

Not like us?

10 Fragments on Evangelical Liberalism and the Left

This piece took form after a series of conversations about the rise of evangelical Christianity, and in particular, megachurches in the US and Australia. My concern is that, on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum (but particularly on the left), the congregations of the new megachurches are seen as incomprehensible, foolish, irreparably other. ‘Not like us’, was the most common characterisation I heard, often followed by a muttered descriptor: ‘freaks’.

by Kate Crawford

There is something worrying about the tendency to dismiss the followers of the new evangelical movements. The megachurches in Sydney, for example, are gaining their members from the so-called ‘aspirational’ suburbs, those that were once deemed working class. Often, their members are fighting to make ends meet, working two or more jobs, paying off mortgages and trying to support families. The advice offered by the new megachurches is as much about finding financial security and self-confidence within Australia’s neo-liberal economic system as it is about God. These suburban populations were once courted by unions and the Labor party, which have very different approaches to the same social problems. Now they are courted by the megachurches.

What does this mean for politics? What does this mean if only the right wing is listening to this growing section of the Australian population? What is the relationship between the self-help rhetoric of the megachurches and the high individualism of economic rationalism? How can Australia avoid becoming deeply divided along religious lines as has occurred in the US? I have many more questions than I have answers. But as a starting point to think through these complex issues, I offer the following observational moments.

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1. The first things I noticed were the teeth. White, large and held in a fixed smile, this was a man who had invested heavily in enamel. He was talking from a dais on a large stage, arms spread wide and illuminated by a giant lighting rig, projecting his southern-inflected voice with charismatic passion and emphatic pauses. The second thing I noticed was the stadium. It was the Compaq Center in Houston, Texas, once the home of the NBA’s Houston Rockets, and every seat was full with eager listeners. The stadium has been purchased outright by the Lakewood Church, the biggest megachurch in the US, and the man with the teeth is Joel Osteen. Osteen is the pastor of Lakewood, and he preaches to over 30,000 people in his stadium each weekend. His congregation affectionately calls him “the smiling preacher.”

I happened to see Osteen in full flight when idly flicking through channels on cable television on a Sunday morning. Lakewood has invested over US\$12 million in buying television airtime, and he can be watched in 95% of US homes, according to *The Washington Post*. *The Post* described him as “the hottest commodity in the world of multimedia religion”. His weekly broadcasts are shown on the Discovery Channel, the USA Network, ABC Family, Black Entertainment Television (BET), CNBC Europe, Vision Canada, Middle East Television and CNBC Australia – where I first encountered him.

Osteen’s message is very simple. “Discover the Champion in You,” reads the slogan of *JoelOsteen.com*, and his sermons lean heavily on this kind of self-empowerment, self-help

language. It's all about 'you' – there is no 'us' at Lakewood. His CDs have titles like *Be Good to People* and his book *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* reached the number one place on the *New York Times* Bestseller list.

Osteen encourages his congregation to take control of their self-image with “positive self-talk”, to affirm their worth by “adding to their river of positive thinking” – particularly when they may have a job interview, or when asking for that pay rise from the boss, or deciding if they should speak up in class. As the camera tracked past the uplifted faces of his 30,000 strong audience, the shot revealed that most were working class African Americans, with some Hispanics and whites, and many had brought their families. He talks to them about being healthier and wealthier, and avoids any fire and brimstone. There is very little by way of direct gospel quotation or darker theological ruminations and nothing whatsoever of the Charismatic techniques of talking in tongues or laying on hands. Osteen takes the approach used by many of the evangelical megachurches, a kind of ‘prosperity theology’ mixed with advice about how individuals can avoid depression, anxiety and self-doubt in times of economic and personal hardship.

2. Post-industrial neo-liberalism applies free-market thinking to all avenues of human social life. People are considered to be on a level playing field, where they can bargain, make contracts, and conduct their business in self-interested and individualistic ways. Under such a system, redistribution is rolled back or removed altogether, with everything from social welfare, childcare, education and health systems becoming more user-pays oriented and privately managed.

3. Professor Nancy Fraser in interview: “It’s not easy to explain [the rise of the evangelical movements]. This is an idiom, a language that is available in our culture, and in certain periods it is adopted as a language for protesting things that might not have much to do with religion, exactly. The shift to a new kind of capitalism, a post-industrial capitalism, which is connected to globalisation, has created winners and losers. And by and large, evangelical Christians are those who would be counted amongst the losers in the economic sense in this situation. For complicated reasons, they are not using the older languages of class, the language of the labour movement, in order to articulate their dissatisfaction with the situation. Instead, they are using this religious language. It is a way of saying: ‘You yuppies. You professional, managerial, educated people who drink your lattes and eat your sushi and you’re all for gay rights and abortion rights. You look down on us, and if you’re for that stuff, we’re going to be against it.’

We have to start by assuming that these people have real grievances. There are real economic grievances for people working at three jobs and still not making a living wage, there is not adequate child-care, there are real reasons why people are worried about the security of their families.”²

4. Fraser makes two critical points: one is about linguistics and the other about wedge politics. The language that is being used by many evangelical ‘prosperity’ churches is very different to the language of class and labour politics. But the basic concerns are similar: how to deal with economic hardship, how to improve your access to resources, why certain sectors of the community have more resources than others. In the language of class politics, the solutions focus on who owns the means of production, and how redistribution can address structural inequities between different social classes. In evangelical-speak, the proposed solutions are individualistic, well suited to the neo-liberal frame: how you can increase your wealth through positive thinking and a personal relationship with God, how you can climb the corporate ladder, how to discover the champion in you. One language focuses on wider social change on a collective level, the other on an individualistic road to salvation and success.

For the left to disavow any understanding of the ‘freaks’ in evangelical churches is to ignore the common, shared concerns that were once considered the domain of the labour-focused

left. It ignores the “real economic grievances” felt by many, grievances that megachurches commonly address in their sermons and multimedia presentations with solutions based on the idea of helping yourself, rather than helping others. It disconnects the left from its traditional base, which then becomes the sole domain of the Christian right.

5. On wedge politics: for people on the left side of politics to raise their hands in incomprehension and disbelief about the rise of evangelical churches is to play into the hands of the political figures who would seek to further marginalise the left. The notion that there is a latte-sipping, sushi-eating, morally permissive intellectual ‘elite’ who has all the power in Australia and seeks to belittle and exploit hard-working Aussies who are doing it tough is a well-traveled fiction. It is a politically savvy construction of the strategists of the right, and one that has had great success. It obscures the people who are real power elite: the Federal Government (which seeks to strip back the industrial relations protections of workers), financial institutions and the conservative media moguls who own the vast majority of Australia’s mass media, just to name a few. The latte-sipping lefties are all but denuded of any real influence, yet they are cleverly demonized for the political gain of the already powerful. There is a commonality of economic circumstance between the deeply mortgaged northwest belt of Sydney - the home of Hillsong - and those who are fighting to keep their labour rights around the country. To be blind to that is to play to this tired and faulty narrative of the remote, imperious left.

6. In a recent article by Gordon Bigelow, the author of *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland*, he looks at the evangelical roots of economics. In particular, he analyses the concomitant rise of liberal economic theory with the growth of evangelical Christianity in the early 1800s.

“[Evangelicals] were middle-class reformers who wanted to reshape Protestant doctrine. For them it was unthinkable that capitalism led to class conflict, for that would mean that God had created a world at war with itself. The evangelicals believed in a providential God, one who built a logical and orderly universe, and they saw the new industrial economy as a fulfillment of God’s plan. The free market, they believed, was a perfectly designed instrument to reward good Christian behaviour and to punish and humiliate the unrepentant.”³

- 7.** Music has the right to sales:
- The Hillsong album “*You are my world*” sold 35,000 copies in 3 days in July 2001.
 - The previous nine albums had sold 3.75 million copies as of August 2001.
 - Music contributed 25% of revenue for the Hillsong church in 2001.
 - Number of delegates at Hillsong’s conference in 2001: 12,000
 - The Hillsong album “*For all you’ve done*” (2004) went to #1 in its first week in July 2004.
 - Percentage of 2004 sales at retailers other than Hillsong Church’s merchandising stall: 10%
 - Number of delegates at Hillsong’s conference in 2005: 25,000
 - Number in 2004: 18,000
 - Opening ARIA position of “God He Reigns” in July 2005: #2
 - Total revenue of Christian music in Australia in 2004: \$30.2 million⁴

8. From Geoffrey Barker in *The Australian Financial Review*:
“Both Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello have associated themselves with the outer Sydney Hillsong evangelical church, which has become Australia’s most successful Assemblies of God franchise with a big following among high-income aspirational voters. As Australia has increasingly come under the influence of American social views and values, it is perhaps not surprising that Australians have embraced the style, organisation and ideas of the so-called

conservative Christian Right in the US, with its emphasis on emotional experience over reason and its claim that success and affluence are rewards from God.”⁵

While both John Howard and Peter Costello visited Hillsong during the last election campaign, Mark Latham notoriously declined Hillsong’s invitation to speak. Hillsong is the fastest growing religious faith in the country – growing in members and wealth. But while the church itself is earning serious money— \$40 million in tax free revenue in 2004 alone – its members are not. The congregations are mainly drawn from the more financially stretched north-west of Sydney.⁶ By choosing not to appear, Latham not only missed a political bridge-building opportunity, but he also left a strong impression: the Labor party could have absolutely nothing to say to the members of Hillsong.

9. God at the polling booth: in the US, religion is a main driver of voting patterns. Approximately four out of five white evangelicals supported George W. Bush in the 2004 election – representing more than a third of all his votes. Once the other conservative Christian communities and Catholics are tallied up, then the clear majority of his support is coming from the religious right.⁷ Democrat supporters are considerably less likely to describe themselves as religious and those that do attend church less regularly.⁸ This is the source of what is being described as the ‘religious divide’ in the US – a nation that is split down the middle according to political preference and religious inclination. Simply put, if Republicans are for the believers, and the Democrats are for the agnostics, atheists and worshippers of false idols, then religion has bled into politics to the point where the two are all but indistinguishable. Any attempts to encourage people to vote according to other priorities, such as labour rights or education or health, seem to have radically failed.

10. From a recent article on evangelical megachurches by the Christian journalist and author of *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben:

“In fact, most of what gets preached in these palaces isn’t loony at all. It is disturbingly conventional. The pastors focus relentlessly on you and your individual needs. Their goal is to service customers – not communities but individuals: ‘seekers’ is the term of art, people who feel the need for some spirituality in their (of their children’s) lives but who aren’t tightly bound to any particular denomination or school of thought. The result is often a kind of soft-focus, comfortable, suburban faith. A *New York Times* reporter visiting one booming megachurch outside Phoenix recently found the typical scene: a drive-through latte stand, Krispy Kreme doughnuts at every service, and sermons about “how to discipline your children, how to reach your professional goals, how to invest your money, how to reduce your debt.”

A list of bestsellers compiled monthly by the Christian Booksellers Association illuminates the creed. It includes texts like *Your Best Life Now* by Joel Osteen – pastor of a church so mega it recently leased a 16,000-seat sport arena in Houston for its services – which even the normally tolerant *Publishers Weekly* dismissed as: “a treatise on how to get God to serve the demands of self-centered individuals.”

You could eliminate the scriptural references in most of these bestsellers and they would still make or not make the same amount of sense. *Chicken Soup for the Zoroastrian Soul*. It is a perfect mirror of the secular bestseller lists, indeed of the secular culture, with its American fixation on self-improvement, on self-esteem. On self. These similarities make it difficult (although not impossible) for the televangelists to posit themselves as embattled figures in a ‘culture war’ – they offer too uncanny a reflection of the dominant culture, a culture of unrelenting self-obsession.”⁹

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What can be seen in the rise of the megachurches, be they evangelical or Pentecostal or ‘contemporary Christian’, is the neoliberal response to the economic pressures of our time. This extreme individualist approach is reaching and connecting with a wide audience. Rather

than seeing this as an unfathomable fact – ‘why would so many people be into this nonsense’, a friend recently said – it is important to see how much it reflects our current culture. It is only by looking at some of the root causes, the economic drivers in addition to the spiritual ones, that the political left can both comprehend the success of the megachurches, and think of other ways to reconnect with these populations on the same issues.

Some celebrity pastors of the evangelical right are using their position to harness political power, and encourage their memberships to vote in certain ways. These religious leaders are not the people the left needs to appeal to, nor to appease: manipulating people’s political preferences from the pulpit should be viewed with deep suspicion. But the people who turn up to megachurches every Sunday do have real concerns, and the lasting solutions to these are not found in individualistic wealth-creation and greed. They face community-based problems, and structural inequalities that the left historically understands and should communicate to the same people who are currently being preached to by Brian Houston, the founder of Hillsong and author of *You Need More Money: Discovering God’s Amazing Financial Plan for Your Life*.

The political left doesn’t need to be singing Nu-Praise or selling self-help books, but it may be wise to offer more community-oriented means to relieve the ongoing problems of debt, dislocation and suburban uncertainty.

Notes

1. Romano, Lois, “The Smiling Preacher’ Builds on Large Following”, *The Washington Post*, 30 January, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A47023-2005Jan29.html>
2. Professor Nancy Fraser in interview with Phillip Adams on Late Night Live, Radio National, Monday 1 August, 2005.
3. Bigelow, Gordon, “Let there be Markets: the evangelical toots of economics”, *Harper’s Magazine*, May 2005, p.35.
4. Figures cited come from the following sources: 1-4 Bagnall, Diana, “Upon this rock”, *The Bulletin*, 13 August 2001. <http://bulletin.ninemsn.com.au/bulletin/eddesk.nsf/0/1b64a402025c32d3ca256aa700092ee7?OpenDocument>. 5 Cashmere, Paul, “The Resurrection of the Hillsong Church Album”, *Undercover Online*, 9 August 2004 http://www.undercover.com.au/news/2004/aug04/20040809_hillsong.html. 6 Cashmere, Paul, “Hillsong Church Hit Is A Miracle”, Paul Cashmere, *Undercover Online* 26 July 2004 http://www.undercover.com.au/news/2004/july2004/20040726_hillsong.html. 7-10 “Christians Rock On”, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 21 August 2005 <http://entertainment.news.com.au/story/0,10221,16330762-10431,00.html>
5. Barker, Geoffrey, “Enter the Religious Right”, *The Australian Financial Review*, 7 October 2004.
6. For more financial background on Hillsong and its head pastor, see Sexton, Jennifer, “Property deals at Hillsong”, *The Australian*, 29 July 2005.
7. Antle, W. James III, “Republican Stepchildren”, *The American Conservative*, 11 April 2005.
8. From figures released by the Pew Research Center on religion and the presidential vote. December 6, 2004.
9. McKibben, Bill, “The Christian Paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong”, *Harper’s Magazine*, August 2005. p33-34. <http://www.harpers.org/ExcerptTheChristianParadox.html>.

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