared to sing songs that are not in your key.

So for Hillsong's musicians, making the music "their own" is a sincere act of mimicry.

Worship music is also about individual members of a congregation making the music their own. As Franz said, the congregation "must connect" as soon as they hear the opening notes of a worship song. To what extent does this suggest a standardization of response, though? In their global study of Pentecostalism, [Miller and Yamamori \(2007, p. 157\)](#) suggest that personal ecstatic experiences are a "regular occurrence" at some Pentecostal churches, insofar as church staff are aware of the precise points in the service when ecstatic experiences will take place, and the precise form that they will take, and they can make preparations accordingly. Is this part of the same problematic as the phenomenon of "entrainment" that [Myrick \(2017, 2018\)](#) identifies in charismatic worship music, a systematic synchronization of physical responses among worshippers which he recognizes as conceptually troubling for (especially charismatic) Christians? [Wagner \(2017b, p. 95\)](#) also gestures towards the temptations of a cognitive approach to worship in noting the use of suspended chords in contemporary worship music, which have been found to "provoke strong physio-emotional responses such as tears".<sup>8</sup> In his work on Pentecostal worship music, [Martí \(2018, p. 26\)](#) suggests something slightly different: a "familiarity" and an "anticipation" of the personal religious event. He refers to the sense of "security" that comes from "the cumulative familiarity of liturgical forms, the consistency of local liturgical settings, and the recognizable musical practices. . . . Individuals become accustomed to

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<sup>8</sup> From a theological perspective, [Myrick \(2018, p. 34\)](#) cautions against "confusing what is physical for what is spiritual", while from a social scientific perspective, the concern is about confusing what is physical for what is social. Representatively, [Steven Feld \(1984, pp. 4–5\)](#) cautions against placing too much emphasis on musical form, rather than the context of music in an individual's life, and trying to "crack the code" between music and fixed meaning.

a worship situation and are able to anticipate the cues for action that are to come". This helps explain Franz's concern as a musician not to "distract" the congregation by showing that he can be "creative" with a familiar song, but the act of worship, as an embodied response to standardized music practice in this case, raises deeper questions about spiritual sincerity.

### 5. Embodying Sincerity

To understand how these tensions work themselves out in Pentecostal worship music, it is necessary to look closer at a typical contemporary Pentecostal megachurch service, noting the clear standardization of musical worship, but also, the way in which musical worship practices become embodied by members of a congregation. The primary tension for the musicians, as Wagner (2017b, pp. 98–99) identifies it, is between maintaining the technical requirements of the performance, as worship musicians must facilitate worshipping by the congregation, while at the same time, maintaining authenticity in their performance, as worship musicians must be worshipping themselves. Drawing on his ethnomusicological study of Hillsong's London church, Wagner describes the typical "block service" format used by Hillsong and comparative Pentecostal (mega)churches, which mirrors almost exactly what I witnessed over multiple services in Cape Town.<sup>9</sup> The Hillsong block service consists of five songs at the start of the service: The first two songs are fast and performed in a major key; these are followed by two slower songs, performed at half the tempo and utilizing suspended chords, and then a final song builds to "an upbeat crescendo" (ibid.). Jennings (2008, pp. 163–65) observed a very similar service at a Pentecostal church using a rented hall in Western Australia; the first, fast songs were intended to symbolize a break with the mundanity of everyday life and "wake people up" physically and spiritually, in the words of the church's senior pastor.

Crucially, Wagner (2017b, pp. 96–99) argues that the block service only "works" if the congregation is able to understand the intended meaning of that kind of music, which only happens if they have been trained to listen in a particular way. As Wagner describes it, the process begins with the training of worship musicians who are placed onstage, not only because they are expert musicians, but in order to present themselves as experts at worshipping God, as well. At similar Pentecostal services, Jennings (2008, p. 163) observed "at least four attractive, well-presented singers" on the stage, and concluded that their importance "cannot be overstated". These performers "sing enthusiastically, often smiling, vigorously gesturing, and dancing . . . the congregation respond in kind, lifting their arms, closing their eyes and dancing. The singers model the correct way to experience the presence of God". At Hillsong Cape Town, these bodily actions of the worship musicians, such as raising their hands or jumping up and down (typically in a semi-choreographed or certainly well-timed manner), are most closely mirrored by the young members of the congregation, who rush to the front of the stage as soon as the worship band appears. They create an approximation of a mosh pit familiar from secular rock (especially punk) performances, where they can dance and jump around more freely than they can in their seats, therefore more closely imitating the behavior of the worship band.

The imitation of gestures, in this case, imitation of the members of the worship band by younger members of the congregation, is one observable example of authentic musical performance in Moore's (2002) influential survey of the topic. "The music we declare to be 'authentic' is the music we 'appropriate'", he argues, recognizing that "the process of authentication is one of transfer" (ibid., p. 219). What Moore labels "second person authenticity", when a musician's performance is accepted as reflecting and validating the personal experiences of a listener, can also be seen in the mimicry of dance and vocal techniques by the adolescent consumers of the most shamelessly artificial forms of pop music (ibid.). The quite serious example he offers is the instinctive response of his own daughter and her friends to S Club 7's "Bring it all Back", the most popular hit of a late-1990s

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<sup>9</sup> The only notable departures from this block service I witnessed were a long version of the popular hymn "How Great Thou Art" on one occasion, and the appearance of a rapper immediately after the block service on another occasion.

manufactured pop group created for a children's television show. Adolescents (and older people as well, of course) are often painfully self-conscious of their bodies, and Pentecostal churches encouraging this kind of worship are typically set-up in a way so as to "facilitate self-forgetfulness" and eliminate such self-consciousness (Jennings 2008, p. 163). In churches that can afford to do so, the stage will be illuminated, sometimes with an elaborate light show, and even a fog machine, so that the congregation is relatively anonymous during the worship block.<sup>10</sup>

There is an additional tension embedded within this simultaneous requirement to facilitate other people's worship (a technical requirement) while maintaining one's own worship (a spiritual requirement), insofar as the latter can undermine the former. Pentecostal megachurch musicians I have interviewed have been very much aware of the limitations that must be placed on their behavior. "In church there's a feeling [that] if you move you're going to distract someone", said Will, a Sydney Hillsong guitarist who has also played in a hardcore punk/heavy metal band. Movement, in the Hillsong worship scenario, essentially means spontaneous or unscripted movement that takes the focus away from the vocalists, who will of course move around a great deal. Moore (2015, pp. 184–86) offers the similar example of a recorded performance by the worship leader Kathryn Scott in which she interjects brief extra-lyrical spiritual statements ("hallelujah", etc.) into her performance and "embellishes" aspects of her performance that serve to foreground her separation from the collective congregational worship. Moore wonders whether these are examples of her "leading" worship by expressing spontaneous religious sentiments that exceed the performance's nominal parameters, therefore (in the language of this present article) demonstrating sincerity through subjective expression beyond the "quotation" of lyrics, or whether these interjections, which all make "good expressive sense", are deliberate performative elements that make her, and not God, the focus of attention (ibid.).

Recognizing the role of Pentecostal worship musicians to model correct worship practice raises the question of the extent to which the congregational mimicry evident in megachurch practice is "sincere" in Keane's (Keane 2007) understanding of the normative Protestant use of the word. Like Kathryn Scott's religious interjections in Moore's (Moore 2015) analysis, above, can the Hillsong mosh pit be thought of as a deliberate performative element that is effectively a quotation? To help understand embodied Pentecostal worship, Wagner (2017b) turns to the influential work of Hirschkind (2006) on ethical listening practices among revivalist Muslims in Cairo. He cites Hirschkind in explaining that the process of musical worship is one of "moral attunement where worshippers do the work of listening in specific ways and with specific attitudes to achieve the affective-volitional states necessary for the religious experiences they seek" (Wagner 2017b, p. 97). Hirschkind's work offers clear parallels to the present research topic, not least because his fieldwork site, contemporary Cairo, is the precise kind of city where Pentecostal revivalism is developing as well. Whether Cairo or Cape Town, and whether Christianity or Islam, revivalist religion excels at the "emotional stripping and welding" that changing identities require in contexts of social anomy (Mol 1976, p. 171).

Analyzing the discourse of Islamic revivalism in contemporary Cairo, and focusing on the practice of listening to cassette recordings of sermons as a form of religious edutainment, Hirschkind (2006, pp. 75–76) refers to the "moral physiology" integral to this listening practice. Distinguishing correctly attuned "listening" from mere passive "hearing" (ibid., p. 70), the process of developing "what might be termed a Quranically tuned body and soul" is likened to learning how to properly articulate the "gestures of a dance" (ibid., p. 76). As is the case for Pentecostal worshippers, such as those at the church Jennings (2008, p. 167) observed, who were cautioned against relying upon "second hand revelation", this cannot simply be a matter of mimicry, as it is a process affecting "the entire moral person as a unity of body and soul" (Hirschkind 2006, p. 76). He gives the example of an actor playing

<sup>10</sup> Kate Bowler (2016), a scholar of Pentecostal prosperity theology, reports that she "once saw a megachurch pastor almost choke to death on his own fog machine. Someone had cranked it up to the Holy Spirit maximum". Fog machines periodically appear within Pentecostal discourse around contemporary worship music and megachurch practices as the key symbol of spectacular excess.



Shakespeare's King Lear having to learn his lines, but also acquire the bodily traits and forms of movement that "express the tortured soul" (ibid.). Hirschkind makes use of the "neglected" work of the early twentieth century anthropologist Marcel Jousse, who focused on the idea of gesture as integral to communication and cognition, citing the example of watching a fencing match and feeling the sensations of the competitors in one's own body (ibid., pp. 76–78). In this way the body becomes an "auditory instrument" in learning to listen in the "Quranically attuned" way the revivalists advocate, with "patterned moral reflexes" developing, such as a change in posture (ibid., p. 79).

While this process seems clear in Islamic revivalist literature, with its constant references to the flesh and the heart, and the strong emphasis on correct ritual practices through "somatic learning" in Islamic tradition, generally (ibid.), the same principles apply to Pentecostal listening practices, however much this process may seem to differ from Keane's (2007) analysis of Protestant sincerity. References to the "heart" are, of course, ubiquitous in Pentecostalism and evangelicalism in general, from Wesley's Aldersgate experience of feeling his heart "strangely warmed" to typical contemporary examples, such as an evangelical university student describing a similar sense of religious conviction as a "real heart feeling" (Bramadat 2000, p. 38). In both Islamic revivalism and Pentecostalism, an "epistemological tension" exists around what Hirschkind (2006, p. 91) refers to as the "displacement" of religious authority inherent in the circulation of religious media that consciously play upon the emotions of the listener. Listeners may cry, but not know precisely why they are crying, or whether they are crying for the appropriate religious reason.

There is a complex interplay of embodied emotion and doctrinal understanding in the practice of listening to recorded sermons, as the sermons "recruit" the body of the listener and seek to create a particular embodied ethical state that produces a particular kind of listening (ibid., p. 98). As such, Hirschkind argues, "one is capable of hearing the sermon in its full ethical sense only to the extent one has already cultivated the particular modes of sensory responsiveness presupposed in the discourse's gestural vocabulary" (ibid., p. 101). Something very similar can be said about Pentecostal worship. As the senior pastor at the Western Australian Pentecostal church in Jennings' (2008, p. 164) study explains, "Worship is not just a physical experience, but an emotional and spiritual one. Physical acts, like clapping or singing, open up your soul. Only when your soul is opened up to the spiritual can you experience encounter with God". But merely clapping one's hands does not "open up your soul" unless you have a particular embodied understanding of the kind Hirschkind analyses. There is a catch, though. For while religious doctrine—or what Jennings calls, after Paul Ricoeur, "proclamation"—is necessary to create the affective state that allows the music ministry to serve its function of the "manifestation" of belief, the personal ecstatic experience foundational to Pentecostalism, the reverse is also true: music is necessary to "animate" the congregation to receive and respond to the verbal messages in the service in the intended manner (ibid., p. 165). Members of the congregation must replicate the rules of Pentecostal worship, but adopt them sincerely, if they are going to experience the music in its intended form.

## 6. Critiquing Insincerity

The effectiveness of megachurches in facilitating this sincere adoption of the rules of Pentecostal worship, amongst other aspects of orthopraxy, has come under critique from many Pentecostal musicians I have spoken with. Hillsong is commonly criticized for what these musicians view as the church's overemphasis on the spectacle of their services—the precise danger for Protestants of becoming "captured" by "material forms", which undermines the sincerity of their speech-acts (Robbins 2012, p 16). Their concern also touches at times upon lyrical content of the songs, with some anxiety about the doctrinal vagueness of Hillsong's lyrics, understandable as concern about insincere speech aimed at boosting popularity by avoiding disagreement. As Evans (2015, p. 183) observes, in noting the "generalist theological foundation of the music", Hillsong must surely understand "the economic benefits of its 'resources' being utilized in the global church". This lyrical ambiguity is a notable feature of popular contemporary congregational songs more broadly, however, as analyzed

by Thornton (2017), who recognizes that what may be viewed as “generic” or “bland” from one perspective, might be viewed as “creedal” or “inclusive” from a different perspective.

The non-Hillsong worship leaders I have interviewed, who include Hillsong material in their churches’ worship repertoires, can rely upon any ambiguities in Hillsong’s worship songs being corrected within the liturgical whole, in keeping with Jennings’ (2008) analysis of the necessity of framing Pentecostal musical worship within the theology presented in a service’s sermon. This argument, that charismatic worship music requires the religious anchoring of the sermon to keep it within the Christian tradition, may be reversed in the case of some Hillsong services, however. In contrast to the sermons preached in the evangelical and non-evangelical South African churches I have observed that make use of Hillsong worship songs, the core message of Hillsong’s sermons (or what comes in place of the sermons), is often secular “common sense”. As Martí (2017, p. 381) has observed, Hillsong’s message is one of empowerment, and empowerment “almost always centers on finding resolutions for family and work issues”. Rather than the music requiring the sermon to keep it unambiguously Christian, in such cases, it is the music that is required to keep the sermon unambiguously Christian.

Such a scenario—worship music with ambiguous lyrics and a sermon grounded in secular common sense, each attempting to rely upon the other to provide some kind of deeper context and meaning—may be the highest expression of Sanders’ (2016) theory of the megachurch as the “non-place”, for it would not merely be the architecture stripped of its cultural referents, but the music and the sermon as well. Such a religious critique has been expressed to me by both fundamentalist and progressive Christians in South Africa, the basic idea being that Hillsong offers a positive but superficial message. We might be able to translate this religious critique into something comprehensible from a social scientific perspective by returning to Hirschkind’s work on Egyptian Islamic revivalists. In that study, he makes use of Massumi’s (2002) distinction between “affect” as instinctive or precognitive “emotional movements” of the body, and “emotion” as “culturally qualified affect . . . inscribed with scripted action-reaction circuits” such as codified religious virtues (Hirschkind 2006, p. 82). Wade and Hynes (2013, p. 175) also make use of Massumi’s distinction, but specifically in the case of Hillsong. They reject the idea that “the fervour and ecstasy of a typical Hillsong gathering [is] simply an outward manifestation of the evangelical mindset”, and argue, after Massumi, for the “autonomy” of affect which, in the case of Hillsong’s services, exceeds codified evangelical “emotion”. Hence, the importance of Jennings’ (Jennings 2008, p. 171) observation that there is nothing automatically Christian about the “ecstatic manifestation” experienced through Pentecostal worship, and the particularly problematic nature of attempting to frame the experience within what is considered by Hillsong’s Christian critics to be weak theology.

There is one final critique of the conceivable insincerity of Pentecostal megachurch music, a more specifically charismatic critique of Hillsong and proximate Pentecostal megachurch services advanced by a minority of Pentecostal worship musicians I interviewed. This critique focuses on the standardization which slowly developed within Pentecostal services over the last two decades. Several musicians associated with Rhema churches, instrumental in charismatic revivalism in South Africa in the 1990s, discussed, at length, the standardization of services within their churches, which formerly allotted much more time and autonomy to musical worship. In contrast to the “block service” described above, these Pentecostal church services would not predetermine the songs, or even the length or share of time allotted to musical worship. The stated desire would be to allow the Holy Spirit to direct the service, allowing the worship leader to facilitate the musical worship as the Spirit so directed. Although Pentecostal worship musicians described this as merely providing opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work within the congregation, the authority of the worship leaders themselves is obviously much greater in services with such planned informality.

In the contemporary case of Hillsong, it is not simply multiple Sunday services that must be accommodated and timetabled, including the movement of individuals in and out of the church and the movement of cars and buses in and out of the car park, but the coordination of live “onstage” content with pre-recorded audiovisual content, which is, itself, often coordinated across multiple “campuses”, or even across the entire global Hillsong network. Hillsong’s centralized structure, predicated at least in part on the desire to maintain a standardized brand image (Wagner 2014, 2017a), leads to a subsequent reduction in the authority of local worship leaders, whose role radically differs from that identifiable within earlier South African Pentecostalism. Songs are chosen from within a limited repertoire to fit within the pattern and time constraints of the aforementioned “block service”. A good illustration of this is the digital timer on the mezzanine level at Hillsong’s main Cape Town campus at Century City, visible from the stage, but invisible from most of the congregation. It regulates the conduct of the service, much like a printed liturgy might in a proximate context.

## 7. Conclusions

This analogy between the standardized Pentecostal megachurch service, epitomized by the hidden timer counting down the end of segments and the end of the service, and the traditional printed liturgy of Catholic and mainline Protestant service, returns us to the basic Christian tensions articulated by Martin (2016) and Wagner (2017b): churches seek to achieve transcendence through worldly practices. So it is, this article has sought to demonstrate, in the case of Protestant sincerity. Subjective inner states are cultivated through the use of the highest forms of technology and craftsmanship the secular culture industry can offer; moreover, these technologies are refined, standardized, and globalized by a centralized corporate megachurch (Sanders 2016) that speaks of its “clients” as a “congregation” (Maddox 2012, p. 154), and promotes a thoroughly individualistic form of faith.

This article began by outlining the particular understanding of Protestant sincerity articulated by Keane (2007), recognizing that, while Keane’s study of (post-)colonial Calvinism and my study of Pentecostal megachurch music culture are hardly identical, and while Pentecostalism can be thought of as a correction to aspects of Reformed Christianity, Keane nevertheless draws out something broad and significant about not just Protestantism, but modern religion in general. The generalizability of Keane’s observations about the modern sincere spiritual subject are attested to by the utility of Hirschkind’s (2006) research on Islamic revivalism in Cairo for helping to explain the process of sincere mimicry in Pentecostal megachurch worship that is the focus of this article. It was argued, with specific reference to Jennings’ (2008) analysis of Pentecostal worship, that the transmission of embodied practices by (in particular) members of the worship band helps to work through the tension between the excessive or purely affective nature of the charismatic worship experience and the sometimes out-of-place Pentecostal sermon, which seeks to place a framework of orthodoxy around the personal ecstatic experience, even if such sermons rely upon on the worship block to prepare receptive subjects. Nevertheless, the criticisms that Hillsong’s worship style attracts, especially from other church musicians, points to the fact that the kind of worship experience the church seeks to create, in order to inspire the kind of sincere subjects it hopes to produce, runs the risk of falling into insincerity by being “captured”, in Robbins’ (2012, p. 16) term, by the cultural forms it seeks to expertly employ.

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