Religious Artefacts As Consumer Culture Products
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This paper explores how religious and secular discourses are combined in the artefacts of a contemporary mega-church. Through an investigation of music lyrics, practice and performance, we explore how religious discourse intersects with the ‘market system’ and ‘therapeutic ethos’ to create a form of marketed religion that is reflective of its target audience. Through analysis of the music of a successful Sydney-based mega church we explore how seemingly contradictory elements of religious traditions are mixed with contemporary discourses that have widespread consumer appeal. We see the hybrid identity of the mega-church (church and business) accentuating the effects of secularisation and consumer culture through the artefacts it produces. This contradiction and reconciliation is reflexively resonant to affluent post-modern yearning for individualism and materialist instant gratification.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Religion has not escaped the effects of consumer culture and is increasingly forced to compete in a spiritual marketplace (Roof 1999). This competition has resulted in constructions of new products and reconstructions of current products. Cultural effects on religious products are not well understood as studies on the consumption of these considered ‘sacred’ products are few. While relations to the sacred have been documented in previous research (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; O’Guinn and Belk 1989; Arnold and Price 2004), they have been predominantly studied as a metaphoric stance rather than specifically about the ‘Sacred’ per se (Iacobucci 2001). As both a religious and cultural product, Christian artefacts are malleable to socio-cultural forces and consumer culture cultural products are also relatively unexplored (Askegaard 2008, Brownlie, Hewer and Horne 2005, Hirschman 1988).

It is not surprising to find the effects of consumer culture on the sacred as ‘marketplace theology’ is being produced by mega-churches which cater to the needs of its target audiences (Twitchell 2004). Cultural products need to be conditioned for the market (Miller 2003), much the same way as agribusiness comes up with exotic and new breeds of common produce to stimulate sales of what is otherwise ‘plain tomatoes’. Featherstone (1991) noted that the locus of the sacred has shifted from traditional religious institutions to consumer culture. In so doing, “consumer culture co-opts religious subcultures and not the other way around” (Romanowski 1992, 47). The purpose of the research is not to ascertain whether contemporary churches and its artefacts is secularised or not, but to explore how church identity is constructed using elements of religious traditions and other familiar, appealing discourses to produce artefacts and experiences that resonate with contemporary consumption ideals of individualism, empowerment, prosperity, immediate rewards and interest in the supernatural.

In an attempt to study how secularisation and consumer culture inflects a religious product and a church’s identity, a cross section of a church-produced contemporary style of Christian worship music dating from 1992–2007 was selected. This music is chosen due to its close relations to a successful Sydney-based mega church which combines Christian theology with business ideals. Textually-oriented discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) was used to do a reading (Scott 1994; Stern 1989) of lyrics. This reading is accompanied and interpreted through an assortment of other texts that include visual, audio, and textual data at the church level. In the analysis of these texts, artefacts and social practices, we were concerned with identifying not only what discourses were being drawn upon but also how they were combined in order to understand the basis for their contemporary appeal.

The church and its artefacts, constructs an identity that draws upon secular and business discourses which are hybridised with religious theology. This hybridisation is comfortably reconciled through a process of differentiation (Saussure 1966) which strives to project an image and identity that is not religion-like and certainly, not like a traditional church. This ‘not religion’ discourse instead offers wholeness, healing and inner transformation to the individual unencumbered by stereotypes of traditional institutionalised religions which connotes formal membership and allegiance. Through this discourse, secular structures and habits are reinforced by a host of practices such as using popular music in praise and worship to heighten emotional contagion, placing a monetary value (ie., price) to church services and events, regular selling of merchandise, marketing preachers and using individualist tenets to repackage religion. The familiar structures and habits of consumer culture re-orient legitimate religious desires into the service of furthering the consumption of religion through music, books, tapes and messages which offers individual self-fulfilment.

Like language, identity can be seen as a system of meaningful differences (Saussure 1966), and in the church studied, the strategy of differentiation is particularly central to its identity construction and discourse. This strategy is enacted in different discursive mediums, for example, in songs and written text as well as through building architecture and design. Through a mixture of humanist, motivational and romantic appeals, the message of God and the Gospel exists theologically but culturally is reconstructed and re-packaged to convey a dominant discourse of ‘ego-centricness’ and ‘feel-goodness’. In a context of individualism where the erosion of traditional institutionalised religions is evident our findings support the takeover of religion by the popular discourse of ‘spirituality’ (Carrette and King 2005). Spirituality, as opposed to religion, is a personal quest for meaning. It is a journey of the soul in order to seek what it’s searching for, or to satisfy what Roof (1999) calls ‘wholeness hunger’. Through this discourse, religion is transformed into a self-centred therapeutic exercise attributable to consumer culture and commercial marketing. The discourses from the songs and church products have this kind of audience in mind. They appeal to the therapeutic and seeker self (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton 1985) by offering empowerment and freedom.

While secularisation theory claims differentiation and separation between religion and other spheres of social life (Chaves 1994), the symbols, practices and myths of traditional religion that once influenced people’s lives continue to do so in the form of consumer culture. Rather than separation and differentiation, what is evident in the findings of this research is a strategic combining of religious and secular discourses within the context of a ‘deregulated’ religious market. In so doing, religion is not able to escape ideological influences exerted by the capitalist marketplace (Thompson 2004). Exposed to the market system and dominated by discourses of freedom and individual choice, religious systems have fragmented as religious consumers can pick and choose. However such ‘freeing up’ of religion has also enabled religious providers to harness the appeal of contemporary discourses in marketing their own brand of religion that resonates with dominant social values of individualism, empowerment and aspiration to affluence.

Cultural secularisation has transformed religious markers and symbols, expressed through music and theology in this study to exhibit patterns of consumer culture. One might argue that this is simply an expression of a religious institution operating under consumer culture, which Slater (1997) defines as a system in which consumption is dominated by the consumption of commodities and in which cultural reproduction is mediated through markets. This is the dominant discourse that actually prevails, is being reproduced and sustained through mega-churches such as Hillsong. Through this dominant discourse, religious beliefs are re-directed into a consumption choice. The economic rhetoric of the ‘marketplace’ speaks of a free market and a consumer who is free to choose; a stance that most people in developed societies are comfortable and
familiar with. It is no surprise that branded churches such as Hillsong employ this rhetoric in marketing religion, enacted through the familiar consumption ideologies of choice, freedom and individual empowerment. While this model of mega-church emerged in a landscape of American Christianity (Twitchell 2004) where the consumption discourse is dominant, it is interesting to see its expansion internationally (Australia, Asia, Africa to name a few) as the practices and dispositions associated with the mega-church spread and colonize other dimensions of Christianity.

REFERENCES