

**Spreading the word:**  
**Persuasive performance techniques used by**  
**Christian fundamentalist evangelists**

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**George Catsi**

**An exegesis and creative project submitted in fulfilment of the**  
**requirements for the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts**  
**University of Technology Sydney**

Part A: Play script *I Want To Be Slim*

Part B: Exegesis

2015

# Statement of authenticity

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I certify that the work presented in this dissertation has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged in the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

**Signature of student:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:**

# Acknowledgements

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<https://youtu.be/f2dlwciffre>

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# Abstract

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Framed by theories of persuasion, this Doctorate of Creative Arts explores the role of the persuasive performance styles of Christian fundamentalist evangelists in increasing the number of church followers. I ask: What makes people convert and then continue to believe, follow, and stay? Is there a relationship between evangelical performativity, the social, economic and political context, and people's decisions to commit to and remain in evangelical churches?

The doctoral creative project, *I Want to Be Slim*, seeks to personify these tools and techniques of persuasion in the behaviour of a theatrical evangelical character, the Reverend Slim Limits. Research into evangelism and evangelical performativity informed the creative development of the performance script. This creative work is written as a satirical cross-platform project involving theatrical performance and digital media, including social networking.

This exegesis draws out the connections between the creative performance script and the broader critical cultural and sociological discussion of the research. The purpose is to give immediacy to the research and demonstrate how it has had direct outcomes in the creative work. ■

# Authorship and copyright of *I Want to Be Slim*

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'Gods (sic) Cowboys' was a comedy trio (1992–96), originally created by George Catsi, David Delves and Michael Petroni. Michael left in the very early stages (before the first professional performance) to pursue a Hollywood scriptwriting career (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader; The Book Thief; The Rite*). George and David continued to develop the show. After 18 months of performing and creating material they auditioned and recruited John Knowles. For four years the group wrote and performed, touring around Sydney and nationally.

Centred on the evangelical cowboy characters Slim, Buck and Billy, the show was an evolving comedic take on masculinity (generally lack thereof), popular culture and politics, wrapped around a parodic look at God and religions. The 'Gods Cowboy' name, logo and character names, and the concept of an evangelical cowboy show, emerged from this original idea. These elements are used in *I Want to Be Slim*, the creative part of this Doctor of Creative Arts submission. To clarify, *I Want to Be Slim* is new work that has been built on the original characters of Slim and Billy. It incorporates some writing from the original show (as documented below),

adapted to explore new directions and concepts. New scripting relevant to this Doctor in Creative Arts submission commenced in late 2008. The final script is approximately 90 per cent new work.

The writing from the original 1990s show present in the assessable version is: Billy's opening prayer, In the Grotto (written by Catsi), opening parts of the healing, and Bibleland including the Luna Park face of Jesus. Further Bibleland drawings for *I Want to Be Slim* were commissioned from David Duloy. All writing from the original show is credited to Catsi, Delves and Knowles equally. ■

## I WANT TO BE SLIM

George Catsi

A satirical comedy, a hyper-real allegory / morality tale about Slim, an ambitious cowboy who missed the point at a Billy Graham Crusade and accepted Graham into his life not Jesus. As a misguided evangelist he sets about building a church, but to whom?

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### **Cast of Characters:**

**Rev Slim Limits:** Pastor of the Church of the Holy Cowboy that he created. He's drawn to Billy Graham's power to persuade and pull a crowd. Very much an ordinary man who thinks he has developed an incredible charisma. He is wily, highly intelligent, and a salesman of epic proportions. Reflecting the universal spread of Christian mission he is of no particular nationality or placed in any country and aged in his mid-life.

**Billy:** A career cowboy he's now joined Slim as his apprentice and principal devotee. In his mid 30's to 40's he has boyish looks and a childlike mischievousness. He is naïve and unrestrained in his truthfulness.

**Time and Place:** Located in a public hall or meeting place the play is set in contemporary times.

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## ACT I - TO CONVINC

*IN FOYER: REV SLIM LIMITS, Pastor of the Church of the Holy Cowboy and BILLY his devotee / apprentice, greet the audience in the foyer as they enter the theatre. The characters directly interact with the audience as their congregation.*

*IN THEATRE: In no particular place or time on stage a carnival / evangelical tent setting. A wooden chair, more throne like, with crimson cushions is present on stage.*

*As a congregation enters a live choir and band are present opening show singing Traditional / Spirituals 'Old Landmark' seguing into 'He's alright, he's alright' (repeated). The music is joyful and loud.*

*Within the set several television monitors of various sizes either broadcast live the proceedings on stage or loop footage (no sound) of church messages, advertisements for church products, live footage plus other media. This continues through performance. A pre-recorded video of Slim and Billy as TV evangelists are doing their weekly TV show.*

**(following text scrolls across bottom of screens:**

**MoraliTyV: Syndicated globally, streamed on-line or by podcast / [www.godscowboys.com](http://www.godscowboys.com) for live services and virtual church / All products available from [www.churchandise.com](http://www.churchandise.com) / Have Slim be your only real friend on Face Book / Cowboy church and café franchises available now / Join the Church of the Holy Cowboy and be part of the winning team)**

*BILLY, Slim's novice, enters from rear of theatre during singing and engages directly with audience as he moves through them encouraging them to clap their hands and stand up. He lets them know the audience is now a congregation and anything is possible on this stage. Music and singing continue as Billy reaches stage.*

BILLY

Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, hurry to your seats! Hurry, hurry, you don't want to be late. Sit down, open your eyes, open your hearts and prepare to be amazed. Here it is for your enjoyment and instruction, for your gratification and edification, the show you have been waiting for all your life. The Greatest Show on Earth!  
Are you ready for the miracle of it? Yes.  
Did I hear you say, yes! (encourage response)

You've seen us in the climate-controlled shopping malls. You've seen us in semi-arid suburban housing estates. You've seen us in brackish shirts and ties on push bikes. You've seen us standing behind every conservative politician. You've seen us in the jungles of New Guinea and you've seen us breeding in outer suburban communities or hills districts. Sometimes you don't even know we are there at all.

*(Billy does a simple magic trick that conjures something from nothing).*

Truly we would fit in anywhere.  
But you've never seen us how you are about to see us right here, right now. Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, without further ado, it is my pleasure and honour to present to you, supported by the chorus of angels, The Herd on High Cowboy Gospel Choir. With the musical elixir dispensed by our conjurers of creativity, The Rhythm Method.

Raise your arms to the sky, raise your bodies to your feet, stamp the ground and let your tongues be free. For the moment has arrived to bring to you, The Amazing, the Inspirational, The Master Pastor himself, God's local representative, The Rev Slim Limits.

*SLIM runs in from rear of theatre and moves through crowd, shaking hands, greeting and dancing with joy. He is filled with the spirit. Choir segues into singing the theme hymn of the event, I Want to Be Slim. BILLY joins them and*

---

*encourages audience to singing along with the words projected onto a screen:*

I WANT TO BE SLIM (OPENING)

(Choir and Billy)

I WANT TO BE SLIM

I WANT TO BE FREE

I WANT TO SHED THE THINGS THAT BIND ME

I WANT TO BE STRONG

I WANT TO BE LOVED

I WANT YOU TO BE THE HAND THAT GUIDES ME

ENTER ME AND BE MY SOURCE

MY FAMILY I WILL DIVORCE

HOW I LIVE IS YOUR DECISION

MY LOVE FOR YOU TRANSCENDS RELIGION

REVEAL THE SECRETS OF YOUR PLAN

HOW YOU'RE JUST A SIMPLE MAN WHO

FOUND THE SECRET TO SLIM DOWN

WE WORSHIP NOW YOUR HOLY GROUND

(Slim's response)

DO YOU WANT TO BE SLIM

WANT TO BE FREE

DO YOU WANT TO SHED THE THINGS THAT BIND YOU

DO YOU WANT TO BE STRONG

WANT TO BE LOVED

DO YOU WANT ME TO BE THE HAND THAT GUIDES YOU

IF JESUS WAS A TRAVELLING MAN

SELLING DREAMS TO ALL HE CAN

THEN I CAN OFFER MORE REWARDS

TO THOSE WHO JOIN, HELP CONVERT THE HOARDS

(Billy)

SLIM HAS SEATS HE IS RESERVING

SAVED FOR THOSE HE DEEMS DESERVING

YOU'LL GET YOUR CHANCE TO ROLL AND WIN

ANSWER YES TO 'WHO WANTS IN?'

(Slim, Billy and choir plus audience)

WE WANT TO BE SLIM

WE WANT TO BE FREE

WE WANT TO SHED THE THINGS THAT BIND US

---

WE WANT TO BE STRONG  
WE WANT TO BE LOVED  
WE WANT YOU TO BE THE HAND THAT GUIDES US  
WE WANT TO BE LOVED  
BE LOVED, BE LOVED, BE LOVED...(repetitive crescendo)

SLIM

*Whilst choir crescendos Billy and Slim do choreographed ritual: Imagined cowboy rope, Billy lassos Slim who breaks free and has a quick mock gun draw with Billy. High playful energy. This church is fun! Finishing with a Cow Salute - 2 fingers (pointer and pinkie) raised against forehead like cows ears and punctuated by a moo sound.*

*Slim feels the musical crescendo then cuts the music and singing off. He is in charge.*

*(evangelistic performance style - staccato and rhythmic - foot stamping)*

Hallelujah, Brothers and Sisters, Hallelujah.

Can I have a Hallelujah.

*(Audience call and response - and for further calls throughout show)*

Can I have a Praise The Lord.

The bible tell me, blessed are the people of Sydney.

*(insert current location)*

The bible tell me, a great church will be built here that will consolidate all the other churches.

HEY, thank you Lord, thank you Lord.

They put a nail in his hand, Brothers and sisters, for you and I. They put a nail in his other hand, for you and I. They did his nails, for you and I

Glory to God.

Come on. Come on, come on, come on.

Can you say, yeah Lord, (yeah Lord)

Can you say, yeah Lord, (yeah Lord)

Yeah Lord, yeah Lord, yeah Lord

Lordie, Lordie, Lordie, Lordie, Lordie

Jesus said, blessed are those that cannot see, but still believe.

I say, blessed are those that cannot think, but still believe. HEY



BILLY

Can I have a Bless you Slim.  
The furnace is gonna be cooking souls on hot, hot,  
hot, hot here tonight.

SLIM

I am the Rev Slim Limits.  
I am the pastor and founder of the Church of the Holy  
Cowboy.  
I am here as your preacher on the last leg of my  
global mission.  
I am here tonight to clear a backlog of sinners.  
So prepare yourself tonight to be cleansed.  
Prepare yourself tonight to be healed.  
Prepare yourself tonight to be saved.  
But you're going to have to work a bit.  
I want you all to Try, really Try.  
I want you to Think, really Think.  
I want you to Believe, really Believe.  
For tonight you will see things that will move you.

BILLY

See people healed before your eyes.

SLIM

Be touched by my hands.

BILLY

Smell God in this room tonight.

SLIM

(in rapture) Oh Brothers and Sisters, Sisters and  
Brothers, you're all related somehow I'm sure.  
We are here tonight on a mission.  
A mission so important, so urgent, so dangerous.  
A mission that not everybody will come back with  
their earthly bodies alive.  
A mission that will lead you to face fear and  
ridicule.  
A mission that is complex and treacherous.  
A mission where we shall fight without compromise or  
acceptance.  
A mission where logic will prevail over science,  
where love will prevail over sex.  
A mission where conservatism will pound the face of  
doubt with love and understanding.

---

A mission that I can lead you through and have you be victorious in.

A mission you have all signed up for by coming here today.

BILLY

We'll hand out your contract soon.

SLIM

But firstly, I want you to formally meet this very special man who will help me guide your mind to where it wants to go, to where it ought to go. He is my most trusted servant, the masters apprentice and he's a very good boy, with strong Cowboy values. Why we're just a couple of cowboys riding out on the spiritual mountains together. We go camping and well, I know this boy intimately and I'd trust him with my life. Can you give him a big Hallelujah Yee haa for Gods second Cowboy, Brother Billy.

Now for some special news. God has chosen Billy to be an evangelical entertainer, like myself and he'll be in training tonight to become a fully fledged deputy pastor. He will be left behind in this location here to water the seeds we sow tonight as I leave to continue to grow the church, expanding globally. Billy will become authoritarian on all things spiritual, my voice, my eyes, my ears whilst I am away. Can I have an Amen for Billy. Give him a round of big showbiz applause as encouragement. *(Gives Billy an approving nod)*

BILLY

Let's pray. Oh Father thank you for delivering us here to day this lost flock. I am not worthy Lord to be amongst such a desperate, degenerate, educated low life yet open group. Slim you have shown your faith in me that I can round this herd up to your heavenly corral and mark them with your white-hot brand of truth. Amen

SLIM

After the service tonight we want you to stay around and join us for some drinks and snacks.

BILLY

We've got crackers and sheep dip

SLIM

There will be party games like 'Toss the Halo of Jesus'.

---

BILLY

'Pin the Saviour on the Cross'.

SLIM

No Billy that's an Easter game. But that's all later.  
For now I want you to you to play a little  
imagination game. The church we are starting here  
today will be simple.

BILLY

Just like you folks.

SLIM

But it will be grown into my most glorious cathedral  
part of a global network that I will lead. But I want  
you just for a moment to imagine yourself in your  
future home, our home that we can build together if  
you join me tonight. Across the global I'm the bishop  
of an evangelical church with 40,000 adherents.

BILLY

Give or take some zeros.

SLIM

I prefer this word adherents to 'followers' as once  
we get you in we aim to have you super glued to the  
place. We have no home big enough to fit you all in. But I  
have a dream and I invite you to be part of. My dream  
cathedral is.....

BILLY (*enthusiastically leaping in*)

....fantastic. It's like a toy store and a jewellery store in one. Imagine a  
pipe organ with pipes that reach all the way to heaven. It's got those  
smoke machines that you wave around to get the kiddies in.

SLIM

We've got a gym where you can watch the service  
whilst you pump and Slimba® classes - my patented  
WEIGHT LOSS exercise program.

BILLY

and a pay-by-the-hour crèche.

SLIM

and a churchandise store for all your gifts.

BILLY

There's a glass ceiling for the women, a glass front  
door for the men, glass walls to keep a watch on what  
everybody is doing and a wall of mirrors to contain  
the young folk.

---

The latest Christian Video games for the teens like 'Muslim Slayer' and there's free parking if you tithe more than 10%, there's high-tech security gates.....

SLIM

Get to the healing Billy because that's what today is about.

There's a golden rack with his magical healing coat and Slim's patented new healing helmet, the latest in miracle health technology, giving you the proof you need. (advertising voice)"If you get proof, it's a miracle!" The healing will come later, so get your ailments ready. Plus at the back of the cathedral is a huge golden statue of Slim.

SLIM

Not yet Billy, it's of our saviour. But just forget about that for a moment, take all that out of your mind, forget about the pipes, the statue, the coat. You're not ready yet for what's possible.

BILLY

You gotta earn it.

SLIM

However, to those people who want to join our herd and tonight say, YES, I want in. Who say, YES I accept Gods Cowboys in my life. Who say YES Slim you are the light and the path. As a sign up reward after the show I'm going to reveal to you a secret. My "10 Steps to Spiritual Wealth"

BILLY

Give them more Slim, give them more.

SLIM

OK Billy, because I can sense this lady here and this man here are ready to make that step, as a bonus I'll make it 20 Steps to Spiritual Wealth.

BILLY

Praise you Slim!

SLIM

The choice is yours. Choice. Choice my friends, one of the most frightening words in any language. Your life is a series of choices. Good and bad, right and wrong, anti and pro. Make one here today and you may

---

never need to make another in your life again.

BILLY

We'll look after that for you.

SLIM I too was once just like you. However, in 1979 I had an epiphany and I made a choice that changed my life, just like yours could. My mother took me to see the great American evangelist Mr Billy Graham. The closest things to perfection, other than my mother, that I had ever encountered. He was holding his Crusade Rally on a rainy day at our local racecourse. Mr Billy Graham's podium was symbolically built right there at the horse finishing post. Up high behind him my mother sang in the Crusade Choir and I, as a 15 year old volunteer, wore the issued orange armband that said USHER. I worked the stands helping people in and out. (*warmly*) The work was good but the tips were lousy. That day, at that racecourse, in front of tens of thousand of people, when Billy Graham called everyone to come forward and accept Him into their lives:

(Musically)

I heard the power of Billy's words.

I saw the strength in Billy's gesture.

I was drawn to the show's simple production values

I was transfixed by the power of his performance.

I was mesmerised by his sheer perfection.

I rose to my feet.

I raised my hands in the air.

I caught the flow of people to the front and,

I gathered at the podium with the others at his feet.

I counted the audience numbers.

I did the maths.

I knew then and there,

I want what he's got.

I want what Billy's got.

The way to eternal salvation lay at that racetrack finishing post. That day I accepted Billy Graham into my life, for he performed well on a wet track like no horse I had ever seen. And the name Billy, well it now represents something very pure.

So who will you accept into your life today? The way to your salvation lays right here at the foot of this podium. The choice is yours and you'll soon get your chance.

BILLY

There is only once chance to be saved and that chance

---

is Slim.

A quick announcement would the owner of a blue Ford number plate CNA 800 please move it as your blocking the drive.

If we're going to be spending so much time together Slim says he's got to get to know each of you a little bit more.

SLIM

Some of you have prior knowledge, your carrying baggage from some previous religious education. We just need to remove this baggage, unclutter things, lighten your load.

BILLY

How many people go to church? *(Wait for hands up in audience)*

SLIM

How many people have seen a church?

BILLY

It's the one with the steeple on top with the water views.

SLIM

Not these days Billy they're often found in shopping malls or industrial estates.

BILLY

Taking the steeple to the people.

SLIM

Do we have any Catholics in the room?

BILLY

The guilty ones.

SLIM

Do we have any lapsed Catholics? Would you recognise His Holiness?

BILLY

The man with the hole?

SLIM

No Billy that's the priest but his Holiness is the Pope. Why the last Pope, Benedictine, I believe enjoyed a large choreographed rally, German style that he learnt during the war.

*Billy and Slim interact with audience asking for different religions in the room - some example lines are:*

SLIM

Anglicans - if they split any more they'll be ripe for a takeover from the Catholics. (*general interaction*)

BILLY

It will be just like going home. (*general interaction*)

SLIM

Bahai - they take all the best bits from all the religions. Like gorging at the buffet and taking the seafood only.  
(*general interaction*)

BILLY

Buffets leave me constipated. (*general interaction*)

SLIM

(to Billy) Regarding these other types of denominations, all you have to do is get some sound and perfectly meaningless doctrine and keep repeating it. You won't bore the laymen, in fact the only thing they resent is something that is new, so they have to work their brains.

BILLY

Speaking of, we always have some older folk who have been moved on from one of those branded churches obsessed with youth, like the Hillsong Church.  
(*localise to high earning Evangelical Pentecostal church*)

SLIM

Whose motto is: Real People,

BILLY

Real Lives,

SLIM

Real Money,

BILLY

Being Transferred.

SLIM

Transformed Billy, Transformed.  
Oh I say pooh to these corporate style enterprise churches. The pulpit of those modern, mega, media churches are for actors that aren't good enough to get on a theatrical stage.

BILLY

Are we good enough to get on a stage?

SLIM

Wouldn't catch me near a stage, Billy.

---

BILLY

You don't think you can find there, on a theatre stage, one single solitary person to save?

SLIM

The way I see it, yes. Maybe if a fellow ain't had a chance to see the light, never heard a real dyed-in-the-wool preacher, like myself, explain the complete truth of the Book.

BILLY

The Book of Slim!

SLIM

But one thing I do know, absolute, the arts is full of these 'advanced thinkers' and 'higher critics' so called 'intellectuals'. With their perfect minds they're creating perfect ideas on why, what I say and do, don't make perfect sense. I'm sure none of the people here are advanced thinkers. Now, let me make this perfectly clear, intellectuals are going to the hottest pit of hell!

BILLY

Pit number 7! Wow that's hot.

SLIM

Relax Billy, we can safely leave it to the mercy of their own theatre critics, to take care of these maudlin and mawkish, alleged, advanced thinkers.

BILLY

Slim you lead by example on renouncing higher thinking.

SLIM

They don't do anybody any practical good in the great work of bringing poor, suffering, retarded thinking, souls to peace. Why then I'm too busy to waste my time on them, that's all, and I wouldn't care a bit if they heard me and knew it.

BILLY

As you told me Slim, we must depend on YOU, not our own creative initiative. Slim expression not self-expression, Slim expression not self-expression never ever self-expression.

SLIM

(to audience) Do we have any atheists in the room? We

---



do, well God bless the atheists because atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith. To believe in nothing is still a belief. Why every word you speak, speaks of faith. We're all in the big believers boat together. So dear atheists like me you go as far as your legs will carry you, and then you leap.

BILLY

Even if you're leaping into nothing

SLIM

But my friends, right here today you could choose to believe in what I believe in.

Religion is like a horse race, full of gamblers. Once you've picked which horse you'll back the only way to be triumphant is to put everything you own down for a win. I'll be honest it is not the atheists that get stuck on my boots when I go for a walk in the paddock. It's the Agnostics, the each-way betters, the doubters, the fence sitters and trust me it is a barbed wire fence their arse is on. Now doubt is useful for a while. Even Jesus played with doubt as he hung from the cross and looked up, "Do not forsake me..."

BILLY

....Oh my darling".

SLIM

Then surely we are permitted doubt. But hey you gotta get on your horse and take it to the water and force it to drink. The slippery slope of doubt leads to the furnace of failure. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation. It just don't work. Doubt leaves you vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. Trust me I know that very, very well.

BILLY

Slim, I've been having some doubts.

SLIM

Really Billy tell me about it.

BILLY

If there is a God why is there sickness?

SLIM

Why, to employ the nurses.

BILLY

If there is a God why do children die? (Before Slim can find an answer) If there is a God why did he put the oil under the sandals of those Muslims?

SLIM

Absolutely! Anyone here who has doubts, not about Billy but about their beliefs? So that must make the rest of you all believers. We're gonna need you to help these folk down here. Help get them to see that doubt will only lead them to trouble later on when they are banished from heaven. Which of you believers here will put your hand in your pocket and pay for one of my motivational DVD box sets, "I Want to Be Slim" for one the doubters. Think about it.

Now, listen closely. I knew a man, a believer, who was exploited, humiliated and had to deal with doubt and I want to tell you his sad, sad story.....

**SONG: IN THE GROTTTO**

AS THE SAND FLIES,  
ON A COLD AND GREY BETHLEHEM MORN  
POOR LITTLE BABY JESUS IS BORN,  
IN THE GROTTTO (IN THE GROTTTO)  
AND HIS PAPA CRIES (IN THE GROTTTO)

YOU SEE JOE'S BEEN LIKE A BUMP ON A LOG  
HIS WIFE'S BEEN HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH GOD  
IN THE GROTTTO (IN THE GROTTTO)

PEOPLE DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND  
JOE FELT LIKE HALF A MAN  
CAUSE HIS SEED IT HAD NO WHERE TO GO  
AND HIS SHAME WAS PLAIN TO SEE  
WHEN HIS FRIENDS FROM GALILEE  
SAW THAT MARY'S LITTLE BOY HAD A BIG HALO

WELL THE WORLD TURNS  
AND IN THIS MAKESHIFT BETHLEHEM MATERNITY WARD  
HE CURSES HIS SPERM CAUSE ITS AIN'T THE LORDS

---

IN THE GROTTTO (IN THE GROTTTO)  
AND HIS LOINS BURN (IN THE GROTTTO)

HE'S GOT A DOZEN CIGARS THAT HE WANTS TO LIGHT  
BUT NONE OF HIS FRIENDS TURN UP THAT NIGHT  
IN THE GROTTTO (IN THE GROTTTO)

AND THEN ONE NIGHT IN DEEP FRUSTRATION  
JOSEPH LEAVES HIS SPOUSE  
THREE KINGS TURN UP  
TO SEE THE QUEEN  
AND HER NEW LITTLE JOKER  
AND THAT'S A FULL HOUSE

AND HIS PAPA CRIES

JOSEPH KNEW HE COULDN'T WIN  
AND THE BIBLE SAYS NO MORE OF HIM  
IN THE GROTTTO (IN THE GROTTTO)  
IF ONLY HE HAD KNOWN (IN THE GROTTTO)

THAT ON A COLD AND GREY MECCA MORN  
POOR LITTLE BABY MOHAMMED IS BORN  
IN THE GROTTTO (IN THE GROTTTO)  
AND HIS PAPA CRIES (IN THE GROTTTO)  
IN THE GROTTTO

SLIM

That's a sad, sad story. But from little things, big  
things grow.

BILLY

Like Christmas!

SLIM

The power of Father and Son and the bonds of family. Joseph and his  
son.....(*tries to remember name*)

BILLY

Jesus.

SLIM

Jesus! He still loved his mother Mary even though she had  
that affair.

And me...well, we are forged in the furnace of our family.

---

Later tonight I want to tell you a story, my story. It's a hard one to tell and I'll need to gather strength from seeing your hands go up. Through your words, 'I love you Slim, I want in', I may just get through it. However Brothers and Sisters tonight is not about me. I've already been saved. I want to share with you a story that makes me pause and give thanks to every breath I'm blessed with. Probably the hardest one I'll tell but I'll give it a go.

*(to woman in audience)*

Hold my hand to give me strength. *(Holds woman's hand)*

What's your name ma'am (e.g. Betty)? I get to see a lot of unfortunates, like Betty here, on my regular hospital visits. I provide them with support, guidance and my "Where there's a Will there's a Way" Estate Counselling Service.

Now it is one thing to see an adult of unsound mind and body but when it is a child whose so weak and frail that you have to help them hold the pen to write, "Gods Cowboys" as benefactor. Why that's almost too much to bear.

*CHOIR OOHS AMAZING GRACE - BILLY PLAYS HARMONICA*

I recently met such a boy in hospital on one of my regular weekly visits. He was in intensive care. Peering in to his tent.....looking down I saw this sad little boy, he was very sick. Why I tried to cheer him up by taking out my false teeth and doing a Benny Hinn impersonation (pause) but no he didn't know who Benny Hinn was either. He just lay there sad and unhappy. I looked at the chart at the end of his bed and I read what that chart said, 'Leukaemia'. I said listen son, listen Luke if you could have one last wish what would it be. Luke looked up at me with those sad and pathetic eyes and said, "I'd like a Wii, sir". "Son I may be a healer but I don't do bodily fluids". "No a Wii computer game' Luke said. 'Son that's not the answer, if you could have a second Make-A-Wish what would it be?' Brothers and Sisters Luke then looked down at the pages of his Slim's Children's Picture Bible that I had propped up in front of him and said, "Slim if I could be

transported into the pages of this picture bible I know that I would become well again and have fun and maybe even meet the saviour."

Well next week when I returned I went straight to Luke's bed. There was nobody in it. I asked the nurse and he said, "Luke's gone to that eternal slumber that awaits us all." That day you saw a grown man cry like a baby.

BILLY

He hadn't signed the cheque yet

*CHOIR VOICES GENTLY TO 'PRAISE GOD'*

SLIM

But through the mists of my grief a vision came to me. I must grant Luke's last wish. I must create a magical place where sickly children will force their parents to bring them to so laughter and smiles can be on their faces one last time.

*CHOIR / MUSIC END*

BILLY

That's why I want you to think about Mr and Mrs Aemia in their grief and I want you to dig deeply because all the money you generously donate here tonight is going so we can create: 'The Gods Cowboys Theme Park for Sickly Children'

SLIM

We're talking Jerusalem on the Gold Coast. Bibleland!  
(Bibleland image on screen)

Can I have an Amen. Every dollar you donate tonight will help fulfil our dream to create the holiday event of a lifetime for terminally ill children, Bibleland.

God told me to go build it. Well I, we, with your financial support here tonight will build it. Why I can already see the families rolling their wheelchairs through the turnstiles to be greeted by one of our sympathetic staff.

BILLY

Or cuddly theme lepers.

---

SLIM

But words are cheap brothers and sisters...

BILLY

That's why he uses so many.

SLIM

...pictures tell it so much better. Time to see the presentation?

***BIBLELAND Infomercial Sales Presentation Plays***

(Script of marketing video or can be read as dialogue - Billy casually interviews Slim - dialogue suggestive)

*Bibleland. Imagine the joy on their faces as they ride the John the Baptist Water slide or go in the Affliction of Job House of Horrors.*

*Imagine as their pathetic little bodies cling to the Joseph and Mary-go-Round.*

*In the centre of the park, right next to the Lions of Rome Virtual Reality Colosseum, we're planning on building the feature of*

*Bibleland. We're building a 360m concrete statue of Jesus on the cross. Praise the Lord.*

*The faithful can't help but feel closer to God as they ascend the escalator to the revolving Crown Casino and Restaurant. "I can see from here to Eternity", they will say.*

*Start to imagine people roll through the turnstile and Father and Son on the Holy Ghost Train. Imagine the food and the fun and the*

*Churchandise. And all the opportunities for families to come closer as the kiddies get closer to God.*

*Remember every dollar you donate goes to creating the holiday event of a lifetime for terminally children, Bibleland.*

SLIM

Bibleland, Bibleland, Bibleland, Bibleland. Now we're going to pass the offering plate around so we need some Deacons to help us out, (points to audience members) you and you. (send them out amongst

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congregation)

Or you can see one of our money changers with EFTPOS at the back of the room or donate on-line. Bibleland is possible but only if you make it so. If you prefer discretion, see me after. Just quietly put some money in my pocket and I can guarantee that it will go towards ensuring this multi-media presentation continues to be seen.

*Choir sings: "Never Heard a Man Speak Like This Man"*

*Never heard a man speak like this man before  
Never heard a man speak like this man before  
All the days of my life, ever since I've been born  
I never heard a man speak like this man before*

BILLY

Slim, I got the money. It's time. They're ready.

SLIM

I want to meet everyone in the room here tonight because you're all new faces to me. Plus nice to see some returning faces from previous meetings when I was last here.

*(points to person in audience)* Bringing friends I hope sir.

*MOVES INTO AUDIENCE - only ask women for their name - appear to be going through every chair in the house*

At the back there hello Sir, hello Sir, hello ma'am what's your name, *(wait for answer)* and you ma'am *(wait for answer)* ..... *(continue then stop on a pretty woman)*

*(Exuding a high status, male confidence)* Hello.

BILLY

Why hello.

SLIM

What's your name? *[Allow for response (e.g.) Sue]*

And where are you from Sue? *[wait for answer - e.g. Sydney]* *(To Sue but including everyone in room)* And who said nothing perfect ever came out of Sydney.

Sue, do you want more from your life? Do you want more money, better relationships, be able to help your friends and

---

families when you can? Do you want more happiness Sue?

*(wait for YES or twist no response into a yes)*

Good girl, *(HOLD her hand)* I want that too.

*(To everyone in room)* Can I have a hallelujah for Sue here.

*(To Sue)* But Sue I can see issues on the inside that still need resolving. You want more friends, Sue? Friends you can really trust. Of course you do, so do I.

*(To everyone in room)* Isn't that what we all want brothers and sisters, friends you can trust. *(to Sue)* Cause you just don't know who you can trust these days do you Sue.

*(To everyone whilst holding her hand)* I've got my card here *(pulls out business card and holds up)* and on this card is my name and number. Looking around the room I can see that some of you folks are going to need some one on one counselling after the show. I am so confident that one of you will take this card that I haven't even booked a hotel room tonight.

BILLY

Where am I sleeping?

SLIM

Now I want you to turn to the person next to you.

Mind this card for me Sue. *(give card to Sue)*

Turn to the person next to you. No, turn to someone you don't know. Look next to you, look behind you, look deep inside of you and I want you to say Howdy Partner I love you.

*Wait for audience to do it (To Billy)*

Why that was apocalyptic.

BILLY

Do we have a room full of Protestants?

SLIM

Now do it again so loud that the Lord above knows how many people are in the room.

BILLY

Actually we do need him to know how many people are in the room because Slim says we're on a strict quota.

SLIM

Now this time I want you to feel the energy coming up from your toes, rising up through your legs, go through your crotch gather some steam, through your

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chest and I want you to shout it out as loud as you can to the Lord up above. Then I want you to turn to that person and I want you to reach out and touch them. I want you to touch them. In my church it is OK to touch.

BILLY

In fact it's encouraged.

SLIM

Billy you lead them. I'm going to see if there are any reluctant stragglers outside.

BILLY

Now we all need to stand up because that's how you get the energy.

SLIM

*Billy gets them to do it whilst Slim goes to the theatre / venue door and looks to see if there is any one else he can draw into this service.*

*Slim is on microphone and can be heard spruiking, trying to woo passers-by into the service. Meanwhile, Billy starts playing "Billy Says" (like Simon says) with audience.*

*Re-enters theatre Billy! (Billy immediately falls into line)*

Lock the doors, lock the doors, that's right seal it up.

*Billy moves around venue ensuring doors are closed.*

Sit down, brothers and sisters, sit down. Relax. relax, everything is under control. Now everybody, we are locking the doors for your own protection. There are people outside, why there are government agencies outside who think they know what's going on in here. They may try and storm this sanctuary of ours. They may try and take you away from this place of hope and peace. But I will look after you. I have several men posted outside who will sort them out. You'll all be safe with me. Billy are the doors locked?

BILLY

The compound is secure.

SLIM

Pass me the keys. There are some of you thinking I

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like his suit but I don't like where this is going.  
You might be feeling the urge to get out, in your  
head your saying "I gotta get out, I gotta get out"

BILLY

I gotta get out, I gotta get out, I gotta.....

SLIM

Billy! (to audience) But it's OK we can help control  
your thoughts.

BILLY

(in sync with Slim)...help control your thoughts.

SLIM

You'll all be safe with me, in what we'll call  
Slimtown. Now everybody relax, smile, because where  
going to be spending the rest of Eternity together.  
Isn't that grand, just you and me and Billy for the  
rest of time. Up there in heaven for ever and ever  
together. We'll all be equal...

BILLY

....and Slim will be the boss.

SLIM

Thank yourself for choosing to stay. You see, the Lord has  
granted me exclusive rights on Doomsday, I and only I decide  
when it will end. Now that we're all safe inside here in our  
sanctuary can I have a heart felt 'Praise you Slim'. (*audience responds*)  
Can you feel it?

BILLY

Feel what Slim?

SLIM

An almighty storm is brewing. The parched and savage  
winds of change will blow through here soon. You can  
choose to be in the storm or above it. Come fly with me.

BILLY

Slim told me we can look down and laugh, pitifully at  
those who make the....wrong choice.

SLIM

Oh wont you come? Wont you make your old friend here  
happy? Let yourself know the joy of surrender!  
Can I have a Praise you Slim,  
Can I have a Slim is God,  
Can I have a God is SLIM.

*Billy exit*

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## ACT II - TO CONVERT

REV JIM JONES V/O (*ACTUAL HISTORICAL AUDIO TRACK*)

There's a little town. Every time I think of it a great deal of pain comes. As a child I was undoubtedly one of the poor in the community, never accepted. Born as it were on the wrong side of the tracks.

*Slim's dialogue picks up from where Jim's stops.*

*Jim's words become Slim's.*

SLIM

My father did not work, did not have a job and was a drunk. My mother had to work to support the family and I was left to my own devices, left to run wild. I was in a dysfunctional family. Oh you have a nice name for it now but when you live in a dysfunctional family you think it is normal. As a boy I always dreamt about escaping from this forsaken family that I had been born into. As a boy I only had one friend, my best friend, my pet cow.

*Reveals a cow hand-puppet and acts out dialogue*

My father named her Blaspheme as a constant reminder to 'watch my mouth'. I loved her dearly. We'd spend endless summers together in the barn, just lying alone in the hay playing, laughing, touching. We dreamed endlessly of growing wings on our backs and flying way up high across the land to better places, distant places, away places. Places where people spoke and thought differently and where our special friendship would be recognised, like Alabama or maybe Mississippi.

*(localised name if appropriate)*

We just knew with time our wings would come.

One day when I was 17 I came home from primary school and went looking for my best friend Blaspheme like I did every single day. But I couldn't find her anywhere. I looked in the barn, I looked in the bedroom. That night I sat down at the family table for dinner and I asked my Daddy. "Daddy, I've been looking for Blaspheme every where and I can't find her. Do you know where she might be?"

Well my Dad just looked to the plate and took a piece of juicy rare roast beef to his lips. As drips of partly cooked blood oozed from the meat and fell down the front of his shirt, my Dad, with a smug grin and eyes piercing my skin, said to me, "Son, one must die, so one can live."

*(drop puppet to floor)*

As I looked down at the slaughtered, butchered and BBQ'd remains of my best friend on my plate, I knew then that Blaspheme had entered my mouth. That night I went to my room and with my father's words ringing in my ears, I cried myself to sleep. I had dreams of rage and revenge that felt so real I could reach out and touch 'em.

Then God spoke to me in a vision. I would build a church in honour of Blaspheme and I would forge a statue of her and it would be made of gold. People would come and they would kiss her feet and there would be a water trough, where they would cleanse themselves and we could wash their brains. There would be candles and I'd be the head of the church and Blaspheme and I could live together, forever.

That night, The Church of the Holy Cowboy was born. Years later at the finishing post Billy Graham showed me the path to the paddock and with his help I opened the spiritual gate and released Blaspheme into the world. Tonight is your chance to join. Just takes three words, "I Want in".

*Large Angel cow icon is revealed.*

SLIM (cont'd)

As a child I learnt the value of having something to believe in. Therefore the foundation of my Church and the future of my world is in the children. Give me a child till they're 7 years old and I will have them for life. I encourage you to enrol your kids into our new program called "Slim Youth" or as I like to call it, SLOUTH whose motto is 'No Limits'.

BILLY

*Billy enters with armband on and has changed his hat and shirt. Standing straight and tall sings the Slouth Song:*

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Love and Truth,  
Slim Youth,  
An eye for an eye,  
And a tooth for a tooth  
I'll Dib Dib Dib,  
I'll Dob on Dad.  
We love Slim,  
And now he's glad.

*They finish with the Cow Salute.*

SLIM

Speaking of suffer the children, here's Billy who will speak directly a lesson of hope to the young or (*looks at a middle aged woman in audience*) the young at heart.

*Billy magically lights a campfire.*

SLIM

If your fire gets low I can give you some more books to burn.

*Slim exits*

BILLY

Come on, gather around, it's parable time. When I was 7 Years old, I was enlisted in the School of Evangelism for Kids. My first day at Malagash Bible Camp or (*lowers voice*)...Jesus Camp. Slim gets upset sometimes when he hears Jesus's name as he's very competitive. He thinks Jesus is taking all our business.

Anyway the camp was fantastic. There were games, water sports and tether ball. It was a ball tied to a rope to the top of a pole. I could play it for hours just hitting that ball as hard as possible and watching it go around, then hitting it again and again and again and it coming back for more. It brought back so many memories.

At night, we'd sit by the campfire with the storyteller named Uncle Joe. He must have been a 100 years old, he was the kindest gentlest man and he told us a Christian bedtime story called Trial By Fire.

*A simplistic puppet show revealed that plays out the scenes.*

It was a story about an overweight guy who was a ventriloquist. He had a puppet named Kristina. This fellow was in a car crash and he got burned up real bad. I remember Uncle Joe telling us kids how the man's face had most of the skin burned right off.

In hospital, his head blew up like a big, bloody balloon. He wanted to tell his wife not to worry, that God would look after him. But the fire had burned his lips right off! Then he remembered Kristina the puppet. She was burned to a crisp in the fire...but he could still do her voice. The nurse put the phone up to the hole in the man's face and he threw his voice. He told his wife, "I've had an accident but don't worry." She asked who this woman was on the phone.

And you know what, God did help him. The Lord did not let him die. He lived for 7 more years in intensive care in excruciating pain, a horribly disfigured social outcast tarred with Jesus's love, but happy and he lost weight.

*Puppet show ends*

Uncle Joe worked on us kids for 6 days trying to get us to accept Jesus into our hearts. He told us that on the seventh day, he would rest and if we were born again, we would get cake. They had a huge Jesus on the Cross cake for only the born again kids to enjoy. Heck I said yes to make sure I got some cake. As Slim says, at the end you have to be willing to do whatever you have to do to get cake.

Those parched winds are coming, so you only have till tonight To decide. You only have 2 choices! You can either be the happy man with his face charred off or a puppet manipulated by a hand up inside you.....(pause, think)..... or you could be the nurse she was nice....or there was the cake maker....the doubting wife.....Slim....help...

*Slim enters*

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SLIM

Billy, don't be fooled by false prophets. Everything you need is right here. (*Slim touches his heart*)

BILLY

In my heart?

SLIM

No ME Billy, it's me. Everything you need is in me. Besides for the good work you've been doing so far I bought you a gift.

*Slim produces a box wrapped in a bow*

BILLY (*opening box*)

I hope it's a hammer. No, I hope it's a lasso. Oh I hope it's an iPod. It's empty Slim. There's nothing in it.

SLIM

No Billy, it's full. Full of hope, everything you've been asking for.

BILLY

(*aside*) Full of it all right.

SLIM

That's what all these folks are after Billy, hope. Hope that the lifestyle they chose, the religion they chose is the right one. No turning back when you get to those gates. Think about it. Oh, let's convert these folks right now so I can get my hands on them to heal them.

BILLY

The stench of sickness is like an aphrodisiac to Slim. Hold back Slim, hold back. Wow! Some of you folks must be thinking, I like where this is going. I'd like to join. I'd like to be a God's Cowboy. But I know you're thinking, some folk, like Slim, come along all strong and mighty but what do they really believe in. What's their position on certain moral and ethical issues?

SLIM

Ethical? The word's ethical Billy, but let's not worry about that tonight.

BILLY

So we're going to clear up some of these issues to help you folks along the way.

A lady once asked, "What's your missionary position,"

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Slim". He told me he had to have one on one counselling with her and that by the end of it she was on top of it.

SLIM

We get letters, we get texts, we get emails. Feel free to email me on slim@godscowboys.com. I get so many letters that I introduced a program called Secretary of the Month, which any of you ladies can volunteer to. It's an exciting program, it's very competitive and I encourage all you ladies to apply. Sue (*woman who he gave card to earlier in show*), January (*or next month after this productions performance*) is still free. You get to spend a lot of time with me working intimately. Sometimes we work late, sometimes we work early, sometimes late meets early. Needless to say you get a lot out of it and I certainly get a lot.

*(In musical vocal call and response style)*

BILLY

So the first letter asks.

SLIM

What's that letter ask?

BILLY

The first letter asks your position. What's your position?

SLIM

My position

BILLY

Your position. Yes, what's your foetal position?

SLIM

Why we're pro-life. We aim to counter the threat of the abortiofascists. We believe Life starts at conception not at birth. God put us on this earth to have a hard work ethic. We advocate that the foetus is part of God's heavenly creation and as such needs to contribute to God's holy church by getting out to work for him. We have created the first foetal employment and acting agency. So if any of you ladies have a photo of that thing inside of you then feel free to join up.



BILLY

What's your position?

SLIM

My position

BILLY

Your position. Yes, what's your position on Genetics?  
The science named after the first book of the bible.

SLIM

We're pro-genetics. In my science technology research facility in Guangzhou, *(screen shows SL.inc promotional slide)* we have currently isolated and have patents on the Christian Gene and Born Again gene. Our aim is to find the Homosexual gene and secretly test babies.

BILLY

Test babies!

SLIM

If found we would quietly introduce into the babies body the Born Again gene. As the person reaches puberty and the homosexual gene emerges, the Born Again gene comes out of hiding. It destroys the homo gene by penetrating it thus neutralising it.

BILLY

Recently in one of my tests I merged a Jellyfish cell with a Christian cell

SLIM

What did you get Billy?

BILLY

*(a knowing joke)* A spineless born-again Christian.  
*Slim glares at Billy*

BILLY

What's your position? (questioningly)

SLIM

My position

BILLY

Your position. Yes, what's your position on the  
ism's. Creationism, Literalism, Vegetarianism.

SLIM

Creationism - the root word is Creative - we creatively interpret things up to suit our doctrine.  
Literalism - I literally translate doctrine so it matches what I am trying to preach to you.

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Vegetarianism - Vegetables are the high fibre of the devil and we only eat the blood of Blaspheme, our Lord. We're talking Beef. BEEF

BILLY

Your salad days are over. What's your position?

SLIM

My position

BILLY

Your position. Yes, what's your position on choice?

SLIM

Choice?

BILLY

Yes Pro-Choice

SLIM

*(change tone)* Stop the music! This is one group I'm sick to death of. Those Pro-Choice people have tried to take away my choices. Along with the homonazis they now have the ear of liberal governments and think they can dictate their perverse life-style on the rest of us. I refer to homofascism, for that is exactly what it is. Everywhere the pink mafia is crushing freedom, destroying democracy, and waging war. The West is fast sliding into one big homonazi state, where the militants rule and punish all those who put up resistance. And a totally sold-out lame stream media is doing its best to slavishly promote every agenda item of the homonazis.

BILLY

Undoing all our good work of the Bush years.

SLIM

Just because it's good for you doesn't mean it should feel good. God don't drive a Prius. God ain't no hippie dippie, green on the outside, brown on the back side homo-loving democrat.

BILLY

That's an Obamanation.

SLIM

God ain't black, female and certainly not of middle Eastern appearance. The most important 3 letter word is no longer GOD but SEX. LOVE has now become about SEX. Dirty, Carnal, Moist SEX. *(looks at Sue in audience)* And I know you will all agree with me when I say, "sex education needs to

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be left to the church where it belongs". AMEN  
BILLY Amen

*Theatre USHER walks up and gives a note to Billy and whispers in his ear.*

BILLY (cont'd)

Would the owner of a green Mercedes number plate GBQ 660 please move it as your double parked. Slim isn't that your car?

*Slim gives him a cutting look. (to usher as he pulls note out)*

SLIM

What's that other note in your other pocket?

USHER

An audience member gave it to me and told me to smuggle it out of the room.

*Usher exits*

SLIM

Passing notes are we. Read it Billy, read it so we can all hear what's in it.

*Earlier in show the name of this and another separate person in audience has been determined.*

BILLY

It says (insert name) and (insert name)  
Help us get out of Slimtown!

SLIM

Now (insert name) and (insert name) put your hands up. Don't be shy, we wont hurt you, we just want to know who you are. All of us here need to know who amongst us is not happy. Why (insert name) and (insert name) your free to go any time, any time you wish. If it is so horrible, so dangerous in here, why you can go right now. However, your partner can't go with you. They're here on their own volition and very much part of our family now. The family you're trying to walk out on. Now I'm going to do you a favour. Why? Because I still love you, we all still love you. I'm going to let you stay but I going to have to move

---

you down here away from the others. Billy go help them move.

*Billy moves the two audience members to two chairs that have been set aside for them.*

BILLY

Come on folks let them through.

*(to other audience members near the chairs)* Now you sir / ma'am your going to be sitting near to them. Now don't be talking to them and you ensure they don't leave. Most importantly report anything and everything back to me whilst they're in the Sin Bin.

*(to Slim)* Slim is this a good time to be moving the ugly folk out of the front pews like you told me to get them out of view of the cameras?

SLIM

*(ignoring Billy)* Brothers and sisters, it is difficult to express to someone who doesn't have this....family experience we are having here today. But in time when those on the outside say, "Why didn't they leave?" Why didn't you leave cause it's evidently so terrible, so horrible. It's because you put yourself in a position where actually you're working for a cause, a dream that you believe in. When you give your life over to something you must give your everything to it. Those on the outside are jealous because they have no cause, no dreams outside their own self interest. So they will seek to destroy what you believe in, what you know in your dreams you have found here with me.

Oh, my friends, my family,  
dreaming is good. It's good because it gets you to better places, a useful mode of transportation. However once you reach your destination, as I hope and feel you have here tonight, holding onto dreams is ultimately dangerous. Dangerous as it's a distraction from your work and you may back slide to your old life.

---

BILLY

We'll honour that dream you've had because it brought you to us and we'll help you purge it so it won't hurt you. Slim told me to do this we'll need to be taking you people to the limit. Then the fun bit for us is we'll keep moving the line. Then keep moving the line, then keep moving the line and wanting so that in the end you'll be so far in and exhausted with your purpose those dreams you desperately wanted to believe in, cease to matter.

SLIM

Well, do you get what we're saying here? (To Captive pair) You don't want to leave us? Betray us? Remember (insert names) you are either with us or you are against us, all of us. Your very own family. Love is nothing without respect. Respect is nothing without obedience.

BILLY

Obedience is nothing without love. Can we give our friends in the Sin Bin a big loving shout out so they know we want them to stay with us forever. Yee haa.  
(singing)  
Yes we love you don't you know  
Because Slim told me so....

SLIM

(*directly to Billy*) Billy! One day I woke up and discovered that God wanted to talk to you, through me.

BILLY

God speaks to you?

SLIM

Directly. He said to me that obedience and focus are the cornerstones of our strength. You must have an unfaltering, unquestioning belief in God's plan and God's word. These good folk need strong leadership.

BILLY

I'm sorry Slim I was being joyful...

SLIM

Joy is not for you to just take. It is given and only comes from a love of obedience.

BILLY

The giver or the getter?

---

SLIM

Billy! *(as if God is speaking to him at that moment)* God's speaking to me and he's telling me that this is now a dog. *(refers to the chair)*

BILLY

Slim, that's a chair!

SLIM

Are you saying God, the Creator of all things, doesn't know his own work?

BILLY

*(hesitant, uncertain where this is going)* No, but it looks like a chair. See I'll sit on it to prove....

SLIM

Stop or you'll break it's back! God gave me a vision Billy, a mandate to speak his truth as he tells it to me. I didn't ask him to choose me. I didn't apply for the position. But who am I, who are we to question.

BILLY

*hesitantly* Yeah.

SLIM

He spoke to me and said that this creature, this glorious creation, is a dog to be loved and cared for like one.

BILLY

But it looks like....

SLIM

Are you saying I'm a liar or is it that you have no faith?

BILLY

Lets do the second question first, I still have faith but...

SLIM

Then pat the dog.

*Billy slowly approaches his hand on the chair before eventually touching it.*

No that's the wrong end.

*Billy quickly removes his hand.*

SLIM (CONT.)

His heads over that side.

BILLY

Slim do you know if it's a boy?

---

*Slim looks under chair*

SLIM

Well was possibly once. Now I want you to do God's work and look after him.

BILLY

Has he got a name?

SLIM

Not that I know of, he didn't come with papers.

BILLY

I know I'll call him Chesterfield, no maybe Deck, or what about Jason. Yes I'll call him Jason.

SLIM

As long as you don't call him electric. Makes me nervous. And make sure Jason is trained.

BILLY

OK Jason. Sit. Sit. Good boy. Slim he's a fast learner!

SLIM

Yes but are you? Now listen and learn. Let me tell you how to succeed in this business without really trying.

BILLY

I'll just get a pen and ....

SLIM

No! You must know it in here (points to head) and most importantly in here (points to heart). Listen, you can choose to fool some of the people some of the time.

BILLY

(Attempting to repeat) Fool all of the people all of the time.

SLIM

No. Don't be fooled all of the time by some of the people or be fooled all of the time by none of the people.

BILLY

So you can fool all of yourself all of the time or fool some of your self some of the time?

SLIM

No, you're not listening. Be fooled none of the time by all of the people. Most importantly, fool all of

---

the fools all of the time.

So Billy, what kind of fool are you?

BILLY

What kind of fool am I? I strive to be a fool all of the time to all of the people.

SLIM

Good. Remember it takes a village to raise an idiot.

Finally, someone brilliant once said....

BILLY

Generally you Slim.

SLIM

'Conservatives are not necessarily stupid but most stupid people are conservatives'. That's why in this business we make sure we tell it how they want to hear it. Simple and a little bit scary. (*looks to people in sin bin*) Like being in the Sin Bin. Are you ready for the sermon, Billy?

BILLY

Ready.

*Slim and Billy walk strongly to centre stage and wait for complete silence.*

SLIM

(*Fire and Brimstone voice*) Get out your bibles. Now tear them up.

BILLY

Tear them up!

SLIM

Tear them up. Because tonight I will be teaching from the Book of Slim.

BILLY

And it's a slim book!

SLIM

Our message today is Global Warming equals Gods Will.

BILLY

I've read Gods will and Slim gets everything.

SLIM

It's simple code. Gods Will / Global Warming: GW / GW. We are pro-global warming. Bring it ON. I know you all agree with me, what's bad for politics, what's disastrous for people is GOOD for religion.

BILLY

First sign of trouble you'll all come running to us.

---



SLIM

When the wind turbines have all been stopped,  
When the solar panels have been taken from your roof,  
When the government fully dismantles the hope for the  
next generation,  
When the fires are burning  
When the forests are cut,  
When the water has all gone, whose love will you  
want? Who will look after you?

BILLY

Slim will.

SLIM

God loves pestilence, plague and drought. Why they  
say the water rising is a bad thing. He's flooded the  
world before so he'll do it again. The melting polar  
ice cap will flush out Santa. Then we will more and  
more feel the presence of the SUN.

BILLY

The hole in the ozone is just giving him a better  
view of his flock.

SLIM

Now Gods SON, was an only child. So why is it that  
God only had one son at a time when all the families  
were quite large. Why is that so? There is no  
reference to any other children. God was practising a  
'One Child Policy'. We can only assume that his first  
was a boy and that he didn't dispose of any daughters  
till he got the Son he was after.

BILLY

Why no more children?

SLIM

Would it dilute the message?

BILLY

What if he had had a girl?

SLIM

A woman as the head of the Christian church! It  
wouldn't have worked. No one would listen to her. The  
whole Catholic system would collapse.  
Was God telling us back then that the optimum family  
size is ONE? Now who else believes is this? Why the  
Chinese also believe in only ONE child.

---

I firmly believe that God may be more closely aligned to the Chinese than you all think. GOD. China. Let's just stack up the facts:

- One Child Policy
- No acceptance of opposing points of view
- A leader elected not by the people but by the chosen ones

BILLY

Forbidden City / Forbidden Fruit

SLIM

Persecution of dissenters

BILLY

Tienanmen Square / Tien commandments

SLIM

Censorship to keep the message pure

BILLY

China is crockery / some call the Bible a crock

SLIM

Why this is all that God stands for. Religion is not a democracy, brothers and sisters.

It is a sign that the ascendancy of China heralds the return of the SON. The SUN heats the planet, melts the poles, rises the water and delivers to us global dislocation of humanity. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for recruitment to our church that cannot be ignored. The possibilities for converts is endless. We are acting on this.

Along side of our planned global expansion to Chechnya, Ukraine and Mogadishu we have a government joint venture agreement to open Cowboy church franchises and coffee shops across China.

BILLY

Glorious Beans Cafés

SLIM

Join us, the fastest growing global church brand. Walk away, abandon small minded friends, small numbered churches and be part of a winning team. China is the new tomorrow and we will find our way there and reveal the Son again. And wont that be a great day. AMEN

BILLY

Amen! (*pondering*) But Slim, won't the church look like it isn't caring, considerate and compassionate to God's creation, earth?

SLIM

Billy, let there be no confusion. We love the earth, even more than any Greenie socialist. If God made it, we love it and we advocate using all of Gods gifts for His cause. That's why we are petitioning for only Green renewable energy to be used on the electric chair executions of any God hating, environment loving criminals. Show your support, put your name on the petition we will pass around and in the foyer.

BILLY

*Hands the petition on a clipboard to congregation to sign and pass on* Gods Cowboys working with you to make the world a cleaner, safer place.

SLIM

(to congregation) We must be expanding, always expanding. Brothers and sisters, growth is all that counts, and the fastest way is Merger and Acquisition. I invite you to be the torchbearers of my light and go out and find another congregation low on numbers but high on assets, that we can more fully utilise. Get in there and move over the leadership of the branch, bring in our people for the numbers, don't worry about being appointed. Start by taking over the bible study group then take the church. The strongest should always lead, to keep the message pure.

BILLY

But Slim, what if I want to start afresh in an untapped area.

SLIM

(to Billy) Easy. Get a hall, gather some songs, throw in things to attract those in need and there you have a business. (to congregation) Then you have to go so far in till you lose your way. You work so hard, you get so tired that you can't think. You'll soon start asking me to do the thinking for you. See that we have the better plan. It's what you want. It works better for you that way. It's about giving over. That's why you're here tonight.

---

BILLY

Wow, so many questions, so many things to worry about.

SLIM

(to congregation) I hear you saying, "I don't want to worry about the answers to the difficult questions of life". This can be solved by saying just three words. I Want in.

BILLY

"I'm tired of being told I have to accept change because it's the right thing to do".

SLIM

I Want in.

BILLY

"I'm tired of big governments, big bankers and their big profits bleeding me and my family dry."

SLIM

I Want in.

BILLY

"I'm tired of scientists meddling in the affairs of good hard working folk".

SLIM

I Want in.

BILLY

"I'm tired of being tired".

SLIM

I Want in.

BILLY

And getting in is what you'll have the opportunity to do at the end of the service. Those who believe and will join tonight, shout it out "I Want In! Those who want to be slim, shout it out "I Want In!. Those of you who are carrying the weight of gorging on disappointment, shout it out "I Want In!

SLIM

Take a good hard look at yourselves. Your bloated bodies are the windows to your soul, and some of you insult Gods gift. In my church we honour those who treat their bodies with respect. The healthy and strong will survive and the overweight shall be banished to a life of self-loathing. You are the reason churches fail. But

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I can help. You must let me help by agreeing to join up today. This offer expires at the end of the night with the implications of not enough of you joining too catastrophic. So look in the mirror and ask yourself, do you want to be slim?

BILLY

Those who want in to Slim's guaranteed program, can sign up any time before the end of night just by raising your hand. Slim seems to be under a tight quota. If you know already then raise them now. If you who want to be free shout it out as you sing our hymn! Stand up.

SONG:

ALL RESULTS ARE GUARANTEED  
A PROMISE THAT YOU WILL BE FREED  
FROM THE SELF-HATE THAT YOU REEK  
TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE IN JUST 9 WEEKS

(ALL)

WE WANT TO BE SLIM  
WE WANT TO BE FREE  
WE WANT TO SHED THE THINGS THAT BINDS US  
WE WANT TO BE STRONG  
WE WANT TO BE LOVED  
WE WANT YOU TO BE THE HAND THAT GUIDES US

SIN IS LIKE A CARB ADDICTION  
PLEASE SAVE ME FROM MY FAT AFFLICTION  
I'M RUNNING FAST IN YOUR DIRECTION  
SLIM FOR ME IS PERFECTION  
EVER SINCE THE BIRTH OF TIME  
TO LOVE A CARB HAS BEEN A CRIME  
SO PLACE YOURSELF ON JUDGEMENT SCALE  
THE WEIGH IS NOW, LET OUT YOUR WHALE

(SLIM)

YES YOU WANT TO BE STRONG  
YES YOU WANT TO BE LOVED  
SO LET ME BE THE HAND THAT GUIDES YOU  
THEN LET ME IN TO BE YOUR SOURCE

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YOUR FAMILY YOU MUST DIVORCE  
HOW YOU LIVE IS MY DECISION  
YOUR LOVE FOR ME IT IS RELIGION

I AM SLIM AND I AM FREE  
AND YOU CAN ALL BE JUST LIKE ME  
THERE'S JUST ONE PRICE TO MAKE YOU WHOLE  
ALL YOUR LIFE AND ALL YOUR SOUL  
I WILL BE STRONG  
I WILL BE LOVED  
SLIM BE THE HAND THAT GUIDES ME

### **ACT III - TO KEEP**

SLIM

So what stops people making that one small step towards the giant leap of eternity? Fear, fear my friends. And it is particularly relevant in the middle classes for they are what pass for educated. But they are plain dumb. You can smell the fear. Fear of losing their advantage and their money. Fear there wont be enough time to grab and stash enough pieces of silver to keep themselves and their offspring in Chardonnay and farting through silk and linen for years. Why their mouths are so busy gorging on lifestyle magazines, food and fashion they've become so numb to their own community. People are caught up on some non-existent system of 'the way things ought to be'. That cannot be called a community. Dumb. The disconnect between groups can be so damned stunning sometimes that you don't know whether to laugh or cry or what to say in the face of it. But Billy we can learn something here. These are the platforms on which we, and our new friends here, will build our success: numb, dumb and ...and ...

BILLY

Bongo drum?

SLIM

I can't find a rhyme for wealthy, educated, middle class, secular, liberals.

BILLY

Whoredom!

SLIM

Too appealing.

BILLY

Sphagnum.

SLIM

A what?

BILLY

An order of atypical mosses that grow only in wet acid areas.

*(Slim gives his a deathly stare)* How about threesome?

SLIM

I think you're missing the point.

However, I need to say one more word about fear.

BILLY

Only one.

SLIM

It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous, adversary and how well I know it. It has no decency, respects no laws or conventions, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease. The matter is difficult to put into words.

BILLY

I see you struggling Slim.

SLIM

*(quietly as an aside)* But fear Billy, fear is our greatest ally and the most potent weapon in our arsenal. People react to fear not love. We won't teach them this in Sunday School, but it is true.

We'll use fear, real fear to shake our believers to their foundation. Make them feel that we have brought them face to face with their mortal end. Make it hard for them to shine the light of reason upon it. Mix the words with metaphors, shuffle the meanings, have death be a release that only we control. Weave the darkness and then be the only one holding the

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torchlight that reveals the safety ladder. Billy,  
that is the foundation for our strong loving  
community, with members who'll never abandon us.

BILLY

Wow Slim I thought it was just doing good deeds and  
loving your fellow man. I've so much to learn before  
I can lead these people.

SLIM

Billy! Pure of heart, pure of mind, now is your  
chance to lead the herd. Take them to the cleansing  
water and force them to drink. Time is running out. I  
need to have the conversion numbers logged in soon.  
Share with them your own story of God and love. Teach  
them how to cure this debauched affliction called  
vice.

BILLY

Vice? (to congregation) Brothers, how is one supposed  
to cure an affliction called vice? Why I'm not even  
certain what it means except it rhymes with nice.

SLIM

Immoral or wicked behaviour.

BILLY

Sisters, I've never experienced vice. I just don't  
know what are the interesting things that people do  
when they're being....vicious. (to Slim) I can't  
teach them about vice like you can Slim. They'll  
listen to you. How long would a drunkard listen to  
the caution of one who's never been in the inside of  
a bar?

SLIM

Billy Graham did Billy. Be Billy, Billy!

BILLY

I'm Billy, I can't be Billy.

SLIM

Billy you are the closest thing, that's why you're  
here. Outsiders are relentlessly working to pull down  
us evangelists. They are outside this building right  
now trying to find a way to destroy all I have  
created. They're looking for my hidden moral  
mutations. They need to see perfection. Perfection is  
the only thing that will give me absolution. You are

---



the face of my redemption.

BILLY

I'm supposed to comfort the sick but what do I know of sickness? How could I tell when they ought to pray and when to recommend an Aspirin? I'm supposed to give marriage counselling but never been married. No religion could allow that. I'm supposed to bring peace to mankind. But what do I know of the forces which cause wars; what of drugs; criminal desire; of capitalism, banking, labour, wages, taxes; securitised debt, international struggles for trade, off shore trusts, soldiers of fortune, passion, se.....? Passion! passion! My cousin Mary Lou, yes, she spoke of passion, a lot, when she was teaching me that religious game called 'Doing it in the Biblical Way'. She knows something about this. Biblical Way, what a fun game brothers and sisters just like wrestling except some funny rules... anyway I'll be teaching it to each of you and the kiddies when Slim leaves me in charge.

Oh and thanks to you Slim for helping me take her to that special doctor and clinic when she had that trouble in her belly a few weeks after the game...

SLIM

*(overriding Billy)* The Lords guides me and..

BILLY

*(joyful innocence)* The Lord told Slim we had to snuff that baby out...

SLIM

Billy! I don't think the folks need....

BILLY

...then Slim you told me people shouldn't be killing babies. You were right, so we had to snuff that doctor out so he wouldn't kill no more ....

SLIM

Billy!

*Slim attempts cow boy salute on Billy but Billy keeps going.*

BILLY

...then we blew up the clinic.....

---

SLIM

(to audience) Oh feel free to cast the first stone. If you were so pure, your life was so perfect you wouldn't be here peddling your pathetic lives. It's never your fault is it. Oh you come to me to find salvation in the heavens because there is nothing on this planet left for you to blame. But its always all about you. Convince me, convert me, save me, try and keep me. Me, me, me. Well what about Slim. You don't think this game doesn't hurt me when you wont put your hand up and say I want in. You don't think I'm under pressure to get you to sign up.

BILLY

Slim stop they know not what they do.

SLIM

You humiliate me by rejecting me. Do you need me to show you the strength of my disappointment?

*Goes to move aggressively into the audience*

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

(gruffly) Slim!

*Abrupt drop of lights to BLACK. A strong, very tight focused WHITE SPOTLIGHT is put on Slim. Blinded by its strength he tries to dodge it like a convict escaping a jail. He relinquishes to his captor and stops, huddled in the light.*

SLIM

Billy?

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

No it's Billy.

SLIM

Billy!

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

Yes, Billy.

SLIM

Billy Graham is that you.

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

Is there another Billy?

*A white balloon (or other device) lit with Billy Graham's face on it appears in the darkness.*

*Slim moves to go to it but the balloon goes dark then reappears in a new spot. Then moves again frustrating Slim.*

Here's the truth of it Slim, front and centre, straight over the plate, you're not perfect enough. 'Never were, never will be' says your dad. He's right; you'll never be me.

SLIM

But Billy everything I do, I do for you. You called us, you called me forward to join you. Isn't that enough to atone for all the mistakes against me.

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

You can do all you do but I was born into a better situation and frankly you're a liability, just not good enough. How hard can it be to get that?

SLIM

I'll get the quota numbers I'm.....

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

I'm de-authorising you from the Billy Graham franchise. Use my name in this show again and expect a call from our legal team. You're on your own. One more thing, your mother told me to tell you, stop blaming everyone.

SLIM

*(stunned, confused, angry, on edge of breaking, addresses the invisible Billy Graham)*

Blame! Blame! You're as bad as this sorry lot you say we're trying to save. Oh you made it look so easy, so easy to be perfect. With your mega this and fancy that and your pure satin sheet life that not even the devil could cling to. It was you who taught me to blame everyone outside our belief for everything wrong in the world. But one thing I've learnt is the notion of the devil being more important. In this 'point the finger' society the devil is perfect. Why accept personal responsibility for my actions when I can blame it on him or her or whatever shape we need to mould for people to pass the buck to. Blame! They can't see it but I can see it. I can smell it. Because people are lazy, egotistical and blamers. Oh understand I'm not the blamer, quite the contrary.

Yes, we live in the time of relinquishing and blame.

---

Blame is big business and I am right there at the checkout scanning the bar codes of irresponsibility, weakness of character, soft parenting and corporate curmudgeons. Then I'm charging the total straight into my bank accounts via their vacuous moral credit cards.

The bigger the looming disaster, the higher the risk, the higher the paranoia, the higher premium, and that's what makes this business so compelling, Mr Graham. We only pay out on this moral insurance in a closed room called death. A confidentiality clause keeping the word of the dead out of the headlines of the living and I, the agent of eternal life, with a clean track record.

Yes, we're the same, you just don't know it. We preachers need the devil more than we need God. What's the good of a river to us if it won't rise above its banks? What's the good of a cell if it won't mutate? What's the good of a hospital if there isn't a morgue attached? What's the good of a vow of chastity if there ain't no alter boys?

*The balloon bursts / vanishes abruptly. (Slim panics, deep regret for what he has said)*

Billy! Mr Graham, I'm sorry. You didn't think I meant YOU when I said this. Don't abandon me. Don't leave me alone with this lot. Mr Graham! (*addresses self*) I just have to show them the truth, my truth, the Book of Slim. Make them see it. They just need to see it.

*From the darkness outside the intense light his pet cow Blaspheme appears. He starts to move to it but stops for fear it will disappear.*

*(Slim addresses self pitifully)* The sins of my past permeates around me. It sticks to me like the stench of the abattoir in my clothes. My sin seems to chase me, surround me then it tries to strangle me, cursing me.

I am reminded that I have sinned every time I go to bed and look at the jar holding those smug lips of my father. And in the intimidating hours of sleep, in the abyss of my memories, when I see beside his coffin my mother shaking inconsolably, loving the unlovable.

Oh Billy, I admit I was a cocksure young man, invincible, bigger than You. You were laughing at me as I tried to knock off all 10 commandments. But I stopped at 8. I couldn't get past 8. You don't think I couldn't hear your mocking me. And when I broke the commandment though shalt not commit adultery month after month, secretary after secretary 10, 20, 30 times and (Sue i.e. *use name of woman singled out earlier in show who he gave his card to*) coming in tomorrow. Not even having that glass cathedral is enough Mr Graham, you know that. The organ is just a pipe dream. My congregation is....

I'm at the bottom of the barrel. What to do. What to do. What to do. What do you want me to do? Do I give it all up and go back to sales? Do I deny everything and hope it goes away - forgive and forget, forget and forgive. Or do I pass around the cups and tell them, 'All we're doing is taking a drink' and just take then all out in one go? Worked for Jim.

*PAUSE and looks in direction of audience with psychotic gaze*

I can do it right now.

*(pitifully)* I've got nothing. Tell me what to do. I don't know what to do. Give me a sign.

*(a balloon of light (or other device) appears with disciple Billy's face drawn or projected onto it)*

SLIM

Billy? Billy! Thank you Billy (*Mr Graham*), you're right I do have something. I'm so silly I still have Billy. And, and the room, maybe they'll convert. The doors are locked. Plus, I still have my suit, it still works. The boots are good. I still have the charm, the looks, the power. I'll show Mr Billy Graham I can get the numbers. It's time for the healing to begin.

---

*Slim goes to grab balloon but it disappears. Blaspheme disappears.  
Return to full theatre lights. Slim back in the present.*

SLIM (cont'd)

.....and I have but one regret in my life...

BILLY

Just one.

SLIM

.....that I didn't heal poor sick Luke right then  
and there in the hospital when I had the chance.  
So when it is built we're putting a healing tent in  
Bibleland. But until that time your lucky that all that  
healing power in the world, is here at the end  
of these fingertips. I have spent my whole life  
learning from all the great mystic healers of all  
time. I channel them and as they pass through my body  
I learn, I learn.

*SONG CHOIR "Something's Got a Hold on Me"*

Something's got a hold on me,  
Oh yes indeed I said  
Something's, got a hold on me,  
I went to Slim's last night  
When my heart it wasn't right  
Now, something's got a hold on me

I can't do it on my own, I need help. I need my  
healing robe.

*Billy reveals then dresses Slim in the coat.*

BILLY

Who wants to be well, who wants to be healed? Whose  
well healed? *(Music begins - rhythmic)*

SLIM

I can smell the sickness in the room, I can smell the rot.  
There's decay and I'm going to get it.  
*(Like the trainer of an impatient prize fighter, Billy has to hold him back)*

*A wind starts to blow, gently, into theatre.*

BILLY

I think those parched and savage winds of change you

---

spoke about are here. They'll blow away the stench.  
If you need healing put up your hand. Don't worry,  
Slim will find sickness you didn't even know you had.

SLIM

*Slim moves through room and picks different people in audience and tells them what their affliction is on the guise of having them whisper in his ear. Slim, of course, tells the audience what he wants to heal them of.*

*Localised improvisation with each person.*

*Examples are:*

*1st person. Asthma*

*After healed secretly pulls a respiratory puffer (inhaler) from pocket and hurls it across room.*

*You are healed of Asthma.*

*2nd person. Obsessive Compulsion*

*You are cured of Obsessive Compulsion*

*3rd person. Nits (touching head)*

*You are cured of Nits*

*4th person. Nits (touching another head)*

*You are also cured of Nits*

*5th person. Obsessive Compulsion*

*(returns to 2nd person again)*

*You are cured of Obsessive Compulsion*

*6th person. Genital Warts*

*You've been here before. This is your third and final treatment. I can't do this on my own. I need your help.*

BILLY

*(to audience) Put your hands in the air and repeat out loud. He's got the power, He's got the power.*

*Slim continues his incant then burrows his head into the lap of the person.*

BILLY (cont'd)

*Go deep Slim.*

*Emerges triumphant from lap and spits onto ground.*

SLIM

*You are cured of Genital Warts.*

*7th. Obsessive Compulsion*

*(returns to 2nd person again?)*

*You are cured of Obsessive Compulsion*

*There is one more in the room.*

BILLY

There is one in this room who suffers from years of guilt and deceit, hiding sin so dark, so vile it hides in the very cells of their being. Someone who yearns to be cleansed, to be cleared, to be cured.

Which one of you is it?

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

Slim! *(loud across room but only heard by Slim)*

SLIM

Billy?

BILLY

What Slim? I'm working them as you taught me.

SLIM

It's Billy.

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

Slim!

BILLY

Yes, I'm Billy, silly. Your killing the flow here Slim.

*(to audience and continues on as Slim dialogues with Billy Graham)*

Point to the person in the room who needs healing.

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

Slim, the stench is you. You are the putrefying decay. You must transfer your demons out of your body and into a pure vessel where the cells of good will battle the darkness till they are destroyed and banished. Only then will you have the perfection you seek.

SLIM

Perfection!

BILLY GRAHAM V/O

Yes Slim perfection, and redemption...to mention. Do that and get me contacts for a Chinese TV joint venture and you may just pull through. Gotta go, the prayer switchboard is all lit up. I'm even working Mondays up here.

SLIM

Perfection!

BILLY

Forget perfection, the future of this act is looking at rejection if you don't do something.



SLIM

Stop everything! Brothers and Sisters, I need to confess.

BILLY

Confess? Are we going off the script again Slim because it doesn't say in my script we are going off the script.

SLIM

I need to confess to you tonight a truth, the truth. The truth that will set both you and me free and deliver to us eternal life. I am the stench that permeates us. I have demons of sin infecting my body like cancer but more hideous than just a disease of the body. I have erred off the track and I present myself to you and seek your forgiveness. I have no power over you. I can't force you to turn to yourself and see the pitiful gaze that I see as I look across this room. I can't force you to divert this gaze of longing for a better life, back towards yourself. I can't force you to try and believe I'm just an ordinary man working in extraordinary ways to break through your guarded walls of loathing. I can't force you to free yourselves, by you giving me the gift of absolution.

No, I have no power of you.

BILLY

Slim this just like your acquittal hearing.

SLIM

With your gift I can transfer the demons out of my body and transfer them into a pure vessel where the cells of good will battle bitterly the darkness till they are destroyed and banished.

BILLY

(aside to Slim) Slim, you don't need to do it this way. Just confess, they'll love it. Oh, they'll pretend to turn their back but you'll get the bounce and numbers will grow. Then lead a good life.

SLIM

Billy, my perfect friend your purpose is now revealed to you. You will be the sacrificial vessel of good. Prove to me and to your new flock that you are ready

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to lead this church. Heal me.

BILLY

We didn't discuss...

SLIM

Get my patented healing helmet, the latest in miracle health technology.

*Reluctantly Billy puts helmet on Slim that looks part like Neurological Electronic graphing (EEG) and part electric chair. The wires trail off upwards. The head piece hints at a crown of thorns.*

BILLY

You sure this is safe. Slim it hasn't been fully tested, the technicians at our Guangzhou lab warned.....

SLIM

Billy put on the auxiliary miracle transferral helmet.

*Billy puts similar helmet on. Intensity of wind on Slim and Billy builds.*

BILLY

Slim it's going to take more than a miracle. Best get on your throne. Jason here boy, come on. (whistles) Come on. (chair moves towards him) Good boy.

*Slim's chair has leather arm and leg straps like an electric chair which Billy attaches. Whilst attaching he talks to audience.*

I need everyone to help me.

Everybody stand up and put your hands forward touching the person in front of you till we are all connected. Touch them. Slim said in his church it's OK to touch. Slim by the power you have now invested know to call on you. Slim I call on... Slim to heal this decrepit, pitiful body of Slim. We're going to need turbo.

*Billy wields a switch that switches on projection screens above indicating what each of them has in their minds:*

**Billy:** *(his images portrayed like a TV with bad reception - some white noise - simple stick figure animation of boy going into a church, he is greeted by cows who walk and dress like people they sing, they pray, someone preaches, the building grows bigger and it repeats with increasing speed, growing bigger each time.*

**Slim:** *(stylised) a young boy Slim (wearing preacher clothes) in an empty room crying; POV of peering into his parents room and seeing them have sex - missionary position - a dominant father, during sex mother reading recipe book, Slimming with Meat; A baby cow crying loudly whilst Slim's mother with cow udders tries to breast feed it; father cutting meat in kitchen with large cleaver; cow shaped pies come out of oven, POV long corridor with fluorescent lights and party at end - as he gets to it there is a glass door and he can't get to join the people who can't hear or see him; Blaspheme in his bed with blood oozing on the sheets. (Images cycle over following action).*

SLIM

*(Slipping away from consciousness, like a dying dictator he works to bring his followers one last time into a frenzy - he imagines the congregation are giving him screams of joy)*

Brothers and sisters, those who'll join today, the spiritual revolution is more alive than ever. I feel it, I live it, I touch it .....If the people are with us, who can be against us? If Slim is with us, who can be against us?

But no one should think my presence here on my potential deathbed means the battle is won. No,...I give permission to let your joy move you to tears at the fragile state of my health.  
*(he grimaces as if in deep pain)*

I'm fine. Those who don't love me and wish me ill, well, bad luck! To those who love, I am the greatest friend that you will ever have and I am trying on every level to protect this community here.

*(to audience)* Are you with me? I said are you with me? Are...you...with...me! So I must warn you again and again no matter what happens, to be together with the community.

*(to Billy reaching out his hand)*

It's you I want to be Billy.

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BILLY

You want to be me! There's too much sin, my body can't absorb any more. Slim, Slim!

*Slim descends into unconsciousness not unlike a trance like state.*

BILLY (CONT.)

Slim has left the building. I'm going to look in your Book of Slim to see if there are answers.

*Billy pulls out of Slim's pocket the Book of Slim.*

'I want to be Slim, I want to be Slim'. There's nothing in it except 'I want to be Slim', over and over again. Where's the shining, where's the light of guidance? Slim I don't understand.

*The wind blows off pages of Slim's biblical text, they fly off the book across the room into the audience. More and more pages enter the room.*

Is this the Rapture, Judgement Day or an Act of God? Slim if it is, our insurance ain't gonna pay out on this.

*Music, smoke and light burst in crescendo.*

She's breaking up; I can't hold her any longer.

*Billy collapses, possibly unconscious or dead. The wind subsides then stops. Slim remains strapped on his seat with smoke and sparks lingering. Billy lies on floor. A quiet falls on the stage.*

*All that moves is the video of Slim and Billy as TV evangelists wrapping up their weekly TV show continuing to roll.*

SLIM

*(emerges slowly from his unconsciousness)*

It's a miracle, a true miracle. I was lost but now am found, I was dead but now am free. *(pulling at arm straps)* Billy release me from these things that bind

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me. Billy?

BILLY

*(emerging from his unconsciousness)* Slim it is a miracle, there's people still here. *(to audience)* I'd like to apologise to everyone for not giving you what you need. So please feel free to go and lead your lives.

SLIM

Apologise to no one but your self for your own self doubt. Release me.

*(Billy unstraps Slim)*

We can't apologise for being chosen to reveal God's plan. Everything that has happened here tonight has a reason and I'm only interested in those who will join us right now. You've seen a miracle here tonight or else you've seen a lie. Your own lie to yourself that we tonight don't have a way. However we have THE way. Let there be no doubt, I was born again here on this stage.

BILLY

Now Slim, is it time?

SLIM

It is time.

*Choir and music, "Something's Got a Hold On Me"*

SOMETHING'S GOT A HOLD ON ME,  
OH YES INDEED I SAID  
SOMETHING'S, GOT A HOLD ON ME,  
I WENT TO SLIM'S TONIGHT  
WHEN MY HEART IT WASN'T RIGHT  
NOW, SOMETHING'S GOT A HOLD ON ME

BILLY

Brothers and sisters now is the time. Time to decide, time to make that choice. Time to put your hands in the air and say yes I want what he's got. I want in. I want my steak in Gods BBQ. I want to shed the things that bind me. Stand up.

SLIM

Stand up and shout it to the sky, "I admit I am a sinner and my soul is charcoal black".

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BILLY

Time for us to herd you to your heavenly coral. Those who reject us will go the abattoir to be slaughtered, sliced and served up at our next communion service. Thank you Slim, I want in.

SLIM

Put your hands in the air, let me see who amongst you has chosen light over dark, meat over vegetable, slim over fat.

BILLY

Those people watching this online call our toll free number on your screen right now. One of our operators will help you find your way to us, so you will never be alone again. Woo hoo. Thank you Slim, I want in.

SLIM

The end is now.

BILLY

Brothers and sisters, by accepting Slim into your lives as you have today, you are now part of the greatest show on earth. You have been saved by this great man right here before you. A man who nearly died because of his sins, for you. A big hand for the man with the hands and the plans. A yee haa for the horse that sticks to the course. A big 'praise you Slim' for the Master Pastor himself, the Rev Slim Limits.

SLIM

And a big round of applause for the man who has successfully become your spiritual guide, the now Associate Pastor in training, Billy.

BILLY

To our chorus of angels, The Herd on High Cowboy Gospel Choir and the musical elixir dispensed by our conjurers of creativity, The Rhythm Method. Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, hurry from your seats! Hurry, Hurry. You don't want to be late, for the end of the world is upon us any time soon. Stand up, your eyes are open, your hearts are open and you have been amazing. There it was for your enjoyment and instruction, for your gratification and edification, the show you'd been waiting for, all your life.

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SLIM

You have been a most divine congregation, let those who have joined come with us now as we walk up the street to the local mall to hand out flyers and sing cowboy songs of praise. Unlock the doors.

*Goes to pair in Sin Bin.*

Come join us.

*Slim and Billy walk out through audience stopping at door and shaking hands with congregation as they exit.*

*Choir sings I Want to Be Slim opening reprise.*

**END**

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## Chapter 1

# In the beginning was the word

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The Reverend (Rev) Jim Jones was a complex thinker and preacher whose promise of a world of economic and racial equality ultimately led in 1979 to the mass murder/suicide of 913 people. Included in this number were 305 children (40 were infants) plus Jones himself. My curiosity about Jones was the impetus for this creative and research project motivated by the documentary *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (Nelson 2006), which I viewed in 2008.

I had read about the outcome—the arsenic laden Kool-Aid cordial drink that most of the members present that day willingly (this point is argued) took, culminating in the mass suicide. The ending seemed so desolate, controlling, manipulated. I asked the question: How did they get to that point? What was good about Jim Jones and his People’s Temple in the beginning that drew these people in? This led to a broader questioning of persuasive leaders—good and bad, inspirational and toxic. I asked: Could persuasive leaders be both at the same time, and if not, when do they transition from one to the other? These questions became the motivation for the research.



All great religious movements begin as ideas in someone's head about what relations have been and should be between people, and between God and people. The ideas are then transformed into a political or ideological vision by some prophet-like leader. Isaiah Berlin identifies the desire of idealists for a 'rational reorganisation' of society. Berlin suggests that an idealist's desire arises from:

belief in a Platonic ideal of 'all genuine questions must have one true answer' and anything else is error. A useful warning sign, a red light should flash when you encounter an idealist who implies there is 'one true answer'. (Berlin, cited in Carr 2008 p36)

### **Introduction**

This thesis is in two parts. The first part is a script for a comedic and satirical theatrical performance entitled *I Want to Be Slim*, which seeks to create a social/political debate about evangelism that will encompass believers and non-believers. This script and performance is built around an evangelical 'church service' by the Church of the Holy Cowboy, a faux American evangelical church of my invention. This faux church is led by the Reverend Slim Limits and assisted by his acolyte, Billy. The script ideally would be performed in a major theatre with art-direction, musical direction including live band and gospel choir, plus audio-visual screenings. This creative work is also

documented with a video of a live performance of a reading of the script filmed in a theatrical venue, and with an online site — [www.godscowboys.com](http://www.godscowboys.com).

The second part, the exegesis, serves as a means of contextualising the creative script, *I Want to Be Slim*. On the one hand I examine psychological and social theories pertaining to evangelism and outline the persuasive techniques used by evangelists. On the other hand, I examine the process of writing the script and its relationship to theories of satire and comedy, arguing that Horatian satire was most able to entertain audiences and critique evangelism.

The research questions of the exegesis will be: 1. What techniques do evangelists use to get a following? Relatedly and related to the creative work: 2. What means can I find, given my skills in comedy writing and performance, to raise political and social awareness about the techniques used, and dangers of, evangelism?

As scene setting, the exegesis will argue that there is a problem with evangelism and the related rise of medieval fundamentalism around the world. The exegesis shows how widespread evangelical beliefs are in the US, and will further show that evangelists have had significant influence on politics in recent times, compared to a previous period in the west where churches were more at arm's length to secular governments. These recent political moves by evangelists will be shown to present a threat to secular democracy.

The exegesis will then move to the question of the attractions of evangelism. It will be argued that the persuasive methods identified by psychologists and sociologists, have been used wittingly, or unwittingly, by evangelist preachers.

Thirdly, it will be shown that the predisposition to conversion may be in part determined by sociological factors.

Section One of the thesis (chapters two and three) establishes the necessary background. I establish definitions for such terms as evangelism, fundamentalism and Christian cults. I discuss how fundamentalist thought works, and outline the growth and widespread nature in the US of evangelism. Then I establish the affect of evangelism in US politics.

Section Two of the thesis (chapters four and five) takes up my first research question. I analyse the persuasive techniques used in general and in particular by evangelists. I also show via case studies (in chapter five) that evangelists do in fact use these techniques.

Section Three (chapter six) deals with my second research question, and I show how Horatian satire is the best form for my creative work.

All sections are intimately related as I draw material from sections one and two to inform my creative work discussed in section three.

This is a multidisciplinary exegesis in which I have examined political, sociological and psychological theories about rhetoric and persuasion, and psychological theories about what attributes predispose people to follow evangelical leaders. In this process of synthesis between these disciplines and that of performance I hope to have made a contribution to our understanding of the pull of evangelical religion.

This thesis makes a contribution to the sociology of religion and to performance studies, and in particular satire on religion, a little examined area. The significance of my research is that evangelical religion affects politics and moral law and thus has the potential to slow rational or liberal advances in human society and undermine secular democracies. At worst, evangelical posturing incites hatred and can destabilise a society. The research matters because morality and ethics, both conservative and liberal, permeate all aspects of our society and determine the borders of scientific, medical and cultural research. I am concerned about the spread of evangelism and its potential danger to humankind. As my case studies will show, the dangers of evangelism can be seen in areas such as climate change, geo-politics plus homosexual and reproductive rights.

In the theatrical context of a fully staged show, my creative script seeks to play with and explore theories of persuasion. My script further strives to challenge the preconceptions of a liberal audience. It does this by confronting

the audience with the positive effects of communalism while simultaneously exposing them to the illogical thinking and the contradictions of some evangelical individuals and organisations. I have tried to find a way to engage audiences, whilst effectively critiquing evangelism in order to have a political effect.

My motivation for exploring this project through performance and research is that I am drawn instinctively to the polarising effect of religion. This stems from my background, which is a mix of, first a Greek Orthodox, and then a Baptist upbringing. This spiritually eclectic backdrop seemed to sit comfortably, so I thought, with a very normal teenage exploration of all things vice. I reflected that this duality of religious teaching and teenage 'pushing of boundaries' had fought itself out within me to determine the moral compass of my adult years, with vice the victor. However, I suggest that as I left the church at 18, it certainly wasn't a clear win for vice, rather more of a point's decision—I concluded that the search for meaning and purpose by individuals was valid. I also determined that the institution and in particular the people who stood in front of me and sold me the truth—the preachers, the church administrators, the deacons—were flawed.

Who these people were and how they went about their business of peddling 'truth' were the questions that interested me at the time. That was my internal motivation. However, this was also propelled by observance of the

outer: how the question of religion or even belief was responded to and reported. My experience was that individuals positioned themselves very quickly on a spectrum of acceptance or rejection of religion and its themes. This I observed in debates played out across all media and reflected in opinion pages, commentary and public comments. This eagerness to respond and take a position was reinforced when I told people the subject of my doctorate and creative work. Everyone had an opinion on religion and were either very keen to tell me or equally keen not to talk about it at all. Concurrently, I observed that non-believers sometimes responded dismissively to those who did choose to talk about their beliefs. I also found it interesting that those with more conservative religious beliefs were often critical of less devout believers. I thought that this ideological/spiritual conflict between individuals and groups was relevant and potentially dangerous for a civil society. It also, I felt, made for compelling theatre.

The challenge was to find a platform that could embrace both my current enquiry into religion and my childhood religious experiences. I chose to study American-style protestant evangelical religion, as I had experience with it through the Baptist Church, and felt that it best represented my own political, social and cultural framework. I narrowed the field of religions to Protestant evangelism as this group is well known and has had considerable impact on

political policy in the United States and by extension on world policy. There are also extensive academic resources across this area and good access to data.

Religion is, amongst other things, an industry, and just like any other business, it wants to grow. In Australia the Hillsong Church follows what I term this business approach and drives growth through mergers and global expansion that taps new markets. This business orientation is underpinned by a corporate command of branding and media. In the United States, social commentator Joe Bageant argues that church business is built upon the faithfulness of America's under-educated and neglected whites, who trust their preachers more than they trust their politicians:

The preachers at least lie to them face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball from the pulpit. This immediacy with the preacher meaning they may be more willing to overlook sexual and financial transgressions. (Bageant 2010 p124)

Dislocation, disenfranchisement, rapid globalisation and unemployment are examined for their influence on the increase in conversion rates in American evangelical Protestant churches. Findings here are somewhat countered by the rise of the aspirational and affluent Hillsong Church in Australia.

The foundation for the creative script *I Want To Be Slim* stems partially from my direct experiences as a teenager. When the renowned American evangelist Billy Graham brought his evangelical crusade to Randwick

Racecourse in Sydney over four weeks in 1979, my mother was part of the choir as well as working in the Crusade office. As a 16-year-old I wore an orange usher's armband and as a volunteer guided some of the 491,500 people who attended in and out of the stands (Billy Graham Crusade 1979 Sydney 1980). At that time, as up to 22,000 people went forward to accept Jesus into their lives, I had a scant understanding that there was something else at play than just spirituality. Ironically I drew a 'p' in front of 'usher' on my armband, in some way foreshadowing my current satirical musings.

### **Literature**

I read a great deal of material that was written, or had been spoken, by evangelist preachers themselves, or by people who had left evangelical groups. Some of these sources included evangelical church websites and newsletters such as *Catch the Fire Ministry* in Melbourne (*Catch the Fire Ministries*, 2014), *Hillsong Church* in Sydney and globally (*Hillsong Church*, 2014), *Anchorage Baptist Church* in Alaska (*Anchorage Baptist Church*, 2012), peak church bodies such as *National Association of Evangelicals (US)* (NAE 2012), and more, see biography. These provided material for my script/performance and were invaluable original sources.

Counter to this pro-evangelist material I read many critiques of evangelism, and I read critical analysis of persuasion, and in particular critical



analysis of the persuasion techniques used by fundamentalists and evangelists. Some of them are noted below.

In general, because of the broad ranging nature of this thesis, it was more useful to thread the literature review throughout the exegesis.

As my planned play script and research into evangelical American Protestantism spanned multiple disciplines, I read widely across the subjects of religion, persuasion and charisma, and theatre and media studies to seek broader definitions and answers to my research question. I then narrowed the focus from religious groups globally to an understanding and history of Christian evangelical and fundamentalist groups and terms. Stephen Prothero's *God is not one: the eight rival religions that run the world & why their differences matter* (Prothero 2010) gave broad insight into Christianity's place in global religion, whilst Ralph Hood, Peter Hill and Paul Williamson's book, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005) gave a comprehensive breakdown of what defines fundamentalist thought.

Finding commentary such as Joe Bageant's *Deer Hunting with Jesus* (Bageant 2010) and Chris Hedges' *American Fascists* (Hedges 2010) on the current social and political context was crucial to give the characterisation and writing its edge. I also researched more analytical database sites such as the *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* (Pew Forum 2012) and *Gallup USA* (Gallup 2012).

I read material from across the spectrum of positions in traditional and digital formats.

Research on persuasion psychology centres on religious, business and broader analyses of why some people lead and why some follow, and on understanding of the tools and techniques of persuasion and charisma. Susan Harding's study on the *Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion* (Harding 1987) in which she recounts her time in a Baptist Church is central to the language of fundamentalism from the perspective of a participant observer of an evangelical church. Cialdini's work *Harnessing the Science of Persuasion* (Cialdini 2001) outlines steps for individuals in an organisational context to ensure conversion/persuasion—reciprocation, consistency, social validation, liking, authority and scarcity. Popper's work on *Hypnotic leadership: leaders, followers, and the loss of self* (Popper 2001) defines the key elements of hypnotic and charismatic leadership as projection, transference, attribution, fire and spark, and commitment. Baron, in *Arousal, Capacity, and Intense Indoctrination* (Baron 2000) defines key steps and traits used to bring people to a belief. Freud's analysis of the authoritarian father, those personalities who prefer 'strong' leadership in a family dynamic, and Adorno's study of the authoritarian personality offer key touchstones for understanding of the follower and the leader's motivations (Freud 1949; Adorno 1950).

Megan MacDonald's work in liturgical and (religious) mass performance and Jill Lane's work on Bill Talen's *Rev Billy* character provide analysis of cultural performativity.

The work of Amber Day's *Satire and Dissent* (Day 2011), Elliott's *The Nature of Satire* (Elliott 2004), Gring-Premble and Watson's *Rhetorical Limits of Satire* (Gring-Pemle & Watson 2003), and Montley's *Adaptor as Satirist* (Montley 1986) helped define satire and frame its challenges and risks. Holbert's work on *Perceptions of Political Satire as Persuasion and Experimental research on Juvenalian and Horatian Satire* (Holbert et al. 2011; Holbert et al. 2013) and Nabi et al's *All Joking Aside: A serious investigation into the persuasive effect of funny social issue messages* (Nabi, Moyer-Guse & Byrne 2007) provided a framework for the application of the persuasion research to the satirical script.

Analyses of the Australian satire creator Chris Lilley's work (Shea 2011; Quinn 2011) and *The Chaser* (Cooper 2009; The Chaser 2009) in the media, demonstrate the perils of satire. In researching this project I observed examples of theatrical work with religious themes, including Victorian theatre company Back to Back Theatre's staging of *Hell House: Provocation, Belief and Morality* (2012), an enactment of fundamentalist theatre aimed at scaring teenagers to Christ, and Canadian Rick Miller's *Bigger than Jesus* (2011), reflecting the many notions of Christ. Further literature is analysed throughout the exegesis.

### **Finding the platform—methodology**

Overall my methodology was: a) a synthesis of pertinent reading, b) use of case studies to prove my argument that evangelical groups do use persuasive techniques identified in psychological and sociological literature, c) creation of a play that demonstrates these techniques and makes their use transparent.

Structurally the exegesis starts by defining terms and establishing a background account of religious and social theory about (largely) United States (US) evangelism. I then present case studies of some evangelical churches.

These case studies provide information for my later discussions of psychological theories of persuasion and the psychology of followers. The case studies also show the, perhaps unwitting, use of these theories by evangelists to convert recruits to their churches and then keep them there. In the final chapter I analyse my script for Reverend Slim's 'church service' in relation to the psychological theories, the case studies and to theories of satire. Further I reflect on the challenges faced in writing the script.

I was unsuccessful at obtaining permission from evangelical churches and individual pastors for either interviews or observational research. I nevertheless attended evangelical services as part of my research. I am unable to report on any of my observations relating to services because of this ethical roadblock. Thus most of my research was from secondary sources. However, my general experience of their services also informed my understanding.

I gathered material for case studies by reading online and watching films. I also read accounts by ex-followers and books dealing with evangelical religion. I studied a diverse range of Protestant churches including the Australian examples of Hillsong Church (Waterloo and Castle Hill, Sydney), Catch the Fire Ministries (Melbourne), City West Church, (Leichhardt, Sydney, now closed), Northside Baptist (Crows Nest, Sydney) and The Potter's House Christian Fellowship (Lismore NSW). The US examples were Anchorage Baptist Temple (Alaska), Convent Avenue Baptist Church (Harlem, New York City [NYC]), Pena Pentecostal Church (Brooklyn) and Hillsong (NYC).

I gained a deeper understanding of the digital application of persuasive techniques by viewing television and digital media across a spectrum of styles and denominations. This included diverse programming such as Hillsong's network of TV, music, social and digital networks; Australian Christian Network (ACN), which broadcasts 24 hours of Christian TV; Godtube (Christian equivalent of You Tube); Jimmy Swaggart Ministries SonLife Broadcasting Network; and Benny Hinn TV. Some religious groups have multiple websites and associated Facebook and Twitter feeds.

I also studied theatrical performances that centred on or included a parodic or satirical evangelical performance—for example, Rev Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping (New York, US)—or the interpretation of existing

evangelical material, such as Back-to-Back Theatre Company's staging of a *Hell House* (Melbourne, Australia).

The Reverend Slim Limits and his church is a distillation of these various preachers' presentations, with the show's final content and dialogue a blend of the real and the imagined. To highlight how the creative and the research components inform each other, the voice of the Rev Slim Limits and excerpts from the creative script will at times be woven into my discussion of evangelical religion. This interplay is to highlight my attempt to achieve 'authenticity' by underpinning the work with research.

### **Ethics**

The exegesis and creative project received ethics approval that allowed me to interview people, attend church services and associated events and present a theatrical presentation across various media platforms. One political problem was that if the 'church service' was played for real, as if it were the truth, then this might lead to participants believing and possibly converting to a faux religion. This might involve them in a hoax. Also this could disturb some people who are vulnerable or genuinely searching for meaning and who hoped that the preacher (who is in fact a character) could provide it. Harm was considered minimal and approval given, as long as the material in the performance was flagged as a 'performance'.

## Exegesis outline

### Chapter two: Religion—what art thou?

This chapter argues that statistically the percentage of Americans describing themselves as evangelical is significant, and that this growing group poses a problem to secular liberal democracy. The most recent poll by Gallup in 2012 posed the question, 'Would you describe yourself as a 'born again'<sup>1</sup> or 'evangelical'?' Forty-one per cent affirmed 'Yes'. This is consistent with the average range of affirmative responses across the last twenty years of surveys (Gallup 2012). I explain how the exegesis narrows the focus of the research question and its effects to the Christian use of the term 'fundamentalism'. More specifically, the exegesis focus is narrowed to US presenters and Australian presenters who adopt a conservative US style.

Religions that call themselves Christian display a diverse range of beliefs. I explore statistical data to determine what the different Christian religious groups are and the demographic breakdown of people who self-identify as Christian, in the US and Australia.

Chapter two also defines the key terms *Evangelicalism*, *Pentecostalism*, *creationism* and *fundamentalism*. Definitional discussion is extended to give a

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<sup>1</sup> In Christianity, to be born again is a Protestant term to undergo a 'spiritual rebirth' (regeneration) of the human soul or spirit from the Holy Spirit, contrasted with the physical birth everyone experiences.

more in-depth analysis of what defines someone as a fundamentalist. The point of argument is to show how this relates to social and moral positioning and influence.

### **Chapter three: Fundamentalism—morality, culture and politics**

This chapter makes an argument about political and economic reasons why people may choose to follow. I present statistical and anecdotal references to argue predispositions that may increase the likelihood of conversion or 'following'. North American and Australian cultural, economic and political trends are analysed as a framework to understand why these fundamentalist Christian communities thrive.

I further reflect on my observations that when proposed legal changes in moral or ethical areas are discussed, genuine debate is difficult or absent, arguing that this is a danger to secular democracy. I give examples of how this is currently being played out in the US and Australia in the discussion of issues such as abortion, stem cell research and whether gay marriage should be legally sanctioned.

I will show that religion is an integral part of the shaping of US politics, policy, identity, and culture. I will draw on sources to argue that religion has a persuasive effect on the nation's character and its ideas about the world, and that it influences how Americans respond to events beyond their borders. In *God's Country: Evangelicals And Foreign Policy*, Walter Mead argues that religion



explains both Americans' sense of themselves as a chosen people and their belief that they have a duty to spread their values throughout the world (Mead 2006).

Harsh Christian fundamentalism has been part of the American fabric since it arrived with the Scottish, Irish, German and English religious reformers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, developing into the political potency we see today. Bageant says, 'the media evolution and political consequences of fundamentalism now comfort millions and scares the 'crap' out of millions more' (Bageant 2010).

As a counter to these above arguments, I explore what might be the greater value members find in these communities, although this value is generally dismissed or overlooked by those seeking to 'out' fundamentalist churches as havens for the ignorant, the bigoted or the naïve. What to an outsider can be perceived as simplistic fundamentalist rhetoric and dismissed, must provide some inherent good to those who join and participate. To critically focus on the *content* and ignore the *context* discards the value these millions of churchgoers attain from membership. A link between fundamentalist church attendance, statistical demographics and education and employment levels will be shown to be relevant in this context.

Valuing education poses a challenge to fundamentalist communities because it may develop analytic skills that potentially subvert the legitimacy of

Biblical interpretations. Statistical data will reveal that a literal view of the Bible may become less likely the further up the education ladder you go.

I conclude that the political, social and economic background of followers is a strong determinant in joining evangelical churches. However this is not a universal determinate, as will be shown by the case study of Hillsong Church in chapter five, which has an affluent demographic of followers.

#### **Chapter four: Persuasion, charisma and the power of the word**

This chapter argues that wittingly, or unwittingly, evangelical leaders in their liturgical performances, use persuasive techniques that have been identified by sociologists and psychologists in relation to other social forms of persuasion, such as politics. I show that sociological and psychological theory about evangelical followers is useful in understanding the effects of the use of these techniques.

This review of sociological and psychological theory will draw on broader comparisons with non-religious applications. I scrutinise the efficacy of persuasive techniques in making people join and stay, or in terms of what I characterise as their ability 'to convince, convert and keep'.

Psychological theories, such as cognitive dissonance, the authoritarian personality and rhetoric, are discussed to understand the nature of the followers and the leaders. Is there a desire for the leader to be centre stage, able to

command, be admired and adored and have influence and power? Is there a desire on the part of the follower to be cared for, to be part of a community and to have certainty of belief?

Fundamentalists, I conclude, are by no means unique in their use of rhetoric to convert others. Political groups and marketers broadly share their techniques and a good deal of the content of their conversion rhetoric. Central to the language of fundamentalism is, as Susan Harding outlines in her study on the *Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion*, ‘a bundle of strategies—symbolic, narrative, poetic, and rhetorical—that are deployed to comfort individuals, singularly and in groups, stripping them of their cultural assumptions, and investing them with a fundamentalist mode of organising and interpreting experience’ (Harding 1987 p167).

Also it is explained how dramaturgical applications of these persuasive theories are employed in the scripting of the creative work. The character of the Rev Slim Limits is crafted with ‘charismatic’, ‘hypnotic’, ‘persuasive’ and ‘rhetorical’ characteristics, in the theatrical pretence of a live church service.

### **Chapter five: Case Studies—Religious groups**

This chapter provides case studies of selected Christian evangelical individuals and groups, reflecting on how they operate and their methods of persuasion. The case studies exemplify the theoretical discussion of persuasion and belief in chapter four. Through embodied learning (the writer in the shoes of the

Reverend Slim Limits), interviews and researched analysis the chapter explores persuasive methodologies used across seemingly disparate groups. I conclude that the persuasive techniques used by these different groups have commonalities, although their effect is partly determined by the degree to which they are used and whether the church has a central authoritarian structure.

The studies further provide evidence of how these groups influenced or directly fed into the creative work. I discuss my reasons for selecting and including aspects of the case studies in the construction of the character of Slim and the artifice of his religious universe. The creative work seeks to enlighten the audience about the techniques of persuasion by making them transparent, by drawing attention to them in a theatrical form.

Examples of case studies discussed in detail are Hillsong Church Australia (and now a global enterprise), Catch the Fire Ministries— led by Pastor Danny Nallich (Melbourne, Victoria) who formed the Rise Up Australia (RUA) Party that contested Senate seats at the 2013 Australian federal election. Tinker Tailor is studied as an example of an Australian Christian cult active from the 1960s to the 1980s. Finally, I analyse the Rev Jim Jones of the People's Temple in the US and the Westboro Baptist Church in the US.

**Chapter six: Building the Church—creative reflection on the interplay between practice-based research, writing and performance**

This chapter shows how the research on persuasive tools and techniques is manifested in the creative work. I discuss theoretical theatrical and performance discourses using direct examples from the script. I reflect on aspects of my research into evangelism and the creative choices and challenges I encountered writing the script. This includes conflicts between choices of parody, satire and melodrama in finding the most effective way to have a political effect on the audience.

The creative work is placed in relation to theories and styles of satire and comedy. Satire reveals new understandings about evangelism as a performance with persuasive objectives. I discuss satire as a creative form, analysing its efficacy in revealing the machinations and the inner workings of its target. By embedding the real within an imagined artifice—my faux church and evangelical character—I discuss how I was striving, in a comedic way, to critically draw out the contradictions of some religious leaders.

How close to reality do you go before you ‘become’ what you are questioning? The difficulty and pitfalls of satire are discussed and how they might play out against the work. Examples of satirical characters and satirical shows, such as *The Reverend Billy* and *Summer Heights High*, offer a framework for situating *I Want To Be Slim* and the Rev Slim Limits.

This chapter also discusses how authenticity became more important as I developed the creative work. I review how, as the writing progressed, I decided to sail closer to the real (satire) and further from comedy, since the latter manifested more as caricature.

To highlight how the creative dialogue can be fed back into the research, the voice of the Rev Slim Limits and excerpts from the creative script will at times be woven into the discussion of religion. This interplay is to highlight my attempt to underpin the script with statements from real pastors as a way of achieving 'authenticity'.

In chapter six I also suggest that notions of truth or authenticity are at the core of religion and belief. The old adage 'truth is stranger than fiction' is at the centre of many of my creative choices. There were observations of real services that I attempted to include in the final creative work. Yet later workshopping of the script indicated no one believed a real pastor would say or do such things. As I discuss in this chapter, some of these observations were included and others were deliberately left out as they moved the work too far into absurdity. This threatened my intent to create satire and not parody. The identification of what is a truthful representation of evangelism and what is creative script, I believe will be highly subjective for the viewer.

On the question of truth, I determined that pastors often selected aspects or made up truths to suit their own interests or their own focus. I do this also in writing this exegesis and in creating my project. I select the parts of researched services, sermons, media and promotions that I feel suit my focus. The Church of the Holy Cowboy is a construct based on my beliefs.

This reflection chapter also discusses the process of the creative project and the changes or redirections to it along the way. These include narrative, directorial and production choices that defined the final work. Throughout this exegesis the creative artefact *I Want To Be Slim* will be referred to as 'the show' or 'the script'.

My research revealed a broad range of religious groups and individuals who had vastly different interpretations and presentation styles. It was therefore complex to meld these into a singular theatrical artefact infused with intelligent comment. In fact, the theatrical nature of the subject and the breadth of its presentation styles compelled me to find universal elements that identified to the audience a character who was recognisable, even to a non-religious or non-informed person. The creative work pushed in the natural direction that evangelists themselves strived for—TV, radio and online. Hence my work seeks to create across multiple platforms, built around a central character and faux church. I wanted the script to encapsulate (to some extent) the research.

I conclude that there are risks involved in satire and that not everyone will see the humour as tasteful or informative but may see it as mocking, judgmental or in bad taste. The balance between entertainment, engagement and critical contribution of the techniques of persuasion has, I assert, been achieved, although its level of success is highly subjective.

I draw conclusions about aspects that fuel religion's growth, including the observation that each preacher and religion is seeking to grow its audience—firstly by attracting new converts but more broadly by attracting members from other religions. I suggest that perhaps evangelical churches compete for membership numbers as any sporting group, political party or community group does. As their set of beliefs or core product is sold as the 'truth,' just what 'truth' means becomes open to interpretation, as each group seeks to differentiate itself in a crowded market.

By the end of this exegesis it will be shown that evangelists use the persuasive techniques of marketers and politicians, as proven by my case studies, and that certain people are predisposed to be affected by these techniques. This is highlighted through a performance where the Rev Slim Limits uses these techniques. Also it will be shown that my research on satire suggests that Horatian satire is the best form for me as a comedy writer/performer to make transparent the use of persuasive techniques of evangelists, in the script *I Want to Be Slim*. ■



## Chapter 2

# Religion: what art thou? Definitions and background

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*'No one joins a cult. No one joins something they think is going to hurt them. You join a religious organisation, you join a political movement and you join with people you really like.'*

*(Jonestown 2006 20 secs)*

This chapter provides a background to the problem identified i.e. the rise of evangelicals (as indeed fundamentalists) around the world. The breadth of the spread of evangelism in the US and globally is demonstrated by using statistical information.

This chapter also considers definitions of religious terminology and their fluid interpretations. Statistical data is used to explore the relationship between politics, policy, identity and culture in shaping religious attendance and acceptance in the US and Australia. The data provides evidence of the success of the persuasiveness of evangelists. This success will be highlighted by the large number of US residents who have converted to, or who follow, evangelism.

Against a snapshot of economic and historical indicators, I discuss the growth of fundamentalist churches in the US. This discussion is relevant to analysis of the 2012 US federal election, dealt with in chapter four. I also discuss the relationship between fundamentalist and evangelical churches and religion in Australia. I present comparative data to highlight how the Australian situation is very different from that of the US. The differences reveal that similar persuasive techniques have been used successfully to achieve conversions across quite disparate groups. This background is significant as it highlights other elements that may contribute to evangelical fundamentalism's success, as will be discussed in following chapters on the techniques and tools of persuasion.

This is part of the work of contextualising the creative work, *I Want To Be Slim*.

### **Definitions and statistics**

Statistically there is a great deal of confusion about exactly who evangelical Christians are, as will be shown through polling in the US and census data in Australia. In light of this statistical evidence, I discuss the reach of Christian belief in relation to shifting education and workplace situations that are affecting attendance figures.

Differences about labelling are expressed from both within the Christian community and from outside it, making it necessary to discuss the various definitions of the terms evangelicalism, Pentecostalism and fundamentalism, and to consider what distinguishes a Christian cult. This analysis is key to establishing how the terminology is used in the exegesis and creative work.

The term **evangelicalism** covers a diverse number of Protestant traditions, denominations, organisations and churches. However, its essence is to place a very strong emphasis on conversions: individuals accepting that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and their saviour.<sup>2</sup>

In this exegesis I adopt British historian David Bebbington's widely accepted definition of evangelicalism as entailing the following three criteria:

Conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed;  
activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be termed crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

(NAE 2012)

However, defining groups within this evangelical tradition is challenging, as across the spectrum groups are freely associating or disassociating from the

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<sup>2</sup>The term evangelical has its etymological roots in the Greek for 'gospel' or 'good news': (*evangelion*), from eu, 'good' and *angelion* 'message'. In that sense, to be an evangelical would mean to be a believer in the message of Jesus Christ as described in the Gospels (American Evangelicals 2014).

sub-descriptors of Pentecostalism and fundamentalism. To further understand the evangelical movement definitional understanding of these terms is important.

**Pentecostalism**, whose adherents and churches are described as Pentecostal, has been one of the fastest-growing segments of the wider evangelical movement. Most distinctive of this movement is an exuberant style of worship and the experience of *glossolalia*, more commonly known as speaking in tongues. Glossolalia is seen as a return to the apostolic (relating to the 12 biblical apostles) experience of the Book of Acts and the biblical Baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal movement was traditionally associated with the impoverished margins of American culture, particularly among Southern whites and blacks. Its influence began to spread during the 1950s through the visibility of healing evangelists like Oral Roberts and the migration of large numbers of Southern Protestants to the Midwest and Pacific Coast. By the 1960s, Pentecostal ideas and style began to surface in the 'mainline' Protestant churches, before a rapid increase of numbers across the US mainland. It is often referred to as charismatic Christianity (American Evangelicals 2014).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sub-definitions appear like Russian dolls as each movement has sub-groups within it. Charismatic Christianity is diverse and is not defined by acceptance of any particular doctrines, practices, or denominational structures. Rather, adherents believe their spiritual life is filled with miracles, signs and wonders, and other supernatural occurrences that include the presence of prophecy and healing. These are perceived as spiritual gifts (Burgess & Van der Maas 2002).

The most significant contemporary impact of these movements is the effect they have had overseas, leading many to tag Pentecostalism ‘world evangelicalism’. This is evident in many parts of the Third World, particularly in South America and sub-Saharan Africa, where statistics are notoriously difficult to calculate and verify. Nevertheless, estimates for Christian affiliation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reveal interesting trends. According to the *European Study of Pentecostalism*, an estimated 11 per cent of Africa’s population (including the predominantly Muslim north) was ‘charismatic’ in 2000 (Anderson 2007; Pew Forum 2006). Even if this figure is only a rough approximation, the Pentecostal and charismatic movements are fast becoming the dominant forms of Christianity in Africa. Some analysts speculate that within the next decade Pentecostalism may conceivably overtake the Roman Catholic Church as the largest Christian presence in Brazil and much of Spanish-speaking Latin America (American Evangelicals 2014; O’Neill 2010 p9; Pew Forum 2013).

**Fundamentalism** derives from a series of pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915 in the US, called *The Fundamentals* (Hunter 1983). These pamphlets contained conservative statements on doctrinal issues, which were

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The Charismatic movement however is not contained within the Pentecostal movement. Adherents can belong to other groups, including a substantial Catholic Charismatic renewal, with these numbering an estimated 120 million globally in 2011 (Pew Forum 2012).

meant to counteract the perceived drift toward liberal theology or 'modernism' within Protestantism. People who subscribed to these doctrines became known as fundamentalists, and fundamentalism came to refer to the whole movement. In his book the *Encyclopaedia of Evangelicalism* (2002), Randall Balmer states that fundamentalism has also been described as militant anti-modernism. However, he suggests that the statement needs to be clarified. One could interpret this as fundamentalists having a suspicion of innovation or technology, a general distrust of all things modern. Yet, in contradiction to this, as discussed further in this exegesis, fundamentalists and evangelicals in general have often been at the forefront in the use of technology, especially communications technology, commanding vast enterprises across all media. As an example, on Twitter the messages about God from Christian leaders such as Joyce Meyer, Max Lucado and Andy Stanley performed up to 30 times better than Twitter messages from pop stars such as Lady Gaga (O'Leary 2012). The 140-character limit of Twitter is perfect for tweeting Bible verses. The important distinction is, as Balmer elaborates, 'Fundamentalists have an aversion to modernity only when it is invested with a moral valence, when it represents a departure from orthodoxy or 'traditional values' however they might be defined' (Balmer 2002).

*American Grace: how religion unites and divides us* (Putnam et al 2010)

confirms the complexity of trying to put fixed boundaries around these groups:

in an amorphous group defined by blurry boundaries, one can debate exactly who is an evangelical. A label they may not even willingly adopt themselves even if their belonging, believing, and behaving all align with the standard scholarly use of the term. (Putnam, Campbell & Garrett 2010 p13)

### **Christian cults**

Clarity also needs to be given to what distinguishes a group associated with a mainstream religion from Christian cults. This is relevant in the creative work and in referencing individuals who appear to speak of Christian values and in Christian terms but are too far from core beliefs to be acceptable to the churches themselves. Different scholars use the cult word differently. However, according to Walter Martin's *The Rise of the Cults*, a 'cult' can be defined as 'a group of people gathered about a specific person or person's misinterpretation of the Bible'. I find this definition most useful and it is the position I take in this exegesis.

Martin suggests that such groups typically:

- Present a Christ different from that of orthodox faith
- Claim new truth
- Offer new, non-orthodox interpretations of Scripture
- Cite non-biblical authority source(s)
- Reject major tenets of orthodox Christianity

- Generally develop a changing, often contradictory theology
- Strong leadership, usually centred in a single person or group of persons
- Almost always offer a salvation by works
- Generally make unsubstantiated prophetic claims (Martin 1969 p17; Denison 2012 p13).

### **Complications**

The religious or denominational labels represent very distinct differences of approach. While fundamentalist and evangelical groups seek to maintain an identity as theological conservatives, evangelicals seek to distance themselves from stereotypical perceptions of the 'fundamentalist' posture of antagonism toward the larger society. They advocate involvement in the surrounding community rather than separation from it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The contemporary North American usage of the term evangelicalism may sometimes be understood as the middle ground between theological liberalism and the cultural separatism of fundamentalism. Balmer states that evangelicalism in a way straddles the divide between American Protestantism, fundamentalism and liberalism. While the North American perception is important to understand the usage of the term, it by no means dominates a wider global view, where the fundamentalist debate was not so influential (Balmer 2002).

To reflect that this position or posturing is fluid, Balmer historically contextualises his argument, observing that in the first half of the 20th century, evangelicalism in America was largely synonymous with fundamentalism (Balmer 2002). George Marsden further supports this in *Reforming Fundamentalism*: 'There was not a practical distinction between fundamentalist and evangelical: the words were interchangeable' (Marsden 1987). By the mid-1950s, largely due to the ecumenical evangelism of Billy Graham, the terms evangelicalism and fundamentalism began to refer to two different approaches. Perhaps compounded by the liberalisation of society from the 1960s, fundamentalism began to aggressively attack its liberal enemies while



Statistically, the percentage of Americans describing themselves as evangelical is significant. Gallup has run a survey since 1992 asking: 'Would you describe yourself as a 'born again' or 'evangelical'?' with an average of 43 per cent responding 'Yes' (Gallup 2012). At various times, people have assumed that evangelicals are individuals who are adherents of certain denominations within the Christian faith, or that evangelicals are those who take their religion very seriously, believe more conservative or fundamental religious doctrine, have had specific religious experiences, or have specific beliefs about the correct relationship between religion and society.

Easter is one of the most important religious holidays of the year for many Christians, the time when they celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to a 2010 Pew Research Centre survey, roughly half (48 per cent) of Christians in the US say they believe that Christ will definitely (27 per cent) or probably (20 per cent) return to earth in the next 40 years (Pew Forum 2010).

In contrast, since the first census in 1911, the majority of Australians have reported an affiliation with a Christian religion. However, there has been a long-term decrease in affiliation to Christianity from 96 per cent in 1911 to 61 per cent in 2011. Conversely, although Christian religions are still predominant in

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evangelicalism downplayed liberalisation and emphasised outreach and conversion of new members.

Australia, there have been increases in those reporting an affiliation to non-Christian religions, and those reporting 'no religion' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012).

In the past decade, the proportion of the population reporting an affiliation to a Christian religion decreased from 68 per cent in 2001 to 61 per cent in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting a marked difference between Australian and US religious positioning, there is no question in the census and no statistical study asking Australians if they are evangelical.

Further complicating matters, in the US Gallup states that 'perhaps [a] surprisingly high percentage' of Catholics (19 per cent) say they are born again or evangelical. Catholics in general may think of themselves that way, but again, for analytical purposes, Catholics are historically different enough from members of traditionally non-Catholic and Protestant denominations to warrant their exclusion from a definition of evangelical. Hence, Gallup Polling describes the 'usual decision to exclude Catholics from the 'evangelical category'' (Gallup 2005).

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<sup>5</sup> This trend was also seen for the two most commonly reported denominations. In 2001, 27 per cent of the population reported an affiliation to Catholicism. This decreased to 25 per cent of the population in 2011. There was a slightly larger decrease for Anglicans from 21 per cent of the population in 2001 to 17 per cent in 2011. Some of the smaller Christian denominations increased over this period – there was an increase for those identifying with Pentecostal from 1.0 per cent of the population in 2001 to 1.1 per cent in 2011. However, the actual number of people reporting this religion increased by one-fifth (Australian Bureau of Statistics).

When defining US evangelicals an interesting anomaly is portrayed in the statistical data. Black Americans are one of the most religious groups in America. They are also, for the most part, Protestant Christians. Therefore, Gallup notes, 'it is not surprising to find that 70 per cent of Blacks in the combined aggregate sample of surveys say they are evangelical or born again' (Gallup 2005). It is interesting to note that Gallup therefore removes Black Americans from their data as they skew the results. This exegesis will follow the above methodology and remain focused on white Protestant evangelical Christian churches or groups.

Gallup states in summary that statistically there is no hard-and-fast way of knowing what categories of 'evangelicals' there are in America today. For practical purposes, one approach is to define evangelicals as white, non-Catholic Christians who agree that the label 'evangelical or born again' describes them. Recent survey data suggests that about three in ten American adults meet these criteria. This group of evangelicals tends to include slightly more women and people who are older, a little less well educated, more likely to live in the South, and much more likely to be Republican and conservative compared with the overall national population (Gallup 2005).

In conclusion, in this chapter the fluid interpretations of religious terminologies have been shown to influence understandings about what the pertinent groupings are. However, regardless of this definitional challenge, the

statistical data reveal the magnitude of the groups, their growth in the US, and the extent of the problem being studied. This demonstrates the success of the persuasive arguments presented by evangelists. This persuasive power becomes relevant in chapter three when I discuss the contextual, political, economic and political settings of evangelical religions.

This chapter has also contextualised the play by giving the writer a better understanding of the definitions used and their relationship to the wider community, and in assisting in deciding how to situate the fictional Church of the Holy Cowboy. Consideration was given as to whether the Reverend Slim Limits is a cult leader, a fundamentalist or an evangelical? I concluded that a definition would not easily be applied as a deliberate creative choice, underlining the ambiguity of attaching these labels. The Church of the Holy Cowboy is what I call 'a little bit impregnated' by all of them, as will be discussed further in chapters five and six.

In the next chapter I go on to the content and structure of fundamentalist thought and to analyse how US evangelism is affecting US politics.■

## Chapter 3

# Fundamentalism—morality, culture and politics

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*'The devil can cite scripture for his purpose.'*

*(William Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice)*

Having outlined the magnitude of US evangelical churches and the growth of significant numbers internationally, in this chapter I examine fundamentalism and its interplay with morality, culture and politics. I discuss fundamentalist thought and its claims about evil, with an emphasis on the US experience. I further argue that to critically focus on the content of evangelicalism and ignore its context discards the worth millions of churchgoers attain from evangelical group membership. Being able to understand fundamentalist thought and its worldview is a means of understanding what makes these groups attractive to followers.

First, I discuss how fundamentalism operates. Then I go on to show how evangelical churches and beliefs currently affect politics in the United States. I further this discussion by correlating education and employment in the United States, with predisposition to fundamentalist beliefs.

I introduce Adorno's study of the authoritarian personality and discuss how membership of a religious group tends to be reduced to a fairly abstract in-group/out-group rhetoric by these groups, through the notion of the 'other'. I briefly outline the role that morality, ethics, culture and politics in the US and Australian contexts play in providing an, 'openness' or 'receptivity' to persuasive arguments that seek conversion then commitment. Having established the size of this problem in the last chapter, this chapter makes an argument that evangelical beliefs are now having a substantial effect on US state and national politics in a way that previous large conventional religions did not. This further establishes the breadth of the problem. I then discuss the value church attendance brings to followers. This value is generally dismissed or overlooked, by those seeking to 'out' fundamentalist churches as havens of the ignorant, the bigoted or the naïve. Such dismissal fails to examine the value membership of these communities provides. What to an outsider can be perceived and dismissed as simplistic fundamentalist rhetoric could provide some inherent good to those who join and participate. The high correlation between church attendance and low levels of education and employment is relevant in this context, and will be discussed further in chapter four.

Drawing on Walter Mead's (2006) arguments, the chapter explores the chemistry formed from the mix of policy, identity, and culture, positioned against current US politics and economics. This chemistry gives a hint of the

vast 'cultural war' being played out in the US. Mead's ideas have resonance in Australia and globally. On the other hand, Kimball (2008) states that whatever one's personal outlook, it is crucial we recognise the centrality of religion. To say religion is the only cause of political conflicts in the US about things ranging from stem cell research, cloning and abortion to the right to freedom of expression, does not capture the depth of these debates (Kimball 2008).

To an outsider, the church or the evangelist may appear to be using persuasive techniques or tricks to bring converts into the community and keep them there. However, for many these persuasive strategies may be normalised within their community. That is, they are consistent with the 'common sense' everyday way things are done and thought about in that community. Clear, stable answers to often indefinable life questions, may provide a 'safe haven' for those seeking understanding and certainty in a complex world. A binary worldview may offer persuasive motivation to those seeking simple answers. For fundamentalists the Bible provides the answers to all questions about what is right and what is wrong, defining evil in morally absolute terms.

### **Religion in Post-Modernity**

A placement of religion in contemporary times is useful at this point to frame the sociological analysis of the problem, as per the data in chapter two.

Durkheim through his extensive studies asserted the role of religion as

providing an explanation for human sociability. He argued that in any society social solidarity is achieved through the establishment of a moral universe that he called the *collective consciousness*. Religious rituals can generate a *collective effervescence* that allows participants to sublimate their individuality ... their shared feelings associated with religious expression helped establish a common commitment to a collective moral universe (Van Krieken et al, 2014 p311).

Wuthnow (2001) worked to distinguish between religion and spirituality, stating that religion is an institution whilst spirituality is understood as an expression of self-identity. Religion is imposed on the individual from the outside, whilst 'spirituality is derived reflexively from within' (cited Van Krieken et al, 2014 p310).

Marx's materialist theory of religion focused on religion's contribution to social conflict, contributing to oppression because it encouraged meekness and passivity. Van Krieken et al state that Marx's analysis expresses sympathy for those that turn to religion as a way of compensation for the pain of living in 'soulless conditions' but argues that this mistakes the problem for the solution. Marx believed that by accepting the prospect of an afterlife, people forsake the prospect of a good life in the real world (Van Krieken et al, 2014 p313).

While 19<sup>th</sup>-century sociologists regarded religion as an anachronism that would inevitably disappear as modernity progressed, today the debate about



the relationship between modernity and religions remains as alive as ever (Lyon 1996, Bruce 2002 cited Van Krieken et al, 2014 p319). Van Krieken et al refer to modernity's secularisation of society as a reason for the decline in religiosity at both an individual and institutional level. Max Weber argued that industrialisation and capitalism had a rational worldview that was at odds with a religious one. Emotion, tradition and the guidelines of religion were rejected by the rationality of industrialisation and capitalism that base action on intellectual reasoning. Irrational ways of thinking, including spirituality, magic and religion are pushed to the periphery of social life by modernity (Van Krieken et al, 2014 p319).

There is broad evidence to demonstrate that with the growth of secularisation, religion does not hold the central place that it once did in Western democracies. Mainstream religious groups were much more closely aligned and integrated with the political, social and economic institutions of society, in periods prior to the Enlightenment. In broader terms, this influence of the institutional church in Western democracies has greatly diminished as part of this secularisation. However as will be discussed in this chapter, the US experience, in the context of this exegesis, is an exception.

Whilst there has been this decline of influence of the institutional churches, with some believing we are now in a post-secularised age, there has been a resurgence of religion albeit in a different form. Van Krieken et al argue that

whilst the institutionalised churches are in decline, playing only a marginal role in the public sphere, religion has been individualised (Van Krieken et al, 2014 p322).

However as can be seen by the enduring numbers defining themselves as Christian in the US, Heelas (1996) believes this post-secular age is characterised by, 'religious privatisation and pluralism, in which belief becomes an individual project ... and by religious commodification involving the commercialisation of religion through consumption' (this is best characterised by Hillsong Church as will be discussed in chapter five). This, Heelas argues, is brought about by detraditionalisation and individualisation as a consequence of globalisation (Heelas 1996, cited Van Krieken et al, 2014 p323).

Modernity, Baumann (1992) argues, tried to reduce ethical problems to rules or laws, with people encouraged to behave in certain ways as per these laws, justified on rational grounds. 'Modernity was a great exercise in abolishing individual responsibility' (Baumann 1992, pxxii). He further states that, 'once post-modernity has torn away the belief that there can be a rational way for perfecting society, it leaves no external rules to govern their lives' (Baumann 1992, pxxii). So whilst morality and ethics are still issues that need to be defined and responded to in a functioning society, these are no longer governed or moderated by the religious and social institutions of modernity. 'With a multitude of choices, individuals become more responsible for their

own morality' (Baumann 1992, pxxii). In this post-modern space, some individuals can seek religious leaders, as they are now the 'experts' on morality rather than state laws.

Giddens (1990) argues that religion can become revitalised partly in response to the uncertainties and doubt generated by contemporary conditions, and partly because modern institutions cannot provide the moral guidance necessary for managing daily life (Giddens, 1990 p111). The rapid changes of a globalised world are left to individuals to decipher, to interpret their moral meaning. This, argues Giddens, opens the door to religion and spirituality once again (Giddens, 1990 p111). As the institutionalised foundations of religion have weakened during the period of modernity, a large number of churches have emerged catering to a range of individualist needs. Van Krieken et al elaborate, 'that today's commodified religion has become an expression of individual lifestyle and of signifying who we are and what we stand for. By answering questions of meaning it compensates for the fragility of identity' (Van Krieken et al, 2014 p324). The experience of this in the US and Australia can be highlighted by the rise in protestant evangelical churches that are led by individuals or families e.g. Hillsong, Catch the Fire (as discussed in chapter five), as opposed to the centralised system of the more traditional protestant denominations e.g. Anglican or Uniting (Methodist, Presbyterian).

Baumann locates the rise of fundamentalism in this context. Whilst modernity meant receiving security, order and regulation, in exchange for giving up individual freedoms, post-modernity transforms the relationship again. Deregulation reigns, with the individual free to peruse his or her own desires. Baumann says that this comes with a cost, and in this case it is the loss of certainty. 'Whilst the default position of post-modernism is freedom, it is still possible to choose security if one is willing to trade it in for freedom. This is where the appeal of fundamentalist religion resides' (Baumann, 1997 p184).

### **Know thine enemy – good and evil**

This evangelical concentration on rhetoric about evil, I will argue, provides an entry into theories of meaning and belief that I claim underpin the discussion on conversion.

'Evil is a Value Judgement', says Dr Michael Stone who created the Depravity Scale but I will argue that Christian fundamentalists believe the judgement has already been made for us. (Arehart-Treichel 2001 p9)

What allows the fundamentalist to convert and to keep growing their numbers? It will be argued that dislocation, disenfranchisement, rapid globalisation and unemployment provide fertile ground for the rhetorically and morally simplistic language of fundamentalism, conveyed through vast and organised media designed to influence and convert.

The search for meaning defines people who come to join churches, with a broad range of circumstances influencing how people interpret the meaning they are searching for. Many theories discuss meaning systems, with Hood et al's *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* summarising this search for meaning as a search for a group of beliefs. These beliefs include both a world theory and a theory of self. These meaning systems help individuals to set goals, regulate behaviour and experiences, plan activities, sense direction and purpose in life, and make self-evaluations in relation to all of these experiences. For a religious person the search for meaning and significance involves the sacred (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005).

The intellectual pursuit by academics, psychologists and social scientists to understand what is sacred in fundamentalism is seen as unnecessarily pedantic to fundamentalists. The sacred, fundamentalists perceive, is quite simply, 'that what has been ordained by the Divine Being through the sacred text' (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005 p15). For them the Bible alone is the direct and literal revelation of God. The Bible is therefore the totally sufficient source of meaning and purpose in life. Islam makes similar assertions about the centrality of the Quran, such that for fundamentalists of any faith, their book rules out the validity of the books of other religions (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005 p.15).

Some contend that religious fundamentalism provides a unifying philosophy of life within which personal meaning and purpose are embedded. In short, religion can be a total way of life. Religion is a complex system that requires an authoritative base (i.e. a doctrine) capable of subordinating to itself all other elements of human experience. Subordinating all else to this supreme authoritative text is an important defining characteristic of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism's psychological staying power is its ability to create a unifying philosophical framework that meets personal needs for meaning and provides coherence to an existence that might otherwise seem fragmented (Iannaccone 1994). Doctrines provide moral certainty and stability, therefore contributing a sense of coherence to an otherwise chaotic world (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005).

In his study of the authoritarian personality, Adorno (1950) asserts that Christianity, affected by the Enlightenment and the emergence of science, profoundly shook the 'magical' elements of Christianity as well as the factual basis of Christian belief in biblical history. Christianity has been gradually transformed into 'social cement'. The more its inherent truth is challenged by science, the more its more hostile, destructive and negative features come to the fore. Deprived of the intrinsic claim of 'truth' this transformation process requires more 'cement' for the maintenance of the *status quo*:

The transformation of religion into an agency of social conformity makes it fall in line with most other conformist tendencies. Adherence to Christianity under such conditions easily lends itself to abuse; to subservience, overadjustment, and in-group loyalty as an ideology which covers up hatred against the disbeliever, the dissenter. Membership in any particular religious group tends to be reduced to a fairly abstract in-group – out-group relationship within the general pattern. (Adorno 1950 pp729-30)

A key point over which people attack Christian fundamentalists is their interpretation of their sacred text, the Bible. However, a proper understanding of fundamentalism does not need to find explanations for deviant or strange beliefs. Rather, Hood et al (2005) argue that we must look at the text fundamentalists hold dear and see how it moulds their beliefs and the characters of those who adhere to its words. The centrality of the text is what permits you to understand fundamentalism from within:

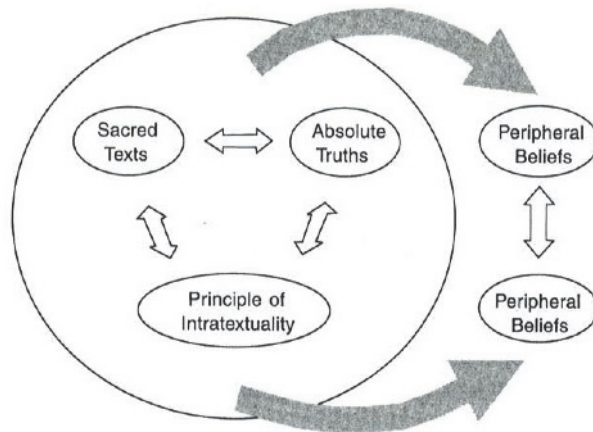
You must take seriously what fundamentalists take as axiomatic: that there exists an objective truth—revealed, recorded, and adequately preserved—illuminating intent that can be grasped and valued as the foundation for understanding all of life. (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005 p21)

The question of who interprets any ambiguity in the Bible for the followers is discussed below.

Hood, Hill and Williamson explain the fundamentalist interpretation of what constitutes their truths and beliefs as an **intratextual model**—the reader must go into the text and allow the text to speak for itself. However, the clear point to note is that the voice must come only from within the text. This can be described as the drawing of an unbroken circle. As captured in figure 3.1 below reproduced from Hood et al (2005), within the circle sit the *Sacred Text* and *Absolute Truths* and the *Principle of Intratextuality*. One's way of being in the world is defined by what is in the circle. The Sacred Text—the Bible, in the case of Christianity—reveals to the reader the Absolute Truths on the whys and hows of life. Everything outside the circle is seen as a peripheral belief that is interpreted and responded to only in relation to what is in the circle.

Critics or disbelievers are kept at distance. All who refuse to embrace the text as the sole authority are perceived as a threat to the security and purity of the worldview.





**Figure 3.1 The structure of fundamentalist thought**

*(Source: Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005 p23)*

Christian fundamentalists are not necessarily closed-minded but rather seek to search the sacred text for all knowledge. The text is the overarching guide and they use Bible verses as 'decision guides' in specific instances. It is the justification for all thought and action. They support other forms of knowledge, including science and historic criticism. However, whatever peripheral beliefs emerge must be ultimately judged and deemed harmonious with what is in the big circle (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005). For example, evolution is not acceptable as it questions the sacred belief of creationism, that God created the world in seven days. By contrast, the world being round and not flat is acceptable, as there is no fixed view in the Bible on this.

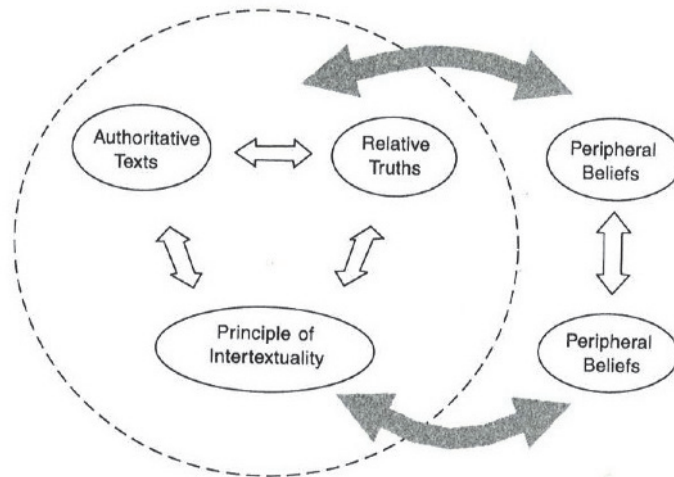
This closed circle captures not only the exclusion of other interpretive factors but also the fact that absolute truths derived from the process are themselves protected from outside influences and are not subject to criticism.

Contradictions within the text are where there is ongoing debate between and within groups. However, there may be a perception that this closed system of thought is consensually held and forever fixed. Hood et al state:

For there is nothing more variable than the perception of absolute truth ... and churches often separate when they disagree on what their sacred text says, indicating that, like all who seek to understand, they are open to change and interpretation. Look beyond the mega-churches and see that they are also made up of smaller local congregations. (Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005 p27)

An indication of intra-textuality is revealed in the comment of American Christian fundamentalist, D. L. Moody: 'I have one rule about books, I don't read any book, unless it helps me understand THE book' (Hofstadter 1963 p108).

Hood, Hill and Williamson also define more liberal, non-fundamentalist churches, which they represent as having an **inter-textual model**, represented as a circle with a dotted line in Figure 3.2 (from Hood et al 2005). This model captures how peripheral beliefs can flow into the circle and impact on the interpretation of the sacred text.



**Figure 3.2 The structure of nonfundamentalist thought**

*(Source: Hood, Hill & Williamson 2005 p27)*

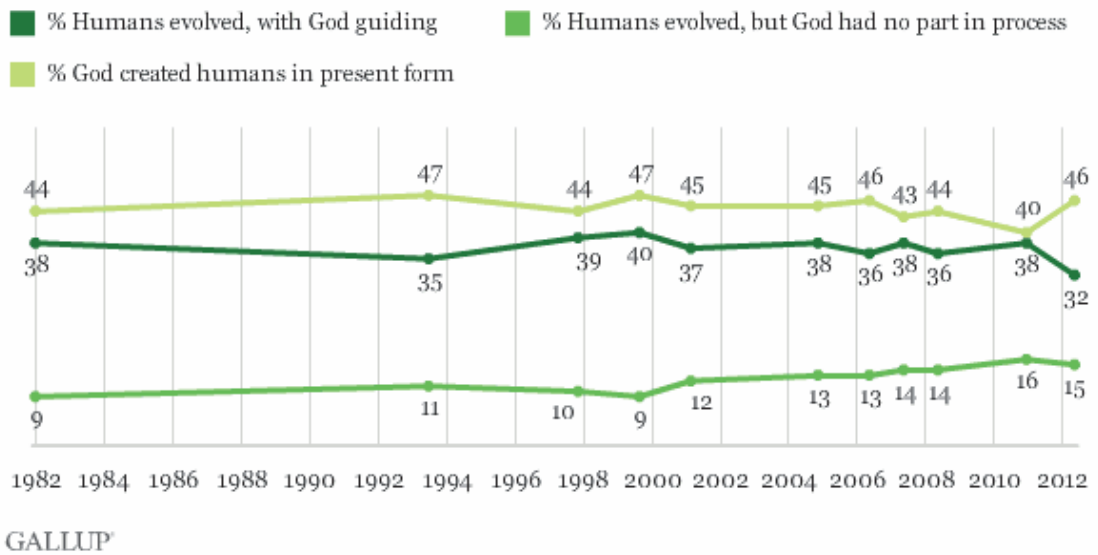
As an example, for the nonfundamentalist evolution is seen as more of God's universe being revealed through science. There is a less literal, more metaphorical interpretation of the biblical verse. Fundamentalists can find liberal churches to be as much an enemy as non-believers since neither group adheres to their 'absolute truths' and both groups thus foster uncertainty.

Exploring the example of the definition of creationism helps highlight the complexity within these systems in determining theological positioning.

Creationists believe that God created humans in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years. Forty-six per cent of Americans believe this creationist view of the origin of humans. As figure 3.3 shows, this level of belief is essentially unchanged from 30 years ago, when Gallup first asked the question.

*Which of the following statements comes closest to your views on the origin and development of human beings?*

1) Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process, 2) Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process, 3) God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so



**Figure 3.3 Views on the origin and development of human beings**

*(Source: Gallup 2012)*

Despite the many changes that have taken place in American society and culture over the past 30 years, including new discoveries in biological and social science, there has been virtually no sustained change in Americans' views on the origin of the human species. More broadly, some 78 per cent of Americans today believe that God had a hand in the development of humans in some way, just slightly fewer than the percentage that felt this way in 1982. Gallup summarises this by saying that there is no evidence in this trend of a substantial movement toward a secular viewpoint on human origins (Gallup 2012).

Most Americans are not scientists, of course, and cannot be expected to understand all the latest evidence and competing viewpoints on the development of the human species. Still, it would be hard to dispute that most scientists who study humans agree that the species evolved over millions of years. Relatively few scientists believe that humans came into existence in their current form only 10,000 years ago, without the benefit of evolution. Thus, almost half of Americans today hold a belief that is at odds with the preponderance of the scientific literature, at least as measured by the wording of the Gallup question (Gallup 2012). This can be reinforced regionally across America by statistics showing that 75 per cent in Arkansas and Alabama believe the Bible is literally true, against only 22 per cent in Vermont, Massachusetts (Rasmussen Reports 2006).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Creationist sub-definitions: Within theological groups there are again disparate views, passionately held. Creationist museums that present a biblical stance have been established to counter evolutionary scientific teaching. The main objective of these museums is to present factual evidence, as they interpret it, in a scientific way, that the Bible is literally true. Numerous museums are established in the US with the largest and most successful being the Creation Museum in Kentucky, which uses state of the art displays, including showing dinosaurs and humans present simultaneously (Creation Museum). This trend for counter-scientific presentation is not just in the US: examples include Lebendige Vorwelt Museum in Germany, Big Valley Science Museum in Canada, Noah's Ark Hong Kong Creation Museum (managed by Noah's Ark Hotel & Resort), and The Centre for Natural Studies in Serbia (Kuratorium Lebendige Vorwelt, Big Valley Museum 2012, Noah's Ark Hong Kong, Dino Creation Museum 2012). Australia has no official creation museums but is strongly represented via the Creation.com site for the global ministry of Creationism (Creation.com 2014). The museums attract considerable attention from scientific bodies seeking to discredit their rigor. Institutes and organisations have been formed to promote their particular ideological stance including the Discovery Institute: Centre for Science and Culture, promoting 'intelligent design', which they define thus: 'The theory of intelligent design holds that certain features of

## Susceptibility of the followers

Fundamentalist churches offer belonging, certainty and family, like most churches. The construct of belonging has long been discussed in psychological and sociological literature. Maslow identified belonging as one of the most basic human needs (Maslow 1954). Carrier, in his study of religious belonging, pointed out that belonging is more than just a stated affiliation. Instead, it is an attitude, a psychological reality that encompasses a set of positive emotions and cognitions that arise from playing a meaningful role in a group (Carrier 1965).

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the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.’ The fracturing with these groups is further evidenced by the Discovery Institute’s claim that they are different from creationists: ‘Unlike creationism, the scientific theory of intelligent design is agnostic regarding the source of design and has no commitment to defending Genesis, the Bible or any other sacred text’ (Explaining the Science of Intelligent Design). Nonetheless, the Creation Museum (throughout its promotional website) refers to the ‘Intelligent Designer’ (Creation Museum).

*Answers in Genesis* is a ‘new earth’ website supporting the view that the earth is created in biblical time frames, described as within 10,000 years (Answers in Genesis 2014). This is countered by Old Earth Ministries (formerly Answers In Creation) – a creation science ministry dedicated to supporting ‘old earth’ (billion+ years) creationism to counter what they state are the ‘false teachings of young earth creationism’. For them a Christian can believe in an inerrant Bible, a literal translation of Genesis, and believe that God created the world over a period of billions of years (Old Earth Ministries 2014).

A third pillar, theistic evolution or evolutionary creation, represents a belief held by some religious groups, including the Catholic Church, that God is the guiding force behind the process of evolution. This belief is compatible with their spiritual beliefs, with the bible seen as more metaphorical guidance than literal (Pew Forum 2012). However, the Pew Research Centre, a nonpartisan US ‘fact tank’, indicate division among white mainline Protestants who believe in evolution. They are themselves divided over the question of whether evolution occurred through natural selection or was guided by a supreme being for the purpose of creating human life in its present form. Overall, 31 per cent of mainline Protestants believe in natural selection, while 26 per cent believe a supreme being guided the process (Pew Forum 2012).

More specifically, Carrier argued that when a person feels he or she belongs to a church:

The member sees himself as taking part in his group; he identifies himself with it, he participates in it, he receives his motivation from it; in a word, he is in a state or disposition of interaction with the group, which understands, inspires, and welcomes him. (Carrier 1965; Krause & Wulff 2005 p58)

However, there is the prevailing fundamentalist message that creates a point of difference. For when the Rapture comes, that time when the Lord Jesus returns to earth—a consolation that many disillusioned may draw energy from—all those forces and people who have conspired against the believers will be destroyed. In its own way the Rapture will be the ultimate final solution.<sup>7</sup>

For fundamentalists being saved involves giving up disbelief, not just suspending it. Once this relinquishment is complete, then everything is referenced through the new prism. Everything can be attributed to the will of God, or interpreted as an act of God. Coincidence does not exist for born again

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<sup>7</sup>'The Rapture' is used in at least two senses. In the pre-tribulation view, a group of people will be left behind on earth after another group literally leaves 'to meet the Lord in the air.' This is now the most common use of the term, especially among fundamentalist Christians and in the United States. The other, older use of the term 'Rapture' is simply as a synonym for the final resurrection generally, without a belief that a group of people is left behind. This distinction is important, as some types of Christianity never refer to 'the Rapture' in religious education (Guinan 2005).

fundamentalists. In a persuasive, affirming feedback loop, all aspects, moments, words and events are ripe for supernatural harvesting. Everything can be attributed to Satan, who must be fought, or can be interpreted as a victory for God.

Hopper's comment that phenomena involving extreme emotions are hard to explain holds true for conversion. In this context finding the reason people join and stay is challenging. However, all the following factors need to be considered in understanding an individual's vulnerability to these techniques: response to persuasive techniques, economic or social pre-conditions and individual emotional conditions. For persuasion and change to be successful, I suggest that cognitive dissonance needs to be minimised or removed.<sup>8</sup> This must be made possible through the mutuality that exists between what the preacher preaches and what the follower projects.

### **Growth of fundamentalist churches in the US**

In *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, Chris Hedges seeks to expose the fundamentalist movement. He cites a Gallup survey revealing that there are 70 million evangelicals in the US (25 per cent of the population), attending more than 200,000 evangelical churches. As mentioned

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<sup>8</sup> For example, a smoker suffers cognitive dissonance when many sources tell them smoking is dangerous. They rationalise their smoking and reduce this dissonance by ignoring or avoiding such advice.



above, polls indicate that around 40 per cent of US residents believe the Bible is the actual word of God. A 2004 study by political scientist John Green identifies approximately 12 per cent (of this 40 per cent) as traditional evangelicals or what the media has labelled the 'religious right' (Hedges 2008).

To protect the sanctity of the word, fundamentalists have developed closed systems of information where their followers can learn from the start of school through to university in a system that filters all learning through the biblical paradigm. Those who don't have a Christian school nearby are supported through home learning with the church providing the educational material. Home schooling numbers in the US are around 1.1 million, with 72 per cent of home schooling parents saying their reason is to give moral and religious instruction (Hedges 2008). Christian broadcasters offer news, health, entertainment and devotional programs. While fundamentalists shun modernism for its liberal thought, they understand the power of media to convey their message. Fox News is an example of a traditional media channel that is targeting these Christian audiences. Evangelicals can pick the sources that align with their own ideologies (Hedges 2008).

In his study on the Digital Jesus, Robert Howard (2011) says that Christian fundamentalism occurs in communication enclaves where circular reasoning and intolerance proceed unchallenged. Web 2.0 technologies with centrally moderated blogs and discussion forums have proved to be an ideal

medium for, as an example, 'end times' communities who discuss the return of Jesus and the variations of sequences that will happen for this to occur. Howard stopped counting 'end times' websites years ago when he reached 500 (Ferré 2012).

These sites strive to uphold canons of Christian fundamentalism while they foster discussion. However, 'when a group of believers can express intolerance without facing resistance, prejudices can persist' (Ferré 2012). This cyclic loop of reinforcement embeds the fundamental tenets of their ideology. Fundamentalists see the world in the dualistic terms of good versus evil (true Christians versus all others). 'Vernacular Christian fundamentalism' understands the Bible as revelatory but inscrutable, focusing on end times prophesy (Ferré 2012).

Howard is hopeful that the interactive character of digital communications will draw alternative perspectives into these fundamentalist communication enclaves, broadening outlooks in the process. 'As individuals have more and more choices about how and where they enact discourse, a new generation of technology-savvy internet users may demand tolerance in their Internet media experiences,' he says (Ferré 2012). This may be a fanciful hope as the internet and digital media also allow a wider net to be cast for like-minded thinkers, others who reinforce your own point of view or who strengthen you in your conviction by their fundamentalist reasoning. It is little wonder, therefore,

that to many the Obama victory came as a shock. 'I thought Romney was a shoo-in,' commented a local politician in Wyoming, one of the poorer states (cited McAuley 2012). If his information had come from far-right conservative sources only, he would have been exposed to a world where the prevailing view is that all the troubles in the US are Obama's fault, and his economic incompetence is obvious. Informed only by such views, the perception of the local politician in Wyoming is quite understandable; it doesn't even need to be argued, he just 'knows' it.

**The Crusade—you're either with us or you're against us**

*'Men never do evil so completely and so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.'* (Blaise Pascal, 1670 #895)

The posturing of certain fundamentalist evangelicals has been provocative and divisive for those both inside and outside the Christian community. Persuasive rhetoric, projection, transference, attribution and the use of polarised aggression (discussed in detail in chapter four) work to further limit the constrained perspectives of followers.

Here are some examples of us/them, insider/outsider commentary by evangelists.

- After the 2009 bush fires that killed 173 people in Victoria, Australia (Victoria Police 2009), Pastor Danny Nalliah from the regrettably named Catch the Fire Ministries said that, 'It was

God's punishment for the Victorian Parliament passing pro-abortion laws' (Feneley 2009).

- Pastor Pat Robertson, a US evangelist, blamed the 7.3 magnitude 2010 earthquake in Haiti on the Haitians' 'pact with the devil' two centuries ago while seeking liberation from the French (Chicago Tribune Newsblog 2010).
- Reverend Jerry Falwell claimed on September 13, 2001, that 'God had opened up the nation to devastation because of the unholy workings of, among other constituencies, 'the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians' (*Sourcewatch*, 2012).
- In Jan 2014 a United Kingdom councillor blamed storms and floods on the legalisation of gay marriage in Britain (Malnick 2014).

Pastor Rod Parsley of the World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio, with a twelve thousand-member congregation peppers his sermons with the language of war and violence. Sentences often seen in evangelical writings include: 'liberals defend homosexuality to erode the moral fibre of the nation'; 'Islam intends to use violence to conquer the world'; 'Christian America has been mandated by God to do battle and defeat all demons' and 'the church that

claims to hold the cause of right, yet condemns confrontation is little more than a social club' (Hedges 2008 pp158-159, 163).

US Westboro Baptist Church defines and expresses its perception of the nature of evil via its websites: [www.godhatesfags.com](http://www.godhatesfags.com), [www.godhatestheworld.com](http://www.godhatestheworld.com) (and others). Members express their hate towards the US government for allowing homosexuality to exist by picketing the funerals of US soldiers. For this, they have themselves been defined as evil by the very church they represent (Brouwer & Hess 2007).

Pastor Russell Johnson led the Ohio Restoration Project, a rightwing coalition of pastors seeking to 'restore' Christianity in America. Known as a 'Patriot Pastor' (PFAW 2006) Johnson talks of an embattled Christian America, defining this as a war of values and morals, of decency and goodness, pitted against forces of darkness and evil that have enveloped the country. He issues a strident call to arms:

We are on the beaches of Normandy and we can see the pill-box entrenchments of academic and media liberalism. We'll take our country back for Christ. (Hedges 2008 p148)

Hedges argues that this creates an atmosphere of being under siege. It imparts the glow of comradeship, the feeling that, although outside these walls there is a dangerous, hostile world, here we are all brothers and sisters. It is clear to whom we bear a moral obligation: to fellow Christians. The world is divided,

Hedges declares, into friends and enemies, neighbours and strangers. Those outside the Christian community are effectively strangers, no longer worthy of being loved. This creates a world where there are only two types of people: godly men and women who advance Christian values, and non-believers—many of them liberal Christians—who peddle the filth and evil of secular humanism (Hedges 2008).

This has to a certain extent manifested in what ex-US vice president Al Gore notes as the single most surprising element in the American conversation—the prominence and intensity of constant fear, with persistent confusion about the sources of that fear. Gore surmises that Americans now have difficulty distinguishing between illusionary threats and legitimate ones (Gore 2007).

It seems that the object of hatred has shifted. Where in the past communists manifested as evil, the 'seat of Satan' is now no longer in the Kremlin. It appears that individuals and institutions promoting secular humanism are now occupying it. Old enemies have been exchanged for new ones, with evangelists preferring now to demonise gays, liberals, Christian liberals and moderates, immigrants and Muslims.

In *On Evil*, Terry Eagleton illuminates perspectives that give clarity to the muddiness of what is evil. Eagleton provides a challenging summary of the

nature of evil and the accusations of the 'other as evil' by those within, and those outside, fundamentalist religions.

Eagleton argues that those who wish to punish others for their evil need to claim that others are evil of their own free will. The word 'evil' is generally a way of bringing an argument to an end. Like the idea of taste, over which there is supposedly no arguing, 'evil' is an end-stopping kind of term, one that forbids the raising of further questions. The problem with this sort of argument, Eagleton suggests, is that 'Either human actions are explicable, in which case they cannot be evil: or they are evil, in which case there is nothing more to said about them' (Eagleton 2010 p8). Or, as Niebuhr puts it:

Religion makes good people better and bad people worse.  
(H. Richard Niebuhr, cited Hedges 2008 p5)

### **Predisposition: education, employment and politics**

In this section it is argued that evangelism is having considerable affect on US politics as it attempts to move it away from secular democracy.

The correlation between the fundamentalist use of persuasive strategies/ rhetoric and politics, education and employment levels is relevant in this context. Is disenfranchisement a predisposition that may lead to successful conversions? This analysis explores the chemistry formed from the mix of fundamentalist policy, identity, and culture, positioned against current politics and economics.

### **Role of religion in US politics**

The 2012 US federal election took place against a background of religious and moral posturing. In the lead-up to the election there was an assumption that a high proportion of Christians would vote conservatively, that there was some sort of unifying Christian political position and that it was a Republican position. However, the Republican's loss forced a fresh analysis. The block of Christian votes flowing to Obama can be attributed to the alienation of these same groups—liberal, Christian moderates and faith-based ethnic and race groups. Christians on both sides of US politics have a broad range of biblical viewpoints, some more liberal, and some more extreme by each other's accounts.

The results indicated that around 90 per cent of blacks voted for Obama (Pew Forum 2012), while around 87 per cent of African-Americans describe themselves as belonging to one religious group or another (Gallup 2005; Pew Forum 2012). These numbers show that many Black Christians either identified strongly with elements of the Democratic policy or conclusively distanced themselves from a conservative Republican platform that was heavily weighted with fundamentalist Christian morals. On religious lines this makes the Republican versus Democrat positioning also a Christian versus Christian positioning, and the vote is in part about who has the religious authority to lead America.



In Australia, a commentary on the Christian group Catch the Fire's website shows a disdain for the Christians who voted for Obama. In posting his comment about the Christian Blacks who did not vote for the Republicans, 'Phil' writes:

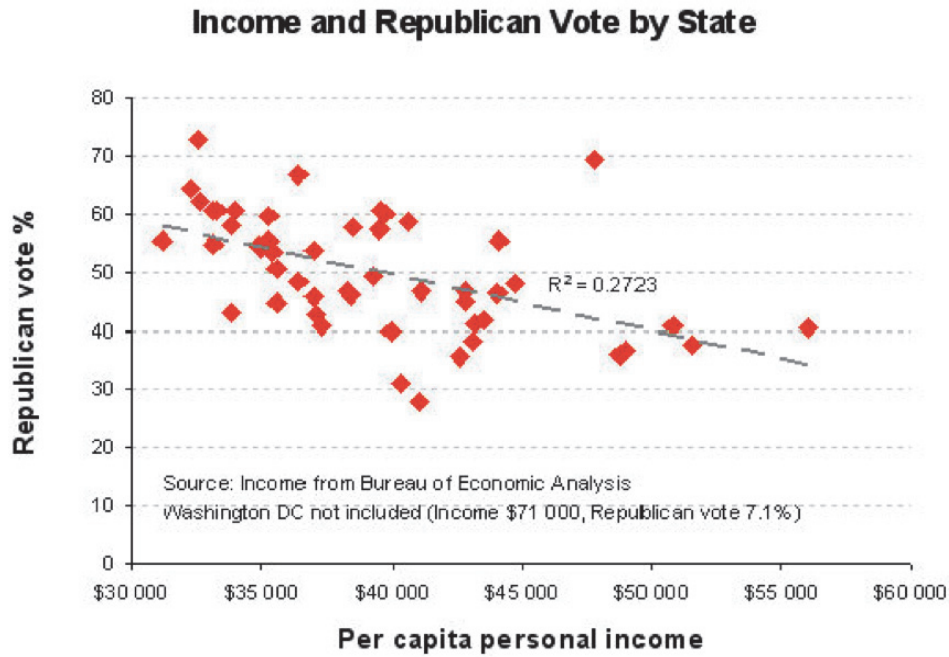
It is a fact that over six million evangelicals in the US voted for Barack Obama. But was this a decision God endorses and supports? ... I weep over what President Obama will do to the US over the next 4 years and I am appalled by the lack of discernment of over 6 million Christians in the US ... I don't personally believe the US election highlighted a failure of the Republicans. What this is really about is the current sad state and level of apostasy within the US Church. (Catch The Fire Ministries 2012)

Time will show if the hard-line conservative evangelicals can find the resolve to reflect on why they were repelling people who may well have voted Obama out, but who found the idea of voting the Republicans in far more problematic. It seems the greatest fear the US electorate had was what they perceived as 'extremist' comments by some hard-line conservatives in the Republican Party. These 'extremists' are associated with the US political movement called the Tea Party, a group that opposes most taxation and government intervention in the private sector while supporting stronger immigration controls and displaying

very conservative ethics that align with Christian fundamentalists. For example a Tea Party-backed Republican candidate Todd Akin, known for his staunch pro-life beliefs, stated that pregnancy is rare from 'legitimate rape' because the woman's body has ways to 'shut the whole thing down' (Gray 2012). Akin was voted out.

It can be argued that perhaps the poll result is not an indication of how far US citizens have strayed from righteousness but how distant the righteous have gone from the US citizens. If they hope to win the next election the Republicans need to do some serious analysis on how to connect with at least two growing demographics, Blacks and Hispanics, statistically both considered very spiritual groups.

Significant interrelated data comes from evidence of the negative correlation between income and the Republican vote, as seen in Figure 4.1 below. The Republican vote was strongest in the poorest states (the dot in the top left corner is Utah).



**Figure 4.1: Income and Republican vote by state**

*(Source: McAuley 2012)*

McAuley speculates that it is not that the poor have swung en masse to the Republicans or that the rich have converted to the Democrats. Rather, this pattern reflects discontent in those states where the economy is weakest. In America's changing economy 'white men' with basic skills are being left behind. The old semi-skilled jobs have gone, and even as America recovers economically, those jobs aren't coming back (McAuley 2012). These economically disenfranchised 'white men' constitute the cornerstone of fundamentalist communities.

### **Push me pull you—polarisation in religion and politics in the US**

Sixty-nine per cent of Americans polled in 2006 believed that if Darwinism were to be taught in schools, then the evidence against Darwinism and intelligent design should be taught alongside it (cited in Bageant 2010 p122). The introduction of intelligent design into the school system is played out in the US courts on a regular basis. Joe Bageant, a US social commentator, reflects that this is what happens when:

the industrial state's fanatical belief in science comes up against the religious fear of an unseen, omnipotent, and unquestionable, wrathful God. No one should suffer those two forces in tension within the one mind and soul. (Bageant 2010 p122)

The arguments of some atheists or liberals to dispel all things Christian is a mirroring or balancing of the human psyche as manifested by the fundamentalist Christians. Extremism in belief can breed more extremism in belief. The at times aggressive dismissal by atheists may in fact politicise those with more quiet or 'liberal' Christian positions. This plays out in larger meta-dialogues by prominent atheists with best-selling books, such as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006); Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 2007) and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, 2004; and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 2006). Such books explicate several ways in which religion is immoral and how the world

would be better off without it. Replace religious faith with inquiry, open-mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas, these authors, as a rule, exhort.

Significantly, it is in small ways across the US that this polarisation can occur. Here is a simple example. In 2012 a US federal judge denied a Christian group's bid to display a Christmas nativity scene in a Los Angeles park as they had been doing for 60 years. The prior year, atheists overwhelmed the city's auction process for display sites, winning most of the slots, excluding the nativity and triggering a bitter dispute. They then set up a display that ridiculed the Christian point of view (AAP 2012).

As a counter example, schools in California are fighting a lawsuit brought by a conservative organisation, on behalf of a group of Christian parents, to prevent the district from teaching primary school students yoga. The school district, aware of the potential for controversy, had stripped out the traditional chants and Sanskrit, and offered alternatives for those who opted out. The health and meditation benefits were the primary focus of the school's choice to run the program. However, the conservative groups believe the yoga is inherently spiritual, anti-Christian, and that the yoga is a form of indoctrination (O'Malley 2013).

What is lost here is the right to express a belief. Some resolute atheists are as doctrinaire as some evangelicals and also as keen to get 'converts' to their

views. By removing the right for Christians to express their belief in Christmas (a Christian celebration), they deny Christians the right of freedom of speech. The atheistic positioning becomes in an absurd way the same as the fundamentalist Christian stance, one of overt ridicule and dismissal of the opposite.

However, it is possible that aggressive argument by those who hold polar positions can have good outcomes for the debate. Rather than merely promoting polarisation, these arguments have allowed the airing of views in between the two endpoints.

### **Employment—the rise of the market**

Life for emerging post-war white underclasses became more stressful and difficult with the emergence of virulent forms of consumerism and capitalism in the US. Bageant describes this as happening because there no longer seemed to be any dependable rules for surviving. The rules of God were dependable and written down in the 'Good Book' where they could be read daily, but those written by man were unclear and shifted (Bageant 2010 p126). The value set for the post-war economy shifted to an individualist-centred market as opposed to one that supported community interfaces and local economies. Reading and analytical skills are required to navigate through a transactional legalistic economy. A person of limited education may either shy away from interacting with this complexity or become entrapped in the small print of these

transactions. This risk of entrapment is demonstrated by the proportionally higher foreclosures among the less educated following the sub-prime mortgage collapse in 2008. A 2011 US study implied that when the percentage of the population with college education decreases, foreclosure rates increase (LI 2011 p207). The church, reading from the one book of rules, can market the promise of 'certainty' wrapped in the traditional interactions prevalent in 'community'.

### **Education**

A snapshot of this fertile ground shows a correlation between fundamentalist Church adherents and lower levels of education. It will be argued that adherence to fundamentalism increases as rates of high school graduation and college entry decrease.

In the first half of the twentieth century, growth in high school graduations in the US was the driving force behind increased college enrolments. The decline in high school graduations since 1970 has flattened college attendance and completion rates as well as growth in the skill level of the US workforce. In the past 25 years, growing wage differentials between high school graduates and dropouts increased the economic incentives for high school graduation. The real wages of high school dropouts have declined since the early 1970s while those of more skilled workers have risen sharply. Those caught on the wrong side of education are pinched between a declining number

of unskilled opportunities and decreases in wages (Heckman & La Fontaine 2008).

Statistically, education correlates with fundamentalist church attendance. Stroope's statistical work on US educational levels shows that biblical literalism is a demographic distinguisher, a 'dividing line' between all church attendees. While secularisation proponents generally hold that the modernisation of societies, including scientific and educational advancement, reduces religiosity, Stroope proposes that research has not provided a compelling answer to the question of how the college experience affects the content of [religious] beliefs (Stroope 2011 p1478).

Specifically, Stroope reasons that the educational make-up of congregations is a key factor in understanding the influence of education on the maintenance of religious belief, and specifically on beliefs about the Bible. This focus is in line with a long-standing sociological tradition that maintains that individuals' personal backgrounds as well as their social context shape beliefs, including religious beliefs (Stroope 2011 p1479). The findings indicated that those with a lower level of education were likely to hold literalist views when in a church community that had predominate numbers of less educated people. A less educated person may temper their literalist views when in a congregation with higher levels of educated people. Stroope's recent research confirms that homogeneity of biblical belief in churches bolsters a member's sense of



belonging. The counter to this is if there is a literal belief gap between members, underpinned by differing educational attainment levels. This may then lead to disharmony and a subsequent splintering of congregations. A more unified belief ratio would positively reinforce membership and thus support levels of participation.

The challenge for fundamentalist communities would be to minimise the impact of education that develops critical analytical skills, as these potentially subvert the legitimacy of Biblical interpretations. A literal view of the Bible become less likely the further up the education ladder you go. The risk for fundamentalist churches is when educators encourage a comparison with opposing points of view, references to history and science, and advocate an academic scepticism to fact or truth, or truth as transient and evolving. This 'open world' educational schema would directly compete with the biblical literalists' schema.

To the less educated, education itself can appear a risk rather than a way to betterment and access to those better-paid jobs. To counter this, some religious groups have created internal tiers of education that form a closed loop. By controlling the message and the input by staff, who are required at every level to maintain the group's worldview, the organisation ensures that members receive only 'protected' content. Examples of these protected educational systems include universities such as Bob Young, Liberty and the Moody

Institute in the US. In Australia the only examples are from the liberal end of the Christian spectrum, for example the Wesley Institute in Sydney and the spectrum of Catholic universities around the country (Strict Fundamentalist Christian Universities 2011).

### **Morality and law**

Historically religion has had a profound influence on the morals and governance embedded in the Judeo-Christian countries of America and Australia. When issues of a moral nature are discussed as reasons for changing law, genuine debate can be difficult or absent. Liberals push against traditional religious values as a basis for shifts in law and morals.

This situation is currently being played out in the US and Australia in the discussion of issues such as abortion, stem cell research and legalised gay marriage. As an example, the arguments opposing this are framed through a biblical lens that defines marriage as being between a man and women. In a recent parliamentary enquiry in Australia, this issue was argued out publically as different groups sought to put their authority on the line. Pastor Danny Nalliah, from Catch the Fire Ministries (*Catch the Fire Ministries* 2014) in Melbourne, Victoria stated: 'Our nation is rapidly slipping away into complete immorality and wickedness.' Pastor Nalliah was compelled to form the political party Rise Up Australia (RUA) to press his opinions (Nalliah 2012). Head of the Australian Christian Lobby, Jim Wallace (*Australian Christian Lobby* 2013),

stated that smoking is healthier than the lifestyle that would be promoted by same-sex marriage, with smokers living 10 years longer (AAP 2012). In the US similar debates on moral values across legal jurisdictions parallel this.

To reiterate, this critical focus on the content of fundamentalism ignores the worth these millions of churchgoers may attain from membership of fundamentalist groups. This contextual worth could include being part of localised community networks and feeling church is a place for family socialising, a place of belonging, a 'safe' place for children to be part of, within a community working towards common goals, with people to call on when in need or to help when others need it. All this wrapped in a centralised belief system, or content, where answers are provided to the complexities of modern living. The contextual framework is not unlike the wants and needs of most societies, groups and individuals. The trade-off on content is what liberals find unpalatable. However, societal changes have broken down many of these contextual pillars of community, leaving in their place unaffordable housing, digital communities where pornography and child predators are a click away, moveable workforces and global capital shifting that has desolated manufacturing in some areas. These points only provide a broad analysis. However, the church's role may be to offer the individual a safe central place of being while they are still struggling with the transient nature of the broader

society. A sanctuary, haven, shelter, home or family are readily used church descriptors that attempt to define the value of belonging and safety.

Similarities between church and non-church goers are likely closer than the 'content' would reveal. Bageant supports this argument by claiming that one can find church adherents in common cause with progressives across many areas. There is much the same disgust with the cheapening and trivialisation of society. He lists amongst other common causes that both sides abhor the debased sexuality of advertising and entertainment, the destruction of family intimacy, monetary greed and the fraudulence of politics. Fundamentalists' obsession with end times can be seen as a variation on the eco-apocalypse being delivered by global warming believers. One camp is under the tent of technology and 'rational science' and the other in the shadow of the cross, or 'personal belief' (Bageant 2010 p124).

In Australia, the recent National Church Life Survey is probably Australia's most comprehensive survey, except for the federal census, with 260,000 people taking part across 3000 congregations (West 2012). It gives an interesting snapshot of the demographic of the typical churchgoer and it challenges any perception of a political right-leaning uneducated following, as is the US case. The census reveals that the political views of churchgoers are, on the whole, more left wing (politically) and education levels are higher than those of the broader community. The results indicate that churchgoers are

highly educated—34 per cent have university degrees, compared with about 25 per cent of the broader community; 60 per cent are women. Occupations tend to concentrate in areas such as education, healthcare, medicine, welfare and social services (*Australian National Church Life Survey* 2012). Within parishes and other congregations, you will find a vast volunteer labour force and a disproportionate number of people employed in the so-called caring professions. Andrew West, religion and ethics commentator argues that:

as many other civil society groups, such as service clubs and political parties wane, it is the churches, synagogues, mosques and temples that are keeping alive the flame of brotherhood, sisterhood and neighbourhood. (West 2012)

Survey director, Dr Ruth Powell, points out that Australian faith communities are centres of Robert Putnam's famous 'social capital' in two critical ways. The first is 'bonding' social capital, the development of close personal links between members of the same congregation, who are there for each other in times of unemployment, illness and bereavement. The second is 'bridging' social capital, the building of links to groups and individuals outside the congregation (West 2012).

### **Believers and non-believers—a binary divide**

A religious fundamentalist evangelist may preach intolerance towards the beliefs of the non-Christian community or even more liberal Christian groups, who do not hold the same worldview. In terms of Hood et al's intratextual

circle described earlier in this chapter, fundamentalists are then able to disqualify these groups from moral or ethical considerations because of their lack of religious belief (as determined by the fundamentalist). Fundamentalist followers live in a binary universe of believers and non-believers, us and them. Hedges speculates that if fundamentalists seek to destroy nonbelievers to create a Christian America, then they also think nonbelievers must be seeking to destroy them. As with totalitarian regimes, when evil is always external, one can believe that moral purification must entail the eradication of the other (Hedges 2008 p8).

By referring to people or whole groups as homosexuals or abortionists fundamentalists employ the rhetoric of depersonalisation. This creates a frightening moral fragmentation that allows believers to act with compassion and justice towards those within the closed Christian circle while simultaneously allowing others outside the circle to be abused, silenced and stripped of their rights. The danger in this moral fragmentation is that it can inspire violence and persecution. Non-fundamentalists may question whether the fundamentalists really mean what they say when they talk about the persecution of homosexuals or nonbelievers or that they will execute abortion providers. But the willingness of some fundamentalists to take extreme action was demonstrated in the 2009 slaying of the prominent late-term US abortion

provider George Tiller, who was shot dead by a pro-lifer in the church where Tiller was serving (Associated Press 2009).

Job losses and a changing workforce across the US have manifested in a culture of rage and despair. This is highlighted in the collapse of the better-paid end of the manufacturing sector from around 53 per cent of the workforce in 1968 to 9 per cent in 2004. A 2012 report highlights the extent of this loss. During the Great Depression, the US lost 30.9 per cent of manufacturing jobs, but in the decade of 2000–2010, the country lost 33.1 per cent of manufacturing jobs. This percentage loss represents 5.7 million manufacturing jobs. The report gives a gloomy statistical picture, showing that on average 1,276 manufacturing jobs have been lost every day for the past 12 years. A net of 66,486 manufacturing establishments closed, from 404,758 in 2000 down to 338,273 in 2011. In the report's words, 'on each day since the year 2000, America had, on average, 17 fewer manufacturing establishments than it had the previous day' (Nash-Hoff 2012; Atkinson et al. 2012).

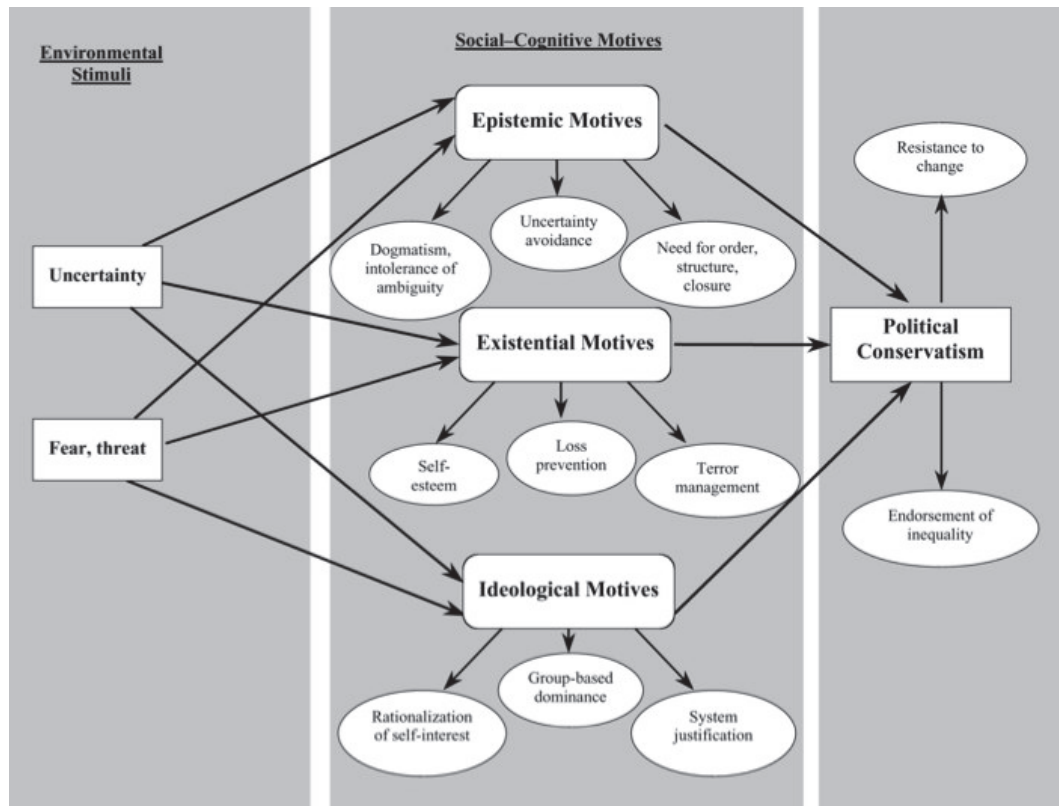
This crisis, according to Hedges, is symptomatic of a series of concurrent issues: people sent to the poorly paid service sector; abuse, neglect and abandonment by government; a crisis of identity as the US's global standing seems under threat of collapse; and a series of protracted wars (Hedges 2008). However, these grim statistics are good figures for religion in that it can draw

people towards its offer of stability, community and possible meaning as to why these events have materialised and who might be to blame.

If feelings of loss, abandonment, despair and deep pessimism about the future are profound, people may seek miracles (Hedges 2008 p44). It is easier, indeed understandable, to look for hope and comfort in the mystical hand of God. It is easier to believe their destiny has been preordained and that the faithful will be blessed, even if they go through hard times. Christian conservatism gives an option for these disenfranchised to redirect their anger at those who have failed to heed the word of God.

Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski and Sulloway (2003) have proposed that conservatism has similar characteristics to authoritarianism and that other similar constructs of conservatism are a form of motivated social cognition. Figure 4.2 shows their analysis of contributing factors. They propose that variables significantly associated with conservatism include, 'fear and aggression, dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity, uncertainty avoidance, need for cognitive closure, personal need for structure, terror management, group-based dominance and system justification' (Jost et al. 2003 p369). Jost et al conclude that, 'from our perspective, these psychological factors are capable of contributing to the adoption of conservative ideological contents, either independently or in combination' (Jost et al. 2003 p369).





**Figure 4.2 An integrative model of political conservatism as motivated social cognition**

*(Jost et al. 2003 p30)*

A dialogue from one of Pastor Danny Nalliah's followers highlights the complexity of the study and the challenge a non-believer faces in trying to understand it.

Pastor Danny Nalliah claims that his divine intervention brought the rain that eased the pressure on a Sydney bushfire emergency in 2013:

It was at 3am on 22nd Oct the Lord spoke to Pr Daniel in a dream and told him to go immediately to NSW and pray in the Blue Mountains, which he did.

He asked me to call on Christians across Australia to start praying against the fires especially from 3pm to 4pm on Tuesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> October, at a time when the worst was predicted. Well, glory to God for a group of 30 plus believers in Christ Jesus met in the Blue Mountains with Pr Daniel and stormed heaven in repentance and prayer, as the Blue Mountains is very well known for its satanic occult activity.

As they were praying God answered their prayers and the rain started to fall in the Blue Mountains. This rain continued all through the night and has been God's blessings in order to stop the predicted worst of the bushfires. Pr Daniel stated, 'This is nothing but the power of prayer. Glory to God. Although the media declared that the worst was to come, we declared the beginning of the end of the bushfire crisis yesterday. Praise God. That's exactly what happened. (Nalliah 2013)

Concurrent reports from firefighters and emergency crisis leaders describe the events in more analytical meteorological terms, involving pressure systems,

and temperature and wind changes. If you apply a scientific line of thinking to Nalliah's evangelical response—that God brought the rain—then it must be that God also brought the fire. As George Orwell stated in 1946:

We are all capable of believing things which we know to be untrue, and then when we are finally proved wrong impudently twisting facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield.

(cited in Gore 2007 p60)

The first section (chapters two and three) has shown the breadth of the problem – the growth of evangelism in the US – and how fundamentalist religion operates, its arguments and worldviews. Further, this chapter has shown evangelism is affecting politics in the US and as such threatens US secular democracy. The challenges of arguing fundamentalist positions in the increasingly liberal and scientifically dominated cultures of the US and Australia suggest fundamentalists need a sophisticated system of persuasive tools.

The knowledge gained in these two chapters has been crucial for developing the creative script. The position of the Rev Slim has been created as

an evangelist who operates in post-modernity, with key individualistic attributes, as someone trying to attract individual 'lost souls', distanced from centralised religion and as trying to have, albeit confused, affects on various political positions.

In the second section (the coming two chapters), I explore the persuasive tools identified by psychologists and sociologists, as well examining the impact of the charismatic personality on the follower. I then go on to evidence their use in case studies of evangelical groups. ■

## Chapter 4

# Persuasion, charisma and the power of the word

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Having outlined the breadth of US evangelism, its modes of thoughts and espoused worldviews this chapter now turns to evangelists' use of persuasive techniques and the reasons for the susceptibility of the followers.

Evangelists are often described as having qualities such as charisma, hypnotic ability and persuasiveness. Politicians, public speakers and other communicators may also be said to have these attributes, but it is argued in this chapter that successful evangelists set themselves apart by usually having these qualities in large quantities.

This chapter outlines psychological and social theories of persuasion also used in other contexts such as electioneering and marketing that can help us to understand both evangelical leaders and followers. In the following chapter (chapter five), I highlight how the theories discussed in this chapter made their way into my performance of the Rev Slim Limits' service.

### **To convert**

At the centre of the language of conversion is a bundle of strategies—symbolic, narrative, poetic, and rhetorical—deployed to comfort individuals, singularly and in groups (Harding 1987). In her study *Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion*, Harding suggests that these strategies strip listeners of their cultural assumptions, and invest them with a fundamentalist mode of organising and interpreting experience (Harding 1987 p167).

Harding writes that too often research into conversion language is premised on the presumption 'that nobody in his or her right mind would believe this stuff' (Harding 1987 p168). Weston la Barre states that the use of these strategies is not a deliberately exploitative purpose of religion. To suppose that, he argues, is to 'propound a paranoid–persecutory theory of history and culture-by-plot' (La Barre 1970 p9). Acknowledging the irrationality of religion, Harding states that religious belief is irrational, and some sort of suspension of normal thinking must have taken place and caused the convert to lose their grip on reality (Harding 1987 p168).

Harding stresses that when a person converts to truly believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, Jesus is the Son of God who rose from the dead and will return, and non-believers will go to a Hell, they become convinced of a supernatural reality that is absolute and irrefutable. To continue to think

otherwise would become irrational. To converts it is then *disbelief* in religion that is false and unthinking (Harding 1987 p168).

Preaching, witnessing and spreading the word is rhetorical in the sense that it is an *argument* about the transformation of self, and a *method* of bringing about that change in those that listen (Harding 1987 p167). Classical Greek rhetoric comprised five parts: *invention* (content); *arrangement* (the order of the argument, generally sequenced as introduction, narrative and proof); *office* (the expression of the ideas through diction, word choice, structure and rhythm); *memory* (the ability to remember a given speech); and *delivery* (controlled use of voice and gesture). The three key pillars of persuasion in this classical Greek structure are:

- *logos*: the ability to create a logical argument
- *ethos*: the standing, character or fundamental principles of the speaker
- *pathos*: the ability to appeal to the audience's feelings and passions with a call to emotion (Habib 2008; Aristotle & Cooper 1932).

Scholars who have studied the application of classical rhetoric to contemporary persuasive techniques include Popper, Cialdini and Lewis. Popper identified key elements for hypnotic leadership as projection, transference, attribution,

fire and spark, and commitment (Popper 2001). Cialdini, in his extensive work on persuasion, lists six universal basic human tendencies: reciprocation, consistency, social validation, liking, authority and scarcity (Cialdini 2001(a) p76). Lewis in a direct study on Charismatic evangelists further defines areas related to identity, crisis situations, and personality and message elements (Lewis 1988).

Definitions of charisma identify components in the ethos of prominent leaders who exert influence over a select group or audience. Their eloquence, transcendence, personal aura and persuasion set them apart from the average person (Lewis 1988 p94). Some have argued that Nazism itself was a 'political religion', drawing people into a movement of political faith through the use of rallies and rituals that created a secular liturgical experience.

The term 'charismatic' is not used here in its relation to Pentecostal denominations that claim charismatic exhibitions of wonders, signs and miracles including speaking in tongues. The term refers to the image traits attributed to leaders. In his study of hypnotic leadership Popper asserts that:

this desire, this need to be the leader, is so overpowering in certain people that it seems to be the only thing that gives meaning to their life. It seems as if the position of leadership offers the only salvation and without it, death, which is forever



knocking on the door, is the only alternative. (Popper 2001 p12).

I expand on the techniques used by evangelist preachers a little further on in this chapter.

### **Susceptibility of the followers**

Turning to the psychology of the followers, it is difficult to quantify the emotions and reasons that lead people to follow charismatic leaders. Popper notes that someone like him, who is strictly socialised to a method of writing based on fact presentation, detailed descriptions, quantitative values and so forth, finds it difficult to write about phenomena whose explanation is highly intuitive. He gives the defining answer, or non-answer, by declaring that even researchers devoted to the study of phenomena such as the holocaust do not agree among themselves on what brought it about and how it developed, despite the mounds of data and evidence they have collected. Phenomena involving extreme emotions are hard to explain even by experienced researchers (Popper 2001 pxvi).

However, the literature on conversion does seek to understand who is converting and why they convert. Harding suggests that there is something 'susceptible, vulnerable, in need, so the question is, 'Why, what's unsettling them?'' (Harding 1987 p168). There is evidence of people who have experienced

'difficult' situations finding themselves in a church and in a position where they convert or at least consider converting. The implication is that vulnerability creates a pre-disposition to conversion or influence. However, there are equal numbers of vulnerable people who put themselves in a conversion position and do *not* convert. For example, Jim Jones took preaching tours to poor black communities promising to take them away to his Utopia property in California where there was no distinction between black and white. Some went but many didn't, even though background vulnerability appeared equal. Conversely, numbers of the non-vulnerable willingly convert, as may be seen with Hillsong's congregation of affluent middle-class people.

However, studies of persuasion psychology have identified specific tools and techniques that can be quantified. Understanding these as individual elements is useful when analysing their role in the individual or group success of evangelists. They are equally important when applied to the performance methodologies that have been layered into the script of the Rev Slim Limits as it tries to replicate their affect and effect. In the following sections I analyse these tools.

I now outline some of the theories that attempt to explain why followers convert and follow.

## **1. Projection**

Projection refers to the tendency to see others through oneself, through the subjective spectacles that express one's yearnings, wishes, and desires. In other words, the other is the screen onto which the individual projects his or her own characteristics or needs which often have no real connection with the object of the projection (Popper 2001 p37). Shamir, referring to leader–follower relations, says:

It is the search for 'lost paradise' that causes subordinates to make the leader the recipient of your own desire for grandiosity. Through vicarious identification and projection processes, the leaders become the recipients (containers) of the follower's ideals, wishes, desires and fantasies. Thus the attachment to charismatic leadership is a manifestation of the desire for narcissistic unity, formed first from self-love, and then from love of idealised others who promise a return to that unity. (Shamir 1991 p8)

As stressed in the case studies chapter, this 'followers'' point of view encapsulates what Stephen Jones, Reverend Jim Jones's son, described as his father's existence 'laying in the hands of those who perceived him' (Wolochatiuk 2007).

Variations of the projection explanation have been developed since Freud first conceptualised the term. Relevant for this discussion, however, is the point that there is both a projective–narcissistic explanation and a transference explanation, and that these indicate an attachment whose sources stem from early childhood. Popper says this attachment is essentially regressive; an attachment that has nothing to do with the content, the message, or the quality of the idea that the leader represents. These primary yearnings are entirely process related and are devoid of any critical approach to content. The attraction to leaders stems from what they represent, not from the contents of their statement or their struggle (Popper 2001 p38).

One issue that is sometimes forgotten is that leaders need followers no less than followers need leaders. In most cases, and certainly in the more extreme ones, the relationship between a leader and his followers is like that between an actor and his audience. Surprising as it may seem, many leaders need followers to strengthen their self-confidence and self-image, and sometimes even to give a basic sense of meaning to their lives. The picture usually portrayed is the opposite, stressing either that leaders plant confidence and hope in their followers, or that their influence on their followers is absolute—the followers are described as malleable objects. As Popper suggests, this description is usually one-dimensional, one-sided, and not at all accurate (Popper 2001 p79).

## **2. Transference**

Transference is a psychoanalytic concept that may further explain people's emotional needs, even yearning, for leaders. Freud explains it as the transfer to the analyst of feelings and reactions that undoubtedly applied to some important figure in the patient's past, usually the analyst's father or mother (Freud 1949).

Thus, transference does not relate only to people in the here and now, but also, unconsciously, to figures from the past. Feelings and attitudes are transferred to therapists or leaders although the feelings are not really connected with them. Thus, according to Freud, at the unconscious level, leaders represent the primeval father, often termed 'the father figure'. The emotional attraction to a father figure, and the surrender to his authority, provides a solution to powerful emotional conflicts and tensions. Since the followers identify with the leader, they feel released from those conflicts and tensions.

Researchers on leadership draw on observational evidence to claim that this emotional function of the leader can easily create euphoria among the led. Identification with the leader releases worried feelings caused by various prohibitions. Identification with the leader frees the follower of the need to hesitate, consider options, and take a stand. Obedience is the easy way out (Popper 2001 p37).

### **3. Attribution**

According to psychological process-oriented explanations, the leader, whether he represents a father figure or someone who 'knows the way', whether he is a 'focus of narcissistic projections' or a 'hypnotic medium', serves to alleviate a distressing emotional process that is painful, demanding and often threatening. The attachment to the leader is therefore based on the dynamics of self-loss.

Attribution, according to Mesmer, Le Bon and Tarde, implies that the collectivity of 'the mass' (the group) constitutes an entity in itself. It is an amorphous mass of meaningless desires. The assumption is that the mass has an effect that exists in its own right. In other words, a mass is not simply a collection of individuals but an entity with its own psychology and dynamics (cited Popper 2001 pp38-39).

According to Shamir, emotional attachment to leaders also develops because certain leaders are associated with values that are held by the followers (Shamir 1991; Popper 2001 p41).

Popper, Shamir and his colleagues further suggest that some leaders may represent certain content in the components of the follower's identity. That is, attribution is content-oriented, not process-oriented. Thus they argue that the individual is not swallowed up by the figure of the leader because that is a way of escaping distress. They argue instead that the leader is put to a test—a test whose criteria derive from the identity of the potential follower. The leader has

to meet the criteria of the follower in terms of ideas and content. This approach reverses the argument concerning the great power of leaders, saying it is the followers who carry the greatest weight in determining leadership. Popper expands the argument to claim that the leaders are mere extensions of the followers (Popper 2001 p42).

For example, a politically conservative individual will seek compatibility with a leader holding a conservative view. If the leader shifts from the schemata the individual holds, then the individual may leave. This is true of a fundamentalist preacher: should he have a liberal awakening, he will likely lose his congregation or parts thereof, unless he can persuade them that his new world view is worth adopting.

#### **4. Fire and spark<sup>9</sup>**

Klein and House defined the leader as the 'spark', the followers as the 'fuel' and the circumstances as the 'oxygen'. All three components create and maintain the 'fire' (Klein & House 1995). Popper further muses on fire as an apt metaphor for the phenomena of leadership:

it can be pleasant and warming, can fade slowly, it can die suddenly, or it can blaze up and destroy everything in its path.

Another thing, anyone who has sat near a fireplace or a bonfire

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<sup>9</sup> 'Spark' is in some ways similar to Aristotle's notion of pathos

knows that hypnotic feeling of gazing into the dancing flames.

You can sit for hours, hypnotised by the flames. (Popper 2001  
p43)

### **5. Building Commitment**

Lang and Lang (1961) describe how American evangelist Billy Graham builds committal conditions. Their argument reinforces my personal observations at one of his rallies. Billy Graham appeals to those who are ready to 'change their lives'. He asks them to come up to the stage. Standing on or in front of a stage together with other witnesses, the volunteer finds himself publicly announcing that he is prepared to join the religious movement, usually without knowing what is expected of him. At the next stage in the process of creating commitment, the person is asked to sign an oath and promise to meet with representatives of the crusade or to take part in prayers that will be held directly after and at further certain times. Afterwards, the person signs the oath as a 'witness of Jesus', and he is told that by signing he has taken an important step towards becoming part of the organisation. He undertakes to adopt its values and aims, and in this way this decision becomes binding. After this, he is invited to meetings, becomes active, enjoys social support and so forth—a situation not unlike joining a political party (Lang & Lang 1961 p137).

This description presents the main steps in a slow process of escalating commitment to action. First, those who come to hear the preacher are people



who have some inclination in that direction. Popper's argument is, therefore, that the development of commitment, even to extreme levels, begins with a certain tendency that may or may not reach active expression but also at the other end may become extreme. A gradual process follows, in which each stage in turn is perceived as a stable situation. At the initial stages, no one imagines that the situation will develop in such a way as all the early stages look like child's play.

Initial stages have been described as 'a foot in the door' (Friedman & Fraser 1996). The idea is that people are asked for something small, such as Billy Graham asking people to step up to the stage. After this, another small request is added: to sign a form. And the individual who accedes to this series of small requests thinks, 'If I've already done this little thing, what does it matter if I do another little thing, it makes no difference.' At a certain stage, this turns out to be a succession of steps that sometimes generates in the individual's awareness a feeling that he's reached the point of no return (Popper 2001 p58). From here, the distance to an illogical or extreme act may be short, as will be seen in the Jim Jones and Tinker Tailor examples discussed in chapter five.

Lewis claims that charisma as a quality of leadership cannot emerge apart from a specific milieu. It is not an innate quality that surfaces regardless of political, social or religious climate. It is suggested that the charismatic figure is only able to emerge in a given context but in that context the leader can help

create the conditions for others to recognise their charisma. The confluence of a social crisis and a cluster or combination of attributes and actions serve to catalyse charismatic perceptions (Lewis 1988 p96).

The evangelist can orchestrate healing services that emphasise the miraculous, or talk of a current or impending moral crisis. These acts work to elevate the charismatic levels of a leader, as Lewis suggests:

The evangelist must rhetorically create a symbolic world or fantasy with a built-in tension characterised by a sense of urgency, which in turns demands a final and immediate action from an audience ... We call this rhetorical process of establishing the exigency as real and ultimate: *exigency marking*—a task every successful evangelist must complete.

(Lewis 1988 p96)

Charismatic leaders and their followers emerge in times of deprivation and disenfranchisement. Masses of people who feel that they've lost everything may attribute charisma to those who give them hope. This sense of loss can be actual, as in situations of economic loss or disaster. However, loss can be interpreted more broadly and may be experienced as diminished political power. For example, a right wing saviour may offer hope to those feeling disenfranchised in a left wing dictatorship and vice-versa. A leader may emerge

when the moral framework of a society is changing, where the disenfranchised feel 'I don't understand the world anymore', or in context where a marginalised group is looking for a voice.

But adherence to a leader may not be everlasting. Context is therefore crucial. As outlined earlier, the rise of the Pentecostal churches in America has been driven in part by economic and social changes that have produced job losses in manufacturing in the US rust belts. Winston Churchill was a charismatic war leader but voted out when the war ended. The context was no longer deemed by the followers to require his type of charismatic leadership. The impact of contextual change is also seen in cases where conservative evangelists run for political office and are not elected. For example, as the successful TV evangelist Oral Roberts was unable to capitalise on his large network to vote for him for political office. Lewis argues that if the context changes *culturally* the influence through charisma may dissipate (Lewis 1988 p98).

### **Techniques used by evangelical leaders**

#### **Rhetorical language**

A leader who communicates a **message of change** may find potential followers drawn to that message. Change may be a call to revolution but this may not necessarily be a call to violence. Change is a departure from the status quo, an alternative message that breaks with the dominant schema. This dominant

schema is underpinned by framing it as a crisis, by calling the thing that needs changing abhorrent, dangerous or dysfunctional for example, to draw attention to the leader's preferred plan. The reality or not, of these crisis points, is secondary to the need to break with the rational norms.

Linguistic and syntactic choices can contribute to creating charisma.

Lewis cites Perelman and Tyteca who list inherent syntactic elements (described as 'figures of presence') in all languages. These elements can induce a response in a listener that attributes the characteristic of 'charisma', to the presenter:

- onomatopoeia: expressive or emotive sounds
- repetition or amplification: the same words repeated or expanded on
- synonymy: repetition of single ideas by means of different words
- interpretation: the explanation of one expression by another
- sermocinatio: fictitious attribution of words to a person
- dialogism: fictitious attribution of words to a group of persons engaged in a conversation
- enallage of tense (Greek for *interchange*): Intentionally misusing grammar to characterise a speaker or to create a memorable phrase e.g. 'if you speak, you are dead' OR 'you pays your money, and you takes your chances'). (Lewis 1988 p100).

These linguistic and syntactic choices can be enhanced by speech delivery elements:

- vocal force: volume variety, pitch variables and stress on words
- rapid delivery: followed by short pauses, linked to repetition of theme and slogan. These can forestall the possibility of immediate critical analysis overloads and eventually short-circuit the reflective process.
- non-verbal qualities: flamboyant hand and body gestures such as jabbing, pounding, pointing.
- clothes: this varies for each minister as they create their charismatic persona. Brian Houston and the whole of the Hillsong ministry dressed casually, like 'hipsters'. This appeals directly to a younger liberated audience. Benny Hinn, a globally successful TV healing evangelist, wears a very smart collarless white suit that gives him, I feel, a medical purity and an aura of professionalism. I copied this in part for the character of the Reverend Slim Limits in my performance.
- tactile communication: the touching of the congregation by the leader.
- crowding effect: the close proximity in a crowded service increases the situational stress and arousal and increases group homogeneity. Also a minority of exuberant believers can influence the majority. (Lewis 1988 pp106-7).

I used all the above techniques in *I Want to Be Slim*.

Simplistic use of language is the use of language that appeals not to the intellect but to the emotions and can often be irrational in content. Catchwords and phrases, slogans, emotionally loaded language, and rallying cries tend to short-circuit the intellectual reflective process. These create themes that lack complexity and indirectly reduce the probability of choosing alternative perspectives (Lewis 1988 p99). This type of language can be seen in the political sphere when politicians work to appeal to a broad voter base and to diffuse critical discussion.

In Australia, it could be argued that the then opposition leader Tony Abbott used these language strategies successfully to help him win the 2013 election. For example, he repeated simple slogans: 'no carbon tax', 'worst government in Australia's history', 'we'll stop the boats' and creating a crisis, 'this is a budget emergency'. Most attempts at critical debate by journalists were responded to by reiterating the slogans.

### **Message elements influencing perception of charisma**

A charismatic leader focuses on creating a single collective goal or purpose that an individual subscribes to when they take on the collective identity. Stephen Jones spoke of his father's deep understanding that his followers seemed to share a universal experience of wanting to belong. Jones found out what you

wanted to hear and see and showed it to you. Whatever they needed, Jim Jones and his People's Temple seemed to have it. 'It's exhilarating and very attractive but once you get hooked by that, it is really hard to get unhooked' (Wolochatiuk 2007 5 min 25 secs). In a more contemporary setting this can be seen in the vast amounts of money individuals donate for 'special projects' outside normal church business, for example Oral Robert's (successful) call that 'God will take me home' unless US\$8 million was not received by a fixed time and date, or individuals giving all their savings to an organisation.

The use of polarised aggression works to sharpen the constricted perspectives of followers. Lewis describes this as taking a certain course of action generally against another course of action (Lewis 1988). This occurs when the charismatic leader positions himself as a fighter, one who sets himself against an ideological enemy, such as Pastor Danny Nalliah's call to start the Rise Up Australia political party to fight against their enemies, homosexuality and Islam. A key point is that the enemy is human or portrayed as human, not just an abstraction. Satan is often used across denominations as the personification of a multitude of abstractions. Satan as a physical being can be fought against, shut out and defeated. However, Satan as an abstraction is difficult to identify. Therefore in the battle against him it is impossible to 'confirm a kill', thus making the battle endless.

The concept of polarised aggression can be associated with Al Gore's attempt to understand the current use of fear as an assault on reason in the US. Gore asserts that nations succeed or fail and define their essential character by the way they challenge the unknown and cope with fear. If leaders exploit public fears to herd people in directions they might not otherwise choose, then fear itself can quickly become a self-perpetuating and freewheeling force that drains national will and weakens national character, diverting attention from real threats deserving of healthy and appropriate fear and sowing confusion about essential choices that every nation must constantly make about its future (Gore 2007 p24).

Leadership means inspiring us to manage through our fears. Demagoguery means exploiting fears for a political gain. There is a crucial difference. Fifteenth-century philosopher John Locke stated: 'Every sect, as far as reason will help them, make use of it gladly; where it fails them, they cry out, 'It is a matter of faith, and above reason' (Carr 2008 p62).

The text of an oral performance, whether by an actor or a charismatic leader, implies a special relationship between performer and listener. This relationship is one in which the performer assumes responsibility for the display of competence, indirectly instructs the listener about how to interpret the messages, and invites participation. This can bind the listener to the



performer in a relationship of dependence, keeping the listener caught up in the display (Harding 1987 p172).

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance and its application to attitude change and persuasion, is useful here. Festinger argues that communication implicates a rich assortment of cognitive elements such as attitudes, perceptions, knowledge and behaviours that are not isolated but related to one another within a system. Each element has a relationship to each of the others and can either not affect the other, be *consonant* with the other bolstering and supporting it, or be *dissonant* with the other. Dissonance occurs when one element is inconsistent with the other. For example, you believe in good health and want to be fit and slim but eat fatty food, don't exercise and drink too much alcohol. This dissonance causes stress or creates pressure to change. If dissonance is present, an individual will try to reduce it or will avoid situations where it is present (Littlejohn & Foss 2008 p78-9)

Attempts to reduce dissonance in religion may include, for example, a Christian avoiding people or information that challenge their worldview; or filtering all arguments through a biblical prism, for example, the Christian may respond to a logical, scientifically backed argument with 'the Bible says'. For persuasion and change to result in conversion, this dissonant fact or belief needs to be minimised or removed.

Harding states that the principle of conversion—of one person insinuating his or her mode of interpretation into the mind of another—informs all dialogue. What distinguishes fundamentalist Baptists from the rest of us, Harding suggests, is the degree to which the fundamentalists have formalised rhetorical techniques that ‘appropriate the listener’s dialogic imagination’ and evoke ‘transformations of self’ in the listener (Harding 1987 p169).

### **Six steps to persuasively creating social influence**

Cialdini, writing in a more general context, defines persuasion as a science, with the implication that it can be formalised, recreated and controlled. His formula lists six key steps to bring about social influence or behavioural change that are relevant to the performance and presentation strategies of evangelists.

#### **1. Reciprocation**

In some cases, by giving something, a person can influence another, by creating a sense of obligation to reciprocate. When shops offer free samples of products, pharmaceutical companies give doctors free gifts or sponsor research, or when churches give free support to a family or even a free book or CD, this act of giving can create a sense of obligation or ‘owing’ in the recipient. Numerous studies show increases in donations, time or commitment by the receiver. This includes more than gifts or favours but extends to concessions people make to one another in a negotiation. If an initial request stalls, the person seeking the concession may make a secondary smaller request. The receiver can interpret

this scaled down request as a gift of sorts and may feel obliged or at least more inclined to accept.

Cialdini cites the example of random passers-by being asked if they would volunteer to chaperone a group of juvenile delinquents to the zoo. As Cialdini expected the results were low at 17 per cent. For another random group a larger request was asked: would they serve as an unpaid counsellor donating two hours per week of their time for the next two years? Everyone rejected this extreme appeal. At that point everyone was offered a concession. If you can't do that would you chaperone a group of juvenile delinquents to the zoo. The compliance rate nearly tripled to 50 per cent, indicating the strength of concession in eliciting reciprocity (Cialdini 2001 (a) p76).

A different example, I observe, can be seen in property development. A site may be zoned for a 10-storey apartment block. However, a developer lodges for a 25-storey block. The ensuing discussion will be about lowering the height, as it is excessive, and may result in a 15 or so storey building being approved. Those opposed may express much relief that the 25-storey block was not built. The developer has in fact succeeded in getting five storeys above the zoning, which he or she may not have got if that had been the initial application.

## **2. Consistency**

This step suggests that people align with their clear commitments, so aim to make their commitments clear, public and voluntary.

Empirical evidence has shown that once people make a public stand and go on the record in favour of a position, they are more likely to stick to it even if the position appears trivial. In a general sense a New Year's Eve resolution said to one's self is more likely to be unfulfilled than one that is publicly declared, and even more so if written down publicly. In an example that highlights this, Israeli researchers asked half the residents of a block of apartments to sign a petition favouring the establishment of a recreation centre for the handicapped. The cause was good and the request was small so almost everyone signed. Two weeks later, on National Collection Day for the Handicapped, all residents of the complex were asked to give to the cause. A little more than half of those not asked to sign the petition gave to the cause. However, 92 per cent of those who had signed the petition donated money. The residents of the apartment who had signed felt obligated to live up to their commitments because those commitments were active (Cialdini 2001 (a); Cialdini 2001 (b) p76).

Billy Graham and all evangelists use this 'foot in the door method'. A public vow (even just by stepping forward), followed by a prayer for you and then a signing of an oath of witness establishes this commitment cycle.

### **3. Liking**

A third persuasive strategy is based on recognising that people like those who like them so the persuader should work to uncover real similarities and offer genuine praise.

'Affinity', 'rapport' and 'affection' describe a connection between people, which is broadly captured simply in the word 'liking'. People prefer to say yes to those they like. This can be in terms of finding people who have similar interests even if there is only a small point of connection, such as friends who come to you with an opportunity, idea or a lifestyle. Physical attractiveness has been shown to work in terms of fundraisers or even political success at the polls.

Similarity can expedite a rapport, with sales people looking for something they can connect with in the perspective purchaser, even if they have to fabricate it. Examples include a study of fundraisers who canvassed a college campus for donations. When the phrase 'I'm a student too' was used, donations doubled.

Compliments and praise stimulate liking as they have the ability to charm and disarm. Cialdini claims the praise doesn't have to be merited or even true for the increase in regard to occur. Data shows that positive remarks about another person's traits, performance or ability reliably generate liking in return as well as raising compliance with the wishes of the person giving the praise (Cialdini 2001 (b); Cialdini 2001 (a)).

#### **4. Authority**

People defer to experts. If you wish to persuade, expose your expertise; don't assume it is self-evident.

News reporting and analysis often centres around interviewing experts to give an opinion on the issue at hand. Amid the complexity of modern life a well-meaning expert offers a valuable and efficient shortcut to good decisions. When an evangelist holds the Bible in the air and quotes without reading, he displays his expertise in the interpretation of the book. He gives himself a moral authority (Aristotle's ethos) over complex life decisions and further displays this authority by distilling these complexities into simplified understandings and actions. This simplification is to many more authoritative than complex intellectual discussions.

### **5. Social proof or validation**

Evidence suggests people follow the lead of similar others. So, to be persuasive, use peer power wherever possible.

Human beings rely heavily on the people around them for cues on how to think, feel and act. When asked to respond or do something we may look around to see what others are doing or have done. Persuasion can be extremely effective when it comes from peers. Taking advantage of social validation, requesters can stimulate our compliance by demonstrating (or merely implying) that others just like us have already complied. Cialdini gives the example of the fundraiser who showed homeowners the list of others in the area who had already donated, thus increasing the chance of a new donation. The longer the existing list, the higher the chance of a donation. Marketers do this by slogans

that read 'going fast', 'largest selling', '#1 in Australia', 'rated #1', and 'voted best'. Advertisements use images that depict crowds rushing for a product, queues to purchase, the product going off the shelves and other satisfied customers.

In its services Hillsong consistently validates its global reach by declaring its expanding numbers—'Be part of the winning team'—and by promoting its numerous programs as 'nearly full or sold out, so get a ticket before it is too late'. Jim Jones was documented as planting his people in the audience to come forward when the call went out to participate in either healing or confirmation. These plants validated the actions for those yet to be converted.

## **6. Scarcity**

Persuasive strategists suggest that people want more of what there is less of. They therefore highlight unique benefits and exclusive information. Items and opportunities become more desirable to us as they become less available. Power can be gained by promoting not what people stand to gain but what they stand to lose if they don't accept the offer. This can be seen in promotions such as: 'limited time only', 'supplies are running low', 'last time in this country', 'final concert tour' or more obliquely 'the end of the world is nigh'(Cialdini 2001 (a) p80; Cialdini 2001 (b) p78).

### **Interplay between factors**

Popper summarises hypnotic leadership into two distinct categories of charismatic leaders: personalised and socialised. Each has characteristics that can be applied when seeking to define an evangelist in terms of their 'centre of interest'. Their centre is either themselves (personalised) or the community they operate in (socialized), as Popper explains:

Personalised charismatic leaders' express: (A) dominant and authoritarian behaviour; (B) self-serving behaviour and self-aggrandisement; (C) exploitative behaviour; (D) ignoring the rights and feelings of others, often revealing uncontrolled aggression.

Socialised charismatic leaders' express: (A) egalitarian behaviour; (B) serving the interests of the collective, not motivated by self-interest; (C) empowerment of the followers; and (D) consideration of other people's feelings and rights, and the conventional game rules. (Popper 2001 p93)

This is a behavioural distinction that stems from personality differences, the most important of which for this discussion are the need for power, narcissism, and Machiavellianism (placing self-interest over the interest of others, not stopping at deceit and manipulation) (Popper 2001 p93).



While the six principles of persuasion reviewed above can be identified separately, they need to be considered in combination with each other and with the points set out earlier on hypnotism and charisma. It is the compounding effect of the interplay of all these elements—whether overt or covert—that creates the persuasive moment. I am not arguing here that all evangelists are exploiting these tools, just as not all sales people use manipulation to get a sale. However, breaking down action and response, desire and demand, will and command can all be construed as manipulation, depending on the extent to which you need or want what is on offer.

One man's miracle is another man's manipulation. Why is it that some see evangelists as disgusting demagogues, undermining the true religious message to gain wealth and power, while others praise them and give them unequivocal loyalty? Lewis surmises that the answer may lie in determining who in the audience has exhausted all other considerations except the option of the influence of the charismatic leader, who gives them hope and meaning (Lewis 1988 p108).

It is interesting to see how this plays out politically, as raised in chapter three. Fundamentalist religious leaders are often extremely good at convincing their followers to be more afraid of imaginary threats than real ones, and to engage in 'magical' thinking about the possibility that their own personal choices could work out very badly. It is no surprise, then, that the US Tea

Party—heavily influenced by fundamentalist Christians—is exerting its presence on its own Republican Party. The Republican Party appears to be oblivious of, or incapable of responding to the very real dangers presented by its recent actions to shut down the US government by blocking financial supply bills. When an impoverished Christian believes that forcing the government into default in an attempt to derail Obamacare is the Lord's work, it is difficult for those same Christians to see that what they are striving for could have real, negative effects on them, as they are the very people the health reform is designed to benefit.

This chapter has used an analysis of psychological theories and theories of persuasion to explain the behaviours of evangelical preachers and their followers. Also there was an examination of social factors that make adherence to evangelical churches more attractive to followers, such as economic position and level of education.

One argument of this chapter was to say that certain social and psychological factors contribute to the receptivity of followers. The second argument presented in this chapter is that wittingly, or unwittingly, evangelist preachers use many of the techniques of persuasion outlined by psychologists. These techniques may be used by advertising, marketing or by political groups, but here the intention has been to show how evangelists use them. The

following chapter evidences the use of these techniques in case studies of selected evangelist groups. ■

## Chapter 5

# Case studies of religious groups

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*'It is easier to for the average man to buy the ready-made group  
neurosis than to make up his tailor-made own.'*

*(La Barre 1970 p15)*

This chapter presents case studies of Christian evangelical individuals and groups. The case studies are provided for two reasons. Firstly, the case studies provide interviews and analysis that evidence the argument of this exegesis, that evangelical leaders and groups use a lot of the techniques of persuasion and of group control that were outlined in chapter four. Secondly, the case studies show how the workings of these groups theatrically and aesthetically influenced the creative work in my creative doctoral project, *I Want to Be Slim*. I expand on these influences in chapter six.

It is important to understand the use of techniques of persuasion and control used by evangelists for two reasons. If we think the growth of evangelism is a threat to secular democracy it is important to understand its workings. It is easier to counter something that you understand.

Secondly, by using these case studies I have been able to use material in

writing the script for *I Want to Be Slim*, to heighten its authenticity and to run the script at times, close to the real observed services – better satisfying its satirical intents.

The groups and individuals discussed begin with Hillsong, and their use of branding, media and music to embrace their followers; Catch the Fire Ministries led by Pastor Danny Nalliah, distinctive for their use of fear and prejudice; and Tinker Tailor, a group whose use of power and control include using notions of sin and relief through confession. These techniques will be shown to undermine individual decision-making abilities and to encourage dependence. I also examine the Reverend Jim Jones and his use of control, centred on paranoia of an impending ‘other’ who was coming to destroy him and his followers. I analyse the Westboro Baptist church and their use of rhetorical slogans. The final case study is of the non-Christian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, highlighting the role of projection from follower to leader.

### **Hillsong Church**

Hillsong, an Australian evangelical church, emerged from a middle-class district of Sydney to become a global franchise. Hillsong’s use of performance, media, music and branding has influenced style amongst other Christian religions.



**Figure 5.1 Hillsong Church's logo**

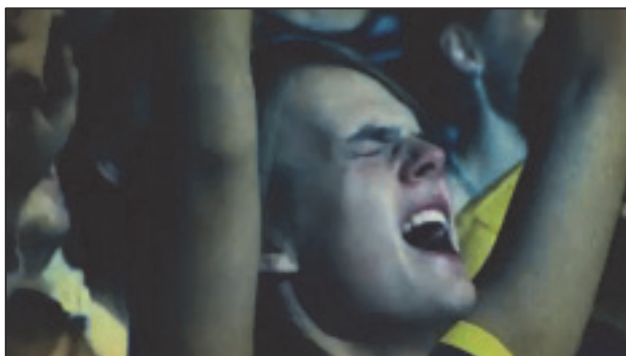
*(Source: [www.hillsong.com](http://www.hillsong.com))*

Hillsong provides evidence to counter the US experience of a correlation between growth in membership and depressed economic circumstances. Hillsong, a Pentecostal church, appears to be built on the back of a burgeoning middle class and their financial aspirations after years of economic growth. The church's rise mirrored the longest period of economic growth in Australian history, with August 2013 marking 22 years without a recession, a record growth period for any nation (AAP 2012). Hillsong's message, expressed in their many book titles including *You Need More Money*, is that God's gifts can be enjoyed *on* earth as well as *afterwards*. This message appears to resonate with some middle-class Australians. However, Hillsong is certainly not centred solely on economics.

Hillsong has grown from a congregation of 45 in a school hall in Baulkham Hills in Western Sydney in 1983, to a rapidly expanding network that collectively draws over 30,000 people into multiple services

in its 3500 seat church in Baulkham Hills and two smaller locations in Sydney every Sunday, plus further growth in Melbourne, Brisbane and Newcastle. Extension services in other languages are also held for cultural groups across 15 Sydney sites.

Globally, Hillsong has expanded into the United Kingdom (London), United States (Los Angeles and New York), Germany, France, Ukraine, Russia, Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, Sweden and South Africa. I viewed online footage of the 2013 Hillsong Conference, held at the Sydney Super Dome (currently called Allphones Arena) at Sydney Olympic Park. Hillsong claimed it filled the 21,000 seats every night for five nights for its free public services, as well as filling the venue with paid visitors at the daytime sessions (Hillsong Church 2013). Monash University professor, Gary Bouma, an Anglican priest, calls it 'aerobic Christianity', the message being positive and affirming (Munro 2013).



**Figure 5.2 Worshiper at a Hillsong service**

*(Source: [www.hillsong.com](http://www.hillsong.com))*

Marketing and brand commentator Hicks (2012) asked: What is the secret to Hillsong's appeal? And how does a church that doesn't use an ad agency market itself? He defined the successful brand as composed of music, simplicity of message and an appeal to youth, built on the strength of high music album sales. Hillsong have released 50 albums in two decades, all produced through their own record label, Hillsong Music Australia (Northover 2013). The music brand Hillsong United has its own YouTube channel, which has amassed almost 30 million views.



**Figure 5.3 Hillsong Music advertising**

*(Source: [www.hillsong.com](http://www.hillsong.com))*

'Music is what helps make Hillsong relevant and accessible to young people,' says Richard Sauerma, strategy director at Shift (a brand agency). 'It is the main thing that lifts Hillsong above other older, dustier religions' (Hicks 2012).



As of December 2012, Hillsong had sold 12 million albums worldwide and written a quarter of all contemporary songs heard in Australian churches in 2011. Hillsong states that the licensing fees include a 'growing demand' from Catholic churches that accounted for between 35 and 45 per cent of all its total undisclosed musical royalties (McKenny 2011). Hillsong Music albums regularly feature in the top 10 charts on iTunes in Australia and the US. Recently it made mainstream news when Hillsong knocked Nick Cave off the number one spot on the ARIA charts (Northover 2013). Here is an example of the lyrics from their top selling song, *Eagle's Wings*:

Here I am waiting  
Abide in me I pray  
Here I am longing  
For You  
  
Hide me in Your love  
Bring me to my knees  
May I know Jesus  
More and more  
  
Come live in me  
All my life  
Take over  
Come breathe in me  
I will rise  
On eagle's wings. (Morgan 1998)



**Figure 5.4 Young worshippers at Hillsong**

*(Source: www.hillsong.com)*

Hicks states that the advantage Hillsong music has over Christian music in the US is that it crosses a range of genres, from soft to hard rock, to gospel, soul and dance. This makes Hillsong appealing not just to believers, thereby providing an effective way of softly infiltrating new markets. Each service begins and ends with music, performed by young 'worship teams', all dressed in the latest hip styles.

'Hillsong NYC' (New York City) is held at the 5000-seat Irving Plaza, a ballroom-style rock venue that has hosted bands like U2 and the Red Hot Chilli Peppers. On a recent visit, Sydney Morning Herald reporter Nick O'Malley describes being greeted at the door by a young woman in a Coldplay t-shirt. He was then directed to the rapidly filling seats by more healthy, exuberant young people. Carl Lentz, co-pastor of Hillsong NYC Church, is described as looking like a prototypical Brooklyn hipster. Lentz

has tattoos, a scruffy beard, a frenetic rock 'n' roll presence and a Mohawk-type haircut. At 34 years, he embodies the young feel of New York City. Lentz merges the secular with the spiritual, incorporating references to pop culture, quips and slang.



Pastor Carl Lentz Hillsong NYC

**Figure 5.5 Pastor Carl Lentz at Hillsong NYC**

*(Source: www.hillsong.com)*

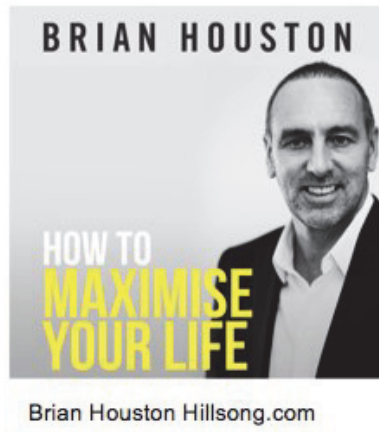
At a service attended by a Reuters journalist recently, Lentz told the congregation:

If you're new to our church, we love you. Don't be alarmed by the craziness you see. One time somebody said, 'Y'all are crazy in your church,' and I said, 'you ever seen you dance drunk? Don't be judging us up in church'.

Hillsong, it appeared to the Reuters journalist, is a mix of ambitious performers, improvisers and youth (O'Malley 2013). O'Malley elaborates on this:

The services evolve and are punctuated by the music. The band on the stage below starts pounding and a light show

pierces the darkness. The crowd rises to their feet, where they will stay for the next 20 minutes or so through three or four long songs of worship. The band is tight and professional, and the sound system is no joke. You can feel the bass notes deep in your chest. (O'Malley 2013)



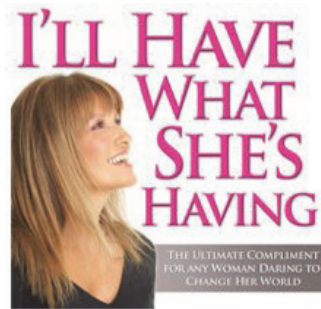
**Figure 5.6 Advertising by Brian Houston, Hillsong Church**

*(Source: [www.hillsong.com](http://www.hillsong.com))*

Professor Richard Florey, of the Centre for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, says that beyond their music the model demands a charismatic pastor. In Brian Houston, Hillsong is blessed. His voice is deep chocolate and the young crowd seem captivated by the image of him that is projected on the big screen while he delivers his sermon (O'Malley 2013).

A mega-church is described as one with a congregation larger than 2000; 'giga-church' when it's over 10,000. That's what Hillsong is. While there are some mega churches that aren't Protestant, the term generally refers to Protestant churches. A common feature of their success appears to

be that they disavow almost anything that makes them look like a church. Crucifixes, stained glass and pews are mostly absent and they resemble more a convention centre with potted plants, large auditoriums, impressive sound and video systems and a band rather than an organ. Professor Marion Maddox, an authority on the intersection of religion and politics in Australia, claims it is a recognisable genre when you walk in but not recognisable as a church (Kohn 2010).



Bobbie Houston Hillsong.com

**Figure 5.7 Hillsong PR material**

*(Source: [www.hillsong.com](http://www.hillsong.com))*

How do this and other physical and structural elements support the performance success of the preacher? Growth-based churches are often located in unconventional spaces—in places not traditionally associated with churches—such as industrial parks, shopping centres, theatres and cinemas. The objective is to attract the unchurched, those who would feel uncomfortable in a traditional church setting, who may worry about their lack of familiarity with the rituals and who may be concerned they will do something wrong. Maddox suggests that the aim is for familiarity, with

the layout of these spaces resembling the main places people encounter other people—shopping, commercial or entertainment spaces. With formality minimal and familiarity emphasised, there can be a general relaxation for the newcomer through the door. God is understated and social interaction brought to the fore as friendly, casually dressed people greet you on arrival (Kohn 2010). Once inside the auditorium the music is the first thing you experience, presented through state-of-the-art video and sound systems that are appreciated by a concert going audience that has grown up on MTV. The opening scene of *I Want to Be Slim* emulates this as well as using their techniques of branding and spectacle.



Brand Jesus - Mumbrella.com

**Figure 5.8 'Brand Jesus'**

*(Source: Mumbrella.com)*

Hicks believes Hillsong has packaged its beliefs better than anyone he can think of, even Coca-Cola, and that it just might be Australia's most

powerful brand (Hicks 2012). Pastor Brian Houston is well aware of the power of Hillsong's brand:

Everything about you says something about you. Your brand is people's perception of you. We have the potential power through deliberate strategy to change people's negative perceptions into positive perceptions, and hence create favourable attitudes. Which we hope ultimately leads to people finding faith in Christ and becoming part of the church community. As a church, we try to tie all of our sites in together using design elements and/or other information. (Branding Hillsong 2010)

A public comment on Hick's Hillsong article sums up the appeal:

I've settled in Hillsong because it is amazing. Church on a Sunday does consist of a live band of amazing and talented musicians singing radio worthy Christian songs (obviously top-chart worthy), outstanding graphics on big screens, loads of very good looking, young and happy people, and most importantly, dynamic speakers who speak the truth. (cited in Hicks 2012)

### Catch the Fire Ministries—Pastor Danny Nalliah



**Figure 5.9 Logo of Catch The Fire Ministries**

*(Source: [www.catchthefire.com.au](http://www.catchthefire.com.au))*

Catch the Fire Ministries, led by Pastor Danny Nalliah (Melbourne, Victoria), is a church that is currently very active politically (*Catch the Fire Ministries* 2014). Pastor Nalliah's message mirrors messages in US churches and is openly anti-gay and anti-Muslim.

In 2012 Nalliah formed the Rise Up Australia (RUA) Party, which was specifically aiming for Senate seats in government at the 2013 Australian federal election. They were unsuccessful in securing any seats. Pastor Nalliah's policy positions mirror messages in US churches, in that he is openly and strongly anti-homosexual and anti-Muslim, while being concurrently staunchly sceptical about climate change (RUA Party 2013).

Rise Up Australia held an Australia Day prayer meeting at the Springvale Town Hall, Melbourne in 2011. Attended by over 750 people, it was an ecumenical service hosted by Pastor Danny Nalliah and held with representatives from many denominations from the local area. The guest speaker was Pastor Donnie Swaggart from the USA, the son of Reverend



Jimmy Swaggart, a renowned US televangelist (Catch The Fire Ministries 2011). The meeting was an opportunity to observe the styles and techniques of Pastor Danny and Pastor Donnie and to contrast these with the eight other denominational ministers present.

As an observer of the DVD of the event, I was able to view these preachers' persuasive techniques directly, including their use of rhetoric and other communication strategies. I was able to incorporate a parody of their political positioning in *I Want to Be Slim*.

Similarly to Hillsong, the service was dominated by singing, lots of singing. Not numerous songs but individual songs that went for longer than their usual running time as verses and choruses were repeated. The opening music and song lasted 15 minutes. Even though I viewed the event on a DVD, the long opening number had two effects on me. Firstly, it relaxed me. Secondly, it made me tired—but tired in a way that loosened my resistance. Singing, I conclude, may help make you part of the group. Rose Ilich supports this when she describes her former membership of the Twelves Tribes religious cult:

Singing puts you in a lull state, it's like a trance state and it makes you more vulnerable to indoctrination ... your critical mind had been disengaged. (Elliot 2013)

The short Australia Day sermons contained stories within stories. The central story, which is generally biblical, is drawn out when the speaker takes side trips into more contemporary stories, or when he criticises a group, an individual, a way of thinking or false prophets.

There was a strong emphasis on dismissing other preachers or Christian groups for not being true to the 'real word' that is the Bible. Nalliah, the host, and Swaggart, his guest preacher, are in their own terms, followers of the 'word' as it should be represented, with an emphasis on what makes a real Christian: the blood, the crucifix, the Bible. These three elements are not negotiable and are the core of the message. Nalliah stressed to the audience that the church leaders and representatives who were present at this ecumenical service were there because they had shown their common commitment to these core elements. Nalliah made a particular point of singling out the Uniting Church minister.

The Uniting Church is known for its freer thinking and more liberal teachings of the Bible: acceptance of homosexuality and the ordination of woman, for example. Although some elements of the Uniting Church had drifted from what Nalliah would consider the true word of the Bible, the Uniting Church minister present at the Australia Day service stated that he was not one of those that had drifted. (Catch The Fire Ministries 2011).

As in Hillsong's case, Catch the Fire's reinforcement of themselves as the 'winning team' sits with this sentiment of Christian winners and losers. There are those who are in and those who are out; Christians who will be saved and Christians who won't because they are not followers of the truth, as one group defines it. I have incorporated this belief into Slim's discourse:

*SLIM*

*Join us, the fastest growing global church brand. Walk away, abandon small-minded friends, small numbered churches and be part of a winning team. (Catsi 2013 p35)*

Pastor Donnie dismissed other religions almost without trying in a semi-mocking way. 'Buddha is not God, Allah is not God, Bono is not God.' With each name the audience laughs. Through the use of repeated 'hallelujahs', use of repetition, call and response and recitation, the audience is encouraged to agree with everything the speaker says. In a subtle way this makes the respondent, the congregation, complicit in the argument (Catch The Fire Ministries 2011). I make use of this technique in my play script:

*(Example 1) SLIM*

*And I know you will all agree with me when I say, sex education needs to be left to the church where it belongs. (Catsi 2013 p27)*

*(Example 2) SLIM*

*You'll soon start asking me to do the thinking for you. See that we*

*have the better plan. It's what you want. It works better for you that way. It's about giving over. That's why you're here tonight.*

*(Catsi 2013 p36)*

The ministers from all the denominations at this ecumenical service shared aspects of rhetorical performance style. Examples include the voice starting softly or at a normal volume, and building slowly and sometimes rapidly in volume and tempo, before returning to the original softer tone. The raised voice carries an emotional pitch or quality. This went hand in hand with the use of straightforward language, with comments repeated or slowly spelt out. For example, on a comments page on Catch the Fire website we find:

Paul Feb 2nd, 2011 at 11:58 am

Ps. Danny This is just a quick note of thanks to you, and to our wonderful God, for the recent prayer day and meetings ... It was so good to hear someone stick to the important issues, without trying to get complicated.

*(Catch The Fire Ministries 2011)*

One can see from the above how Nalliah uses the thinking and techniques outlined in chapter four e.g. commitment, repetition, belief in the bible, creating 'in' and 'out' groups, and so forth.



**Figure 5.10 Logo of the Rise Up Australia Party**

*(Source: [www.riseupaustralia.com](http://www.riseupaustralia.com))*

In March 2013 Pastor Danny Nalliah formed the Rise Up Australia Party as a conservative response to the current political situation in Australia. His aim was to secure Senate seats in the Australian federal election 2013 (Nalliah 2013).



The flyer is a vertical rectangular document with a blue and red color scheme. At the top left, there is a collage of photos showing a diverse group of people. Below this, the text reads 'VOTE 1 RISE UP AUSTRALIA PARTY Keep Australia Australian!'. A small inset photo shows a man in a suit, identified as 'President: Daniel Nalliah'. The main title 'RISE UP AUSTRALIA PARTY' is prominently displayed in large, bold, blue letters, with the Australian flag and a map of Australia to its left and right. Below the title, it says 'Keep Australia Australian! Multi-Ethnic • One Culture'. A paragraph explains the party's focus: 'Rise Up Australia Party is for people from all ethnic backgrounds who aim to preserve Australian freedoms, culture and way of life'. A large red banner at the bottom left contains the text 'VOTE 1'. On the right side, under the party logo, is a list of 'POLICY PRINCIPLES' including: 'Keep Australia Australian! We are MULTI - ETHNIC. One culture. One law - Australian law.', 'Support Australian farmers and producers.', '51% Australian ownership of infrastructure.', 'Restore and invigorate Australian manufacturing industries.', 'Protect traditional family unit - Father, Mother and Children.', 'Stop declining birth rate. Protect the unborn. Create conditions that support women.', 'Parents and schools should have the right to discipline children, within sensible, non-abusive guidelines.', 'Protect freedom of speech and religion.', 'Stop illegal boat arrivals to preserve lives.', 'Keep Australia debt free.', 'Honouring the first people of the land; Advancing Australia together.', and 'School curriculums to include history of Western civilisation and heritage.' At the bottom right, a red box contains contact information: 'TO JOIN OR DONATE - CONTACT US AT: www.riseupaustrialiaparty.com', 'PO Box 7032, Dandenong Vic 3175', 'Phone: (03) 9708 6691', and 'Email: Info@riseupaustrialiaparty.com'. Social media icons for Facebook and Twitter are also present. At the very bottom, there is fine print: 'Authorised by Barry Fitzsimons 23 Melverton Drive, Hallam Vic 3803', 'Printed By: Value Trade Print 40 Cumberland Dr Seaford VIC 3198', and 'Rev: June 2013'.

**Figure 5.11 Rise Up Australia political flyer 2013**

*(Source: www.riseupaustrialia.com)*

In a Rise Up Australia Party media release he discusses the appointment of Ed Husic, the first Muslim minister, to the front bench of the Australian Labor Party. Nalliah works to link fundamentalist Islam with all Muslims:

The Koran endorses, nay encourages, the chopping of hands for theft, stoning to death for Adultery, NO free speech, NO democracy, NO women's rights etc. How

could we in Australia permit someone to take the Oath on the Koran and then trust him to work for the good of our Nation? Even though Mr Ed Husic the new Parliamentary Secretary for PM Kevin Rudd looks very much like a nice bloke, the simple fact that he has taken the Oath on the Koran should be very concerning. (Nalliah 2013)

Seeds of doubt are planted and then watered.

Nalliah communicates this conservative ideology by strategically linking it with fear. Nalliah writes:

While many of our church congregations have their holy huddles, our nation is rapidly slipping away into complete immorality and wickedness. (Nalliah 2012)

Nalliah claimed that Monckton, a climate-change denier promoted by Nalliah, was a 'gift from God to expose the enemy's lie and bring to account those who are trying to sign away our sovereign rights as a country into the hands of the UN and a One World government agenda' (Nalliah 2013). Nalliah's ideology firmly opposes homosexuality in light of faltering stands by other churches (Nalliah 2013). His political positioning needs to be framed against his comments following the Victorian Bushfires that killed 173: 'It was God's punishment for the Victorian Parliament passing pro-abortion laws' (Feneley 2009).

In a post on a comments page on the Catch the Fire website a follower writes:

**pirfa kumbin** (the name of the person making the post)

Jun 13th, 2013 at 2:00 am (spelling and grammar as per post)

please help me pray to God to release His judgemental anointing against the enemies of my destiny. actually my biological father is into witchcrafting, i have been seeing him fighting my star in the dream. I believe in the word of God that says that suffer not the witch to live. i also believe the scripture that says that any tree that does not bear good fruit shall be cut down to pieces.. please pray that the enemies of my destiny be removed in Jesus name..thanks. (Catch The Fire Ministries 2011)

Pastor Nalliah does not rebuke this call for harsh punishment to be brought upon the writer's father.

In a newsletter calling for financial pledges Nalliah rallies the faithful, invoking notions of good and evil:

Now the time has come for one of the most important battles to be won, and that is to transform our Government. Proverbs 29:2 – When the righteous rule the nation rejoices. But when the wicked are in control the nations groan. (Nalliah 2013).

In his newsletter Nalliah forwards an article from Bill Muehlenberg, a Christian commentator from Victoria, 'for our (readers'/congregationalists') prayerful interest'. Muehlenberg identifies



the two biggest threats he perceives to faith, freedom, and family. He says they come from militant groups dedicated to the destruction of the West, democracy, and Christianity. He directly refers to militant Islam and the militant homosexual lobby. He claims both are working overtime to destroy all opposition (Muehlenberg 2013). Muehlenberg uses didactic language that evokes fear:

But here I want to speak to the second major source of the new totalitarianism. I refer to homofascism, for that is exactly what it is ... Everywhere the pink mafia is crushing freedom, destroying democracy, and waging war ... The West is fast sliding into one big homonazi (sic) state, where the militants rule and punish all those who put up resistance. And a totally sold-out lamestream (sic) media is doing its best to slavishly promote every agenda item of the homonazis. (Muehlenberg 2013)

In my creative work, Slim quotes Muehlenberg's comment word for word.

A comment associated with this posting refashions the same phrase to apply to abortion. Tas Walker states, 'The other threat is abortiofascism' (Muehlenberg 2013).

Al Gore argues that fear is the most powerful enemy of reason. Both fear and reason are essential to human survival, but the relationship between them is unbalanced. Reason may sometimes dissipate fear but fear frequently shuts down reason. Gore states, that under the right

circumstances fear can trigger the temptation to surrender freedom to a demagogue promising strength and security on return. When fear displaces reason, the result is often irrational hatred and division. Gore quotes Justice Louis D Brandeis who wrote, 'Men feared witches and burned women' (Gore 2007 p23).

As abortion, homosexuality and Islam are fundamentalist touchstone issues, I needed to represent them within the script for *I Want To Be Slim*. I do this by having Reverend Slim at several points through the script reveal his intent on these subjects. I also extend these ideas satirically to what could be considered absurd levels. However, Rev Slim's absurd comments cannot necessarily compete with the real words that come from certain preachers, as seen in Muehlenberg's comments above.

*SLIM*

*We're pro-genetics. In my research facility in Guangzhou we have currently isolated and have patents on the Christian gene and the Born Again gene. Our aim is to find the Homosexual gene and secretly test babies. If found we would quietly introduce into the baby's body the Born Again gene. As the person reaches puberty and the homosexual gene emerges, the Born Again gene comes out of hiding. It destroys the homo gene by penetrating it thus neutralising it. (Catsi 2013 p26)*

Reverend Slim clearly states the pro-life position on abortion, absorbing Muehlenberg's posturing:

*SLIM*

*We are pro-life. We aim to counter the threat of abortiofascism. We believe life starts at conception not at birth. God put us on this earth to have a hard work ethic. We advocate that the foetus is part of God's heavenly creation and as such needs to contribute to God's holy church by getting out to work for him. We have created the first foetal employment and acting agency. (Catsi 2013 p25)*

Abortion is also used to reveal Slim's more extremist position. I draw on actual cases of Christians killing abortion doctors and blowing up their clinics (Associated Press 2009). Billy has had a naïve sexual encounter with his cousin, who was teaching him what he thought was a game called 'doing it in the biblical way'. Slim deals with the outcome of this:

*BILLY*

*Oh and thanks to you Slim for helping me take her to that special doctor and clinic when she had that trouble in her belly a few weeks after the game ... The Lord told Slim we had to snuff that baby out ... then Slim you told me people shouldn't be killing babies. You were right, so we had to snuff that doctor out so he wouldn't kill no more ... then we blew up the clinic. (Catsi 2013 p41)*

Islam is dealt with more subtly in the script, with a Christian video game for the teens to play called 'Muslim Slayer' available at Slim's church (Catsi 2013 p7). Billy, who expresses some doubt, asks, 'if there is a God why did he put the oil under the sandals of those Muslims?' (Catsi 2013 p12).

### **Tinker Tailor**

Tinker Tailor is an example of an Australian Christian cult. This group, led by Lindsay and Del Grant, was active from the 1960s to the 1980s.

In his book, *Imperfect Company: Power and Control in an Australian Cult* (1991), David Millikan provides a comprehensive interview and analysis of this cult. Millikan gives evidence of and insight into the psychological manipulation and obsession with doctrine of a cult and explores how it can work to control a group. Millikan was not a member of Tinker Tailor but he interviewed Lindsay and Del Grant as well as previous and current members of the group. I drew on these interviews that explored what contributes to a group that is deemed to have 'gone too far' from acceptable norms—an accusation that is often thrown at evangelical or fundamentalist groups. I also used these interviews as a source for a doctrinal and technical framework for Slim, as will be highlighted in chapter six.

The distinction between a cult and a sect is much debated. In the end it comes down to an examination of the practices and beliefs of the group in question and the extent to which the group has separated itself from the culture of its members. A group that has moved well down the path of estrangement from its cultural background is called a cult (Millikan 1991).

Millikan suggests that a more useful way of distinguishing between sect and cult focuses on the basis of the inner life and behaviour of the group. He describes a cult as an elitist group that takes control of its members to a point that they are deprived of personal freedom and initiative. The cult's organisers work to isolate the members from society, sever their relationships with family and friends and press them entirely into the service of the cult leader's all-consuming vision. A profound manipulation of the members' sense of guilt was present with Tinker Tailor. The most fleeting moment of doubt about an aspect of cult belief or behaviour would be attributed to the evil propensities of the person concerned. Members were told almost daily that they were allowing themselves to be seduced by the devil or that they were falling under the pernicious influence of the world outside or even of their own family (Millikan 1991 p13).

Control of individual guilt was maintained at meetings in groups and in private conference with Del and Lindsay. These occasions were often marked by demands for self-criticism and the criticism of others. Those who were seen to deviate were subject to abuse, humiliation, and sometimes physical 'rebuking'. It was not unknown for a person to crawl from a room on their hands and knees after one of these confessional sessions. I have incorporated these aspects into Slim's discourse:

SLIM

*If it is so horrible, so dangerous in here, why, you can go right now. However, I can't get you to be taking your partner with you. They're here on their own volition and very much part of our family now. The family you're trying to walk out on. Now I'm going to do you a favour. Why? Because I still love you, we all still love you. I'm going to let you stay but I'm going to have to move you down here away from the others. Billy, go help them move. (Catsi 2013 p28)*

Former members Rose and Mark Illich's anecdotal description of their time with the Twelve Tribes cult describes similar regimes. There was a stress on the deep iniquity of the outside world, viewed as a dark place in which the only light is one's conscience. Failing to follow your conscience inevitably saw one consigned for eternity to the 'Lake of Fire'. Members were encouraged to 'renew your mind' and to be 'an open book before your brethren', always 'sharing' your sins, either with the elders, your shepherd, or at the gatherings (Elliot 2013).

The Illiches' sins were considerable. Rose, for example, had slept with men before getting married; she had also 'rebelled' against her mother. Mark, meanwhile, had played drums in a rock band ('I had a 'drum spirit', apparently,' he says). He had also surfed and smoked marijuana. 'They [the Twelve Tribes' leaders] present a very high standard,' Rose says:

It's all you hear, all the time, and so you start judging yourself by this standard. Your thinking becomes very black and white. At the same time, they present themselves as the only way to truly obey God, whose spirit they embody. So if you disagree with the elders or your shepherd, you're disagreeing with God himself.

(Elliot 2013)

The pressure to confess was considerable. If just one member held back, God could not answer anyone's prayers that day. And so Rose would scour her mind daily for any hint of sin. 'In the end you run out of things and your mind invents trouble' (Elliot 2013).

Survivors of communist regimes, or of other dictatorial groups' persecution, talk about their tormentor's obsession with weakening their ability to think independently. One of the ways in which such groups manipulated their victims was to force them to betray themselves and their friends and peers. 'The act of confession was a central tool of control. First it was directed against oneself, in interminable sessions in which it was necessary to search one's heart for the signs of apostasy or revisionism. This was accompanied by threats and physical violence. It is a profoundly disorientating process to be forced to confess to errors and faults of which one is unaware' (Millikan 1991 p14). I incorporate this technique in Billy's discourse:

BILLY

*Come on folks let them through. (To other audience members near the chairs) Now you sir / ma'am you're going to be sitting near to them. Now don't be talking to them and you ensure they don't leave and most important report anything and everything back to me whilst they're in the Sin Bin. (Catsi 2013 p28)*

Millikan reveals there was no relationship as important as the one a member had with Del and Lindsay. There was no such thing as an ability to confide in another human being: something said in confidence might be regarded as sinful. The result was that confession sessions produced a shameful rush to find faults in others that might temporarily take the focus off oneself. This produced a profound sense of isolation and dislocation in the people of the cult. It was impossible to put one's trust in anyone (Millikan 1991 pp.14-15). Slim practises this technique on Billy:

SLIM

*Billy! One day I woke up and discovered that God wanted to talk to you, through me. He said to me that obedience and focus are the cornerstones of our strength. You must have an unfaltering, unquestioning belief in God's plan and God's word. These good folk need strong leadership ... Billy, God has just spoken to me and has told me that this is now a dog (refers to the chair).*

BILLY

*Slim, that's a chair!*

SLIM

*Are you saying God, the Creator of all things, doesn't know his own work?*



BILLY

*(hesitant, uncertain where this is going)*

*No, but it looks like a chair. See I'll sit on it to prove ...*

SLIM

*Stop or you'll break its back! God gave me a vision Billy, a mandate to speak his truth as he tells it to me. I didn't ask him to choose me. I didn't apply for the position. But who am I, who are we to question? He spoke to me and said that he wants this creature, this glorious creation, to be a dog and be loved and cared for like one.*

BILLY

*But it looks like ...*

SLIM

*Are you saying I'm a liar or is it that you have no faith?*

BILLY

*Let's do the second question first, I still have faith but ...*

SLIM

*Then pat the dog. (Catsi 2013 p30)*

The capacity of members to make confident judgments about anything of importance was continually undermined. They were kept in a state of perpetual uncertainty about their own capacities. Most had to cope at one time or another with the accusation, 'You are all bad'. This came from someone with the unquestioned status of a seer or spiritual parent. It was a devastating thing to hear (Millikan 1991 p15).

Finally, similarly to the Jones experience described below, the cult assigned exhausting work schedules to the cult members. Del and Lindsay

had the luxury of a sleep-in until late in the morning. Not so the others, for whom it was rare to get to bed before 2 am. They were then up very early to start work. Ex-members talk about the terrible tiredness that took over, leaving some without the capacity to relate to their own children (Millikan 1991 p15).

*SLIM*

*Then you have to go so far in till you lose your way. You work so hard, you get so tired that you can't think. You'll soon start asking me to do the thinking for you. (Catsi 2013 p35)*

Millikan describes an interview with Sarah, one of the ex-members of Tinker Tailor. Sarah reported that if there were any problems with the church's businesses the members were all working in (for almost no money), Del and Lindsay would respond from a controlling doctrinal position:

Their response was 'The Lord will look after this!' But soon I let my own intelligence take over. They believe that God would send the Holy Spirit to sort out any business issues. That's why they didn't advertise. But they didn't know I was using my own brains. This was the worst thing you could do. It was the one thing we were told over and over again; 'You must depend on God not your own initiative.' The great saying was 'Christ expression not self-expression, never ever self-expression'. That's why we were people without personalities. We were

never encouraged to express them. Even thinking for ourselves was 'self-expression', and people without personalities are zombies. (Millikan 1991 p35)

I have Billy voice this doctrine:

*BILLY*

*As you told me Slim, we must depend on YOU, not our own creative initiative. Slim-expression not self-expression, Slim-expression not self-expression never ever self-expression. (Catsi 2013 p11)*

As with Donny Swaggart's good and bad Uniting Church ministers, and Hillsong's less relevant churches, Tinker Tailor drew a distinction between two types of Christians: 'nominal Christians' and 'real Christians' (Millikan 1991 p158). The real ones are also called 'those who know the Lord', 'born again', 'believers'. This creates a self-determined internal hierarchy within the Protestant tradition, which classified those who were 'in' or 'out'. While non-believers are obvious targets of derision for some, it is often the other denominations or churches that are held up for the harshest criticism. I see this as a form of one-upmanship about who is more of a Christian, who is truly saved and who is truly interpreting the Bible correctly.

It is easy to see how Tinker Tailor moved beyond just the use of persuasive techniques but used methods that encourage followers' dependence. These include inciting the extreme use of 'in and out of the

group' techniques and other techniques that verge on torture e.g. abuse and lack of sleep.

A political manifestation of this is the emergence of the Tea Party in US politics. Commentators describe the Tea Party as driven by fundamentalist Christian intent. While part of the Republican Party, they openly target more liberal members of the party, describing them as not true Americans and as not listening to the American people. Fearing that their seats will be targeted at future elections, more moderate Republican politicians may shift their views to the right for political survival. This stratifying can be seen on the political left as well, with the Greens containing hard environmentalists who show little willingness to compromise at any cost, through to more centrists who embrace a broader policy agenda that does include compromise. This was noticeable in the first attempt at introducing a Carbon Tax into the Australian parliament by the then Rudd government in 2009. The Greens refused to pass the legislation because it was not 'green' enough (Coorey 2009).

A second distinction is that some Evangelicals see the world as essentially hostile. As a consequence Christians can move around in this life as 'pilgrims', 'sojourners' or 'visitors'. The biblical quotation 'We Christians are in the world but not of the world' (John 17:16) is based on a doctrine of sin that regards this world as so compromised as to make it

impossible for anything of eternal significance to exist here (Bible Hub n.d.). These extreme Evangelicals have an uncertain, even suspicious, view of secular learning and human culture generally (Millikan 1991 p159). This played out in the US political debates about debt in 2012–13, in which economists predicted cataclysmic results if the Tea Party forced a national economic shutdown to extract ideological gains. As the Christian conservative Tea Party member is not religiously ‘of this world,’ the long-term consequences matter little. Jesus will return soon and save them. This section above shows the threat to secular democracy that evangelism can bring.

A profound form of cultural isolation is present in this theology. To say that the world is sinful in the way that Evangelical theology teaches is to pass a judgment on the cultural achievements of society that is profoundly alienating. It means that the phenomena of contemporary culture, even at their best, are seen only as instances of mankind’s sinfulness. Millikan asserts that this stifles the arts and causes people to retreat into broad judgments that lack imagination (Millikan 1991 p160).

Slim voices this position:

*SLIM*

*But one thing I do know, absolute, the arts is full of these ‘advanced thinkers’ and ‘higher critics’ so called ‘intellectuals’. With their perfect minds they’re creating perfect ideas on why, what I say and*

*do, don't make perfect sense. I'm sure none of the people here are advanced thinkers. Now, let me make this perfectly clear, intellectuals are going to the hottest pit of hell!*

*BILLY*

*Pit number 7! Wow that's hot. (Catsi 2013 p11)*

This theological antagonism to the world is deeply embedded in many closely-knit Christian communities and it can explain the reluctance for critical thinking. The intellectual curiosity and openness to the happenings of the world that might give a larger perspective from which to judge the claims of Del and Lindsay (and other evangelical leaders) may never have been part of the childhood of church members (Millikan 1991 p160).

Del and Lindsay identify three key tenants of conversion that can manifest as the 'prizes' members experience on joining. These three key tenants I made pertinent to Slim.

*Denigration* of self is a popular theme in much of the teaching of Evangelism. It is not uncommon to hear people refer to themselves as 'worthless' or 'nothing', save for the power of Jesus Christ.

*Salvation* was seen as a gift of God associated with conversion. A Christian lived in this world and participated with others in the struggles and joy that life here involves, but this 'carnal' life could never rival a member's loyalty to the kingdom of God. Every plan and activity that was worldly was entered into on the understanding that it lacked significance

or could be seen as a threat to the relationship with Christ and the prospect of salvation (Millikan 1991 p169).

One extreme view considers that salvation is a benefit that derives from one's practising membership of the community of faith. If one proceeds through baptism, confirmation and membership, and lives in conformity to the rules, teaching and discipline of the Church, salvation is assured. Part of the process is the belief in the things that the Church regards as central to the Christian doctrine. However, just what is central is a matter for the Church to decide.

Salvation is something that is won through a struggle whose rules are not understood by the ordinary person. There are no lessons that the world of flesh can give. In fact, Millikan asserts, the world of normal affairs does nothing else than distract one from the single-minded effort involved in achieving salvation. It must be a single-minded fight which, if needs be, requires the sacrifice of things that we hold dear to this life. It could mean the sacrifice of career in the service of Christ, the loss of family, wealth, comfort, even loved ones. But these things are temporary and have no significance when compared to the great prize of salvation (Millikan 1991 p172).

The third tenet, *perfectionism*, is a very difficult doctrine to maintain, for the reality of this life is that most of us do, in fact, by Christian standards, sin. It might be argued that a Christian theology that does not recognise this is of little use. Tinker Taylor's theology says that any sin is a sign that the 'old self' has in fact not been put to death, which means one is not saved. This creates a constant uncertainty about one's relationship with Christ. It also creates a restless and morbid obsession to root out the places where the 'old self' may still be lurking. This is the pernicious and destructive side of sinless perfection (Millikan 1991 p178).

In his book *The Dangers of Idealism* Isaiah Berlin writes:

the search for perfection does seem to me to be a recipe for bloodshed, no better even if it is demanded by the sincerest of idealism, the purest of heart ... to force people into neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed in schemes is almost always a road to inhumanity. (Cited in Carr 2008 p36)

In creating the character of the Reverend Slim Limits in *I Want To Be Slim*, I decided that he is primarily driven by this need for perfection, to absolve himself from prior (and recurring) sins, along with his familial issues. I placed him within a psychological framework of paternal abuse and maternal impotence, leading to isolation and low self-esteem. This profile manifests in narcissistic tendencies, a searching for validation from others



while being unable to connect emotionally. Billy Graham is established as a paternalistic role model, an outcome of Slim's projection as he struggles for the 'perfection' Graham appears to market. This, however, is unattainable and leads Slim to self-denigration.

The Reverend Jim Jones's son, Stephen, suggests that Jim Jones had low self-regard:

I think people need to understand that every hour of the day Jim Jones thought that he was a fraud. He knew he was a bad guy, he knew he was a sick guy. He just didn't want everybody else to know.' (Wolochatiuk 2007).

I have made Slim share this characteristic.

### **The People's Temple – Reverend Jim Jones**

I represent divine principle, total equality, a society where people own all things in common, where there's no rich or poor, where there are no races. Wherever there are people struggling for justice and righteousness, there I am. (Jim Jones, founder, People's Temple, cited in Nelson 2006)

Reverend Jim Jones of the People's Temple (US) is referenced for reasons similar to Tinker Tailor. The People's Temple began as a relatively unassuming religious community but went on to become flawed and dangerous. The Reverend Jim Jones was an enigmatic preacher whose promise of a world of economic and racial equality ultimately led in 1978

to the mass murder and suicide of 913 people. An in-depth analysis of Jones is not part of this work as there are countless publications in this area. My reading of Jones is more directly based on documentaries that include interviews with the cult's survivors and his son.

My play includes direct lines and sentiments primarily drawn from two documentaries, *Jonestown: Paradise Lost* (Wolochatiuk 2007), and *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (Nelson 2006). Here I list examples of commentary, quotations and accounts that affected the script.

**1. Jim Jones' background:** Jones' description of his troubled upbringing directly informs Slim's dialogue in describing his own family story of abuse. The idea is to theatrically link this psychological profiling of a 'troubled past' with the character's later behaviour (as discussed by Popper). This is also a part of Slim's use of rhetorical tenant of 'pathos'.

*SLIM*

*My father did not work, did not have a job and was a drunk. My mother had to work to support the family and I was left to my own devices, left to run wild. I was in a dysfunctional family. Oh you have a nice name for it now but when you live in a dysfunctional family you think it is normal. (Catsi 2013 p21)*

**2. Stephen Jones' (son of Jim Jones) comment** on belonging: 'If there was some universal experience (for followers) it was that on some level of wanting to belong' (Wolochatiuk 2007 3 min 55secs).

**3. Stephen Jones' comment** on his father's ability: 'A guy like my dad

found out what you wanted to hear and see and showed it to you.

Whatever you were looking for, whatever you were running from or toward, Dad had an uncanny ability to hook into that. It's exhilarating and very attractive but once you get hooked by that, it is really hard to get unhooked' (Wolochatiuk 2007 5 mins 25secs) .

**4. Songs heard in archival footage sung at People's Temple services** (in

happier times). Two of these songs are now present in the script:

1.

*Never heard a man sing like this man before*

*Never heard a man sing like this man before*

*All the days of my life*

*Ever since I've been born*

*Never heard a man sing like this man before*

2.

*Something's got a hold on me*

*Oh yes indeed I said*

*Something's got a hold on me.*

*I went to Slim's last night*

*When my heart it wasn't right*

*Now, something's got a hold on me.*

**5. Jim Jones' comment to his community is an example of 'othering' of**

**those outside the group:** 'I am the greatest friend that you will ever have

and I am trying on every level to protect this community here. Are you

with me? I said, “Are you with me?” Are ... you ... with ... me! So I must warn you again and again to be together with the community’

(Wolochatiuk 2007 9mins 25 secs).

*SLIM*

*I’m fine. Those who don’t love me and wish me ill, well, bad luck! To those who love, I am the greatest friend that you will ever have and I am trying on every level to protect this community here.*

*(To audience) Are you with me? I said are you with me? Are ... you ... with ... me! So I must warn you again and again no matter what happens, to be together with the community (Catsi 2013 p50).*

**6. Vernon Gosney’s comment:** A survivor of Jonestown who requested to leave when Congressman Ryan came to see the community, Gosney was present at the airport shoot-out that killed the congressman. Gosney had made the choice to leave his four-year-old son behind in camp. His son was subsequently killed by the cyanide:

It is difficult to express to someone who doesn’t have that experience and they say why didn’t you leave if it was so terrible, so horrible. Because if you put yourself in that position when actually you were working for a cause that you believed in. It is like taking people to the limit then moving the line, then moving the line, then moving the line and wanting so desperately to believe in the dream and seeing that the dream has become a nightmare.

(Wolochatiuk 2007 9min 30 sec)

SLIM

*Brothers and sisters, it is difficult to express to someone who doesn't have this ... family experience we are having here today. But in time when those on the outside say, 'Why didn't they leave?' Why didn't you leave cause it's evidently so terrible, so horrible. It's because you put yourself in a position where actually you're working for a cause, a dream that you believe in. When you give your life over to something you must give your everything to it. Those on the outside are jealous because they have no cause, no dreams outside their own self-interest. So they will seek to destroy what you believe in, what you know in your dreams you have found here with me. Oh my friends, my family, dreaming is good. It's good because it gets you to better places. It's a useful mode of transportation. However once you reach your destination, as I hope and feel you have here tonight, holding onto dreams is ultimately dangerous. Dangerous as it's a distraction from your work and you may back slide to your old life. (Catsi 2013 p29)*

**7. A note that was handed to the Congressman:** That was the first indication that some people wanted out of Jonestown. It was the impetus for the cracks that eventually led to the shooting and the suicides.

*VG and Monica Gasby  
Help us get out of Jonestown*

**Figure 5.12 Note from members wanting help to leave Jonestown**

*Earlier in show the names of two people in audience have been determined. Their names are put on a note. Billy reads the note. (Catsi 2013 p28)*

*(insert name) and (name)  
Help us get out of Slimtown!*

8. **Quote about Jim Jones:** 'The congressman, journalists, and concerned relatives, was like evil incarnate coming to destroy us' (Wolochatiuk 2007 35mins).



[image.Jonestown.org](http://image.Jonestown.org)

**Figure 5.13 Bodies at Jonestown**

*(Source: Jonestown.org)*

9. **A sign in the communal area of Jonestown**, where the cyanide was distributed:

THOSE WHO DO NOT REMEMBER THE PAST  
ARE CONDEMNED TO REPEAT IT.

**Figure 5.14 Sign displayed in the communal area of Jonestown**

Slim projects a similar sign during his service – THOSE WHO REPEAT THE PAST ARE CONDEMNED TO REMEMBER IT. From a character

perspective it gives clues to his struggle to clear his past and reimagine himself in a more perfect way.

### Westboro Baptist Church (US)

Westboro Baptist Church in the United States wages a very public and explicit campaign of hate against a series of liberal groups, the US government and most interestingly what one would consider their own conservative and religious affiliations.



Figure 5.15 Westboro Church slogans

Westboro define and express their perception of the nature of evil via their websites [www.godhatesfags.com](http://www.godhatesfags.com), [www.godhatesttheworld.com](http://www.godhatesttheworld.com) (and others). Since 2005 they have been carrying on a campaign of hate against most liberal groups plus most interestingly the conservative and religious sections of the US.

Led by the patriarch Pastor Fred Phelps, in Topeka, Kansas, they manifest their hatred towards the US government for allowing homosexuality to exist by picketing the funerals of US soldiers. Their rationale is that the US government permits homosexuality to exist, and, therefore, as agents of the government the soldiers deserve to die. Among Christian conservatives Westboro Baptist Church is considered a pariah for their extremist views, even though many conservatives share their views on homosexuality and abortion. However most other groups cannot tolerate Westboro's expression of the views through their anti-military, anti-US stance. Other Baptists have themselves defined Westboro as evil.

Westboro Baptist have in recent years moved beyond just picketing soldiers' funerals. They have begun to target churches, children's funerals (Daily Mail 2011), and gun massacre victims' funerals, including those at Newtown School Connecticut (USA), and at the Aurora Cinema Batman screening (USA) (Hibbard 2012). Recently they proposed picketing Nelson Mandela's funeral on the basis that he was married three times and was therefore an adulterer. They expressed these views across their Twitter feed (see example), which regularly generates more than 20 posts a day (Twitter WBC 2013).





### Twitter feed Westboro Baptist church Dec 2013

Figure 5.16 Westboro Baptist Church's twitter feed

(Source: twitter WBC 2013)

In a more publicity-seeking event they aimed to picket the funeral of Sylvester Stallone's 36-year-old son. Stallone is charged with being an adulterer: 'Thrice-married rebel taught his son to mock God.

#picketfuneral MT@digitalspy: Sylvester Stallone's son Sage Stallone found dead, aged 36,' Margie Phelps wrote on Twitter (Madambashi 2012).

Westboro's use of multiple media modalities to get their message out is interesting. They have extensive websites that explain to every country why God hates them. They have very active twitter and YouTube accounts and even create music-style videos that satirise those condemning them. The video *God Hates Australia* spews hatred for the victims of the Victorian Bushfires in 2009: 'The fag infested land of Australia is burning. The fire of God's wrath is sending hundreds of those filthy Australian beasts straight to hell' (Westboro 2009).

As extreme as these comments may seem they are presented here because their messages are not too distant from the homonazi and abortiofascists comments seen on Pastor Danny Nalliah's website. A further link between these two groups is that Westboro, like Nalliah himself, puts the blame for the bushfires on the same pro-abortion laws passed by the Victorian government.

Westboro presents an interesting case of how absolutes play out in the US, and the confusion the country has in dealing with it. Phelps of Westboro is a rapacious litigator, protecting his right to free speech under

the US first amendment. At best legislators have managed to impose distance limits on how close Westboro members stand when picketing a funeral, e.g. 300 feet from the nine-year-old Arizona shooting victim (Daily Mail 2011). Both the right-wing and left-wing communities struggle to deal with this notion of freedom of speech, even when, as in this case, it incites and is hateful. In the US, freedom of speech is—like Westboro’s doctrine—an absolute, akin to the debate on gun control. If Westboro is prevented from speaking its truth, then all conservative and left-wing groups may also be vulnerable to this law. Authorities therefore bend over backwards to avoid prosecuting. This freedom allows more extremist views to find sympathetic ears.

### **Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh—a non-Christian example**

*Breaking the Spell* (2009), Australian Jane Stork’s memoir of her time as a disciple of guru Bhagwan Rajneesh, is relevant to theories on the issue of ‘projection’ discussed in chapter four. In an example of extremism in a non-Christian group, Stork chronicles the rise and fall of the ‘Rolls Royce guru’ Bagwan and his religion termed Rajneeshism. The memoir details Jane’s part in the events that led to its collapse. Stork describes how she rose through the ranks to Bhagwan’s inner circle and how she was willingly sent on a mission to murder an opponent.



**Figure 5.17 Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh**

*(Source: Oregon Public Broadcasting  
www.opb.org/pressroom/article/rajneeshpuram)*

Giving a 'followers'' point of view, Stork's memoir encapsulates what Jim Jones's son described as his, 'father's existence laying in the hands of those who perceived him' (Wolochatiuk 2007 8 mins 12 secs). Stork discusses how the follower 'projects' onto the leader the role of loving father, leader, teacher, mother or whatever their need is:

Bhagwan liked to say he was an ordinary man, but who of his disciples really believed that? It was clearly another of his cosmic jokes. Who is going to follow an ordinary man? A disciple of three decades said to me recently, I believe Bhagwan is a great master. Of course he was, for who wants to admit to following a mediocre master for half his life? Or worse still, an ordinary man? No, we were sure we were the disciples of a great master. Bhagwan was not an ordinary man. What ordinary man do you know who lives such a reclusive life, unmarried and without children or friends? His house is in a fenced and guarded compound, within a larger fenced and guarded compound.

He only ever came out of his enclosure to be driven the one hundred metres to Buddha Hall for discourse every morning. He never left the greater compound. He was virtually a prisoner in his own house. (Stork 2009 p115)

Stork's account introduces the two-way relationship between leader and follower, implying that one is not without the other:

Why do people imprison themselves behind guarded walls? Generally it is to keep out the maddening [sic] crowd, who may want something from them that they are not willing to give. But in this case it was Bhagwan's own devoted disciples. Could he have not felt comfortable mixing with them? Well, at least in my case, and I think one can safely say that of most disciples, I was busy projecting every sort of perfection and majesty on to him. To some, like me, he was God himself, all seeing, all knowing, the saviour of the world ... It must be hard to have a conversation when you are not seen for yourself but as the projection of someone or something else. And how can a man who cultivates exclusivity and mystery around himself come out and mix with the people? He can't. It blows the whole thing—for everyone concerned. Such a man has no friends—he cannot afford friends. He cannot pop down to the pub for a drink, or call up a friend and invite them over for dinner and a game of cards, or to play a game of golf on the weekends. He needs to remain an enigma to the world, and especially to

his disciples, for his sake and theirs. It is an unspoken agreement between them. (Stork 2009 p116)

I draw on this description when Slim reflects on his position near the end of the show, as he is preparing to possibly die in a healing transferral. He makes the congregation (audience) responsible for their projections onto him:

*SLIM*

*I have no power over you. I can't force you to turn to yourself and see the pitiful gaze that I see as I look across this room. I can't force you to divert this gaze of longing for a better life, back towards yourself. I can't force you to try and believe I'm just an ordinary man working in extraordinary ways to break through your guarded walls of loathing. I can't force you to free yourselves, by you giving me the gift of absolution.*

*No, I have no power over you.*

*BILLY*

*Slim this is just like your acquittal hearing. (Catsi 2013 p48)*

*'You have a mantle, you shall be our leader.'* (Isaiah 3:6)

The case studies discussed in this chapter have allowed me to evidence the use of tools and techniques of persuasion and how they are used in the groups I have selected. This has furthered my argument that indeed evangelist preachers do use these techniques described by psychologists.

Moreover I have shown that in groups such as Tinker Tailor and the People's Temple, extreme methods of follower control were used as well.

In chapter six I go onto analyse the script and its intentions more thoroughly. I draw on the research on persuasive tools, understood through the context of the case studies, to create the script and performance, *I Want To Be Slim*. The case studies have been crucial in allowing me to show how the script is authentic, and from where it sources its satire. This relationship between authenticity and satirical writing will be discussed in the following chapter.

In relation to the case studies, theatrically I have not placed the Reverend Slim Limits in any one doctrinal camp. I aim for a theatrical effect where the audience experiences real persuasive techniques drawn from across the examples in this chapter's case studies. My understanding of these case studies allows me to write a script that I hope will 'jolt' my audience—who I anticipate will be liberal and left leaning. My theatrical aim is to make the audience want to participate in the Reverend Slim Limits' church, even though they disagree intellectually with all or most of what it stands for.

This chapter proves that indeed wittingly, or unwittingly, evangelist preachers use many of the psychological techniques outlined in

chapter four. The way they use them provided me with material to write the script authentically.

In the next and final section I go on to answer question two: What means can I find, given my skills as a comedy writer/performer, to raise political and social awareness about the techniques used, and dangers of, fundamentalist evangelism? Also in general I discuss the interplay between the research and the script/performance. ■



## Chapter 6

# Building the church—creative reflection on the interplay between research, writing and performance

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In the prior chapters I have identified the problem of the growth of evangelism and its influence on politics and morality with the potential to undermine secular democracy. I have outlined the tools and techniques of persuasion and their application by evangelists with particular focus on the outlined case studies. This chapter will reflect on how I drew on this research to write the creative work, and how effective the play is in replicating persuasive techniques in the theatrical setting. I also reflect on my attempts to find an effective style for *I Want to Be Slim*, for it to have political effects.

I will discuss theatrical and performance theories relevant to my research into evangelism, and the creative choices and challenges I encountered writing the script. My discussion of theories and styles of satire and their application in *I Want To Be Slim* will reveal the complexity of satire. I argue that Horatian satire best suits my purpose, given my skill

set at the time, to best make transparent the persuasive techniques used by evangelists.

The creation of the creative work is my contribution to deal with the problem of the growth and influence of fundamentalist evangelism. In this chapter I ask what way might there be for a writer / performer / comedian, such as myself, to find a way to politically counter evangelism. What type of play should I write?

### **Synopsis of I Want To Be Slim**

*I Want To Be Slim* is a satirical comedy, a hyper-real allegory/morality tale about Slim, an ambitious cowboy who missed the point at a Billy Graham Crusade and accepted Billy into his life, not Jesus. As a misguided evangelist he sets about building a church, but to whom, Jesus, Billy Graham or himself?

*I Want To Be Slim* is a two-hander, no fourth wall, hands on theatre experience that converts the audience into a congregation, then works to draw them into Slim's spiritual world. It's an off-centre exploration of persuasion, projection, and posturing that will make you want to believe. Ideally it would be fully staged to include live music including a full gospel choir, video screens and theatrical sets.

### **Chapter outline**

This chapter reflects on how I drew on the research into persuasive tools and techniques used by evangelists to produce the creative work, exploring the creative choices and challenges I encountered in writing the script and the significant dramaturgical input I received at specific points in the creative process. I also detail my own personal background to show how I was motivated to undertake this research.

In the sections that follow I describe the historical framework that informed my creation of the character of Slim and other theatrical elements. I situate the creative work in relation to theories and styles of satire and comedy and reflect on the work's efficacy in replicating persuasive techniques in the theatrical setting, using direct examples from the script.

The research had revealed a broad range of religious groups and individuals who had vastly different interpretations and presentation styles. Concurrently the analysis of persuasion revealed a range of techniques that may or may not be present in an evangelical church. In this chapter I explain how I have created a character who I hope will be recognisable even to an audience that is not religious or has no prior or personal experience of fundamentalism.

How close to reality do you go before you 'become' what you are questioning? This chapter discusses the difficulty and pitfalls of satire, particularly with a religious work, and reviews examples of satirical characters and satirical shows, such as *Summer Heights High*, *The Chaser*, performances of the Reverend Billy and Australian company Back-to-Back Theatre's presentation of *Hell Houses*.

In concluding the chapter I suggest that characterisation was one way to 'walk in the shoes' of the research and to attempt to understand, in fact to *feel* the persuasive elements that are at play in an evangelical church. I discuss how I then took this venture one step further and became the central actor in the work, putting myself directly into the evangelist's shoes.

**Background reflective framework—why I wanted to write the new work**  
*I Want To Be Slim*, a journey behind the power and poison of the modern day evangelist, was inspired by personal life events.

I was born and baptised a Greek Orthodox. In 1972, when I was 10 years old, my mother became (and still is) a born again Baptist. In 1979 my mother sang in the Billy Graham Crusade Choir for the great American evangelist's Randwick meeting (see photo 1 below). As a 16-year-old volunteer, I wore the issued orange armband that said USHER. As the

people flowed forward to accept Jesus into their lives, I was transfixed by the power of the 'word' and the performance but felt somehow that there was falseness to it, that it was using a trick or tool of persuasion. Ironically, and as a foreshadowing perhaps of my future satirical disposition, I drew a 'P' in front of 'USHER' on the armband I wore as I showed people the way to eternal salvation, which lay near the racetrack finishing post shown in photo 2 below.



**Figure 6.1: Billy Graham at the Randwick crusade, Sydney 1979**  
(Source: [www.capecentralhigh.com/journalism/billy-graham-turns-93](http://www.capecentralhigh.com/journalism/billy-graham-turns-93))



**Figure 6.2: Crowds at the Billy Graham crusade, Randwick 1979**

*(Source: [www.jps.com.au/crusade-1979](http://www.jps.com.au/crusade-1979))*

My two lives of church and school rarely touched. I wrapped each life in secrets and lies about what I did on the weekend or during the week. I feared rejection from both groups: on the one hand, a Christian church with a defined morality; and on the other, a high school fraternity immersed in the frivolity of drink, grass and sex (or hope thereof). My confidante was a Mormon, now a life friend, who also lived a dual life.

What is it to live a part of your life in a group that is formed and defined by its beliefs? Particularly when that group tells you that to fully join you must give over and accept the absolute truths it claims to possess? Although my brother and sister did 'give over' by becoming Baptists, as a teenage boy I never immersed myself in the redemptive waters of the church's baptismal pool. One part of me may have known that I had my bases covered when the Greeks baptised me as a six-month-old baby. However, in reality at that age I never knew why, but just felt drawn away from the church and I followed that feeling. One has a lifetime of hindsight to answer questions like these.

I left the church at the same time I left school to start my life. I became a young man—although still really a boy—with a healthy sense of humour and a strong social conscience but also with an emerging scepticism towards holders of 'Truth'.

To step away was difficult as it meant a personal rejection of all my mother stood for and prayed for her children to have. Now all her children have left the church. A question she finds difficult to answer is 'is the church the problem?'

In 1992 my by then ex-Mormon friend David Delves together created a comedy act (for no particular reason) called *Gods (sic) Cowboys*. We wrote and performed it for four years in Sydney and around Australia with our third cowboy, John Knowles. *Gods Cowboys* was a light-hearted comedy that used song and character to dialogue about the absurdist nature of religions, God, cowboys and popular culture as if all these were part of the same thing. The character, the Reverend Slim Limits, was the self-professed leader of a gang of 'cowboys', who were out to 'round up spiritual strays, herd them up to his heavenly corral and mark them with his white brand of truth'. Slim liked the power he held over his congregation (the audience) and his evangelical partners.

My life journey became one of exploring my own leadership abilities and my power to influence—powers and abilities that others told me I had. Maybe what I took from the church was not quiet inner peace but a louder outer voice that was more associated with the performances of Billy Graham and the preachers who followed him at my church's pulpit and on my television.

What stayed with me even after I left the church was the power of the spoken word and gesture to persuade an individual to step against the crowd and walk forward in the direction the preacher decreed. I continued to ask myself: What makes people convert then continue to believe? To follow, to do, to stay and to defend when their leader's actions have become, to the rest of the world, disturbed, deranged or downright dangerous? I asked whether there was a psychological profile that drew together the Reverend Jim Jones, Reverend Billy Graham, Pastor Benny Hinn and Pastor Brian Houston of Hillsong? This questioning became the foundation of my script.

Billy Graham's empire was built on his individual name and pop star status. Others have taken the lead from him and moved away from the denominational aspect of the church. Is spirituality now channelled through the individual? Marketing and packaging of evangelism is now defined by branding built around individual preachers or 'power couples' of preachers and their wives, for example Jimmy Swaggart's Ministries (JSM), Brian and Bobby from Hillsong, Jimmy and Tammy Bakker.

Slim went away but never left. Spurred on by the global rise of the darker elements of evangelical fundamentalism, in 2007 I resurrected Slim. I began building on the earlier Cowboy work and the satirical evangelical organisation, The Church of the Holy Cowboy, with the Reverend Slim



Limits as its leader. I imagined a project that would interact with the material through a live theatrical performance, with cross-media platforms that would mimic those of the true practitioners: a faux website, social networking tools and, if successful, TV and radio. Draft public 'test' performances of the character and the 'work in progress' material followed at the Melbourne Fringe Festival (2008) and the Adelaide Fringe Festival (2009/10). In late 2008 I wrote a proposal to complete a Doctorate in Creative Arts (DCA) at the University of Technology, Sydney. In 2009, at the end of my first year of my DCA, I produced at the Vanguard music venue in Sydney a performance incorporating live musicians in a band we named 'The Rhythm Method'. There was also a 16-voice gospel choir, known as, 'The Herd on High Cowboy Gospel Choir', complete with cow-skin patterned choir gowns. The script and performance at this point were more caricature than character, and were played with a light touch.

However, in late 2010, after being awarded the Kit Denton Fellowship, a national award for courage and excellence in performance writing, I felt validated to create a deeper exploration. What is it like to wear the preacher's suit, to profess to be the holder of absolute truths, to create one's own church where you interpret the words so they suit what you believe? What is it like to carry people along a path with the

responsibilities that come with knowing that you change people's lives forever?

Who are these people that stand up in the name of God and project perfect lives, or who twist their imperfect pasts into tools to persuade? I held my character Slim on the edge of the river. I wanted him to get in and get dirty because it is here that maybe he and I would find our absolution.

In the mid-1970s, when I was around 13 years old, the church I attended ran a coffee drop-in youth club called 'Wannacumin' for any young folk in the community. One long-haired, drinking, smoking teenager found some solace there and after a week showed up for the evening church service. I remember sitting in the church and seeing the elder deacon at the door refuse him entry because of his looks. If I were to pinpoint the crack in any illusion I still held that the church was a house of love, it was probably that moment.

Over the years I worked to take this show further, deeper; drawing on all the elements created and lived to this point. I want to take an audience with me into Slim's world—to be led, to be uncomfortable, to believe, to doubt and maybe to join.

A part of me stood in fear, always baulking at stepping into this water because when I looked into it I saw a quagmire, a wretched swirl of

blind-faith, fire and brimstone, judgement, demonising and a sticky capacity for people to want to be led no matter where they are taken. It was a subterranean world; if I could reach across it to the other side and survive with myself and love of humanity intact, then maybe I could reach back across my years and understand why I had not gone there.

*I Want To Be Slim*, the play, is the summation of this journey through that water to the other side.

### **So who is Slim and what is his church?**

The Reverend Slim Limits and his Church of the Holy Cowboy is an immersion in the world of the men who want to preach, centred on the fictional character of Slim. The play/performance is structured around the format of a typical church service. Slim's story is of an idealist who was drawn to Billy Graham's power to persuade and pull a crowd. He wants what Graham's got and sets about building up his own evangelical empire. A flawed Slim works the audience as he seeks to convince, convert and keep them, no matter what it takes. Doctrine mixes with fable, failure masquerades as fortitude. To exit from the church is interpreted as rejection of it. All mix to create the absurdist reality of Slim's absolute truth.

Slim's apprentice, a naïve man-boy devotee, also Billy by name, unwittingly exposes the cracks behind Slim's absolute truth, sending Slim into a spiraling descent of personal doubt, exposed insecurities and venomous blaming. However is Slim's descent an opportunity for a new awakening or a rehearsed manipulation? Believe what you need to believe. *I Want To Be Slim* is a vibrant portrait of one man that speaks more broadly to the 'cult of persuasion' that all societies experience. The play is relevant to current times, as a massaged message rather than a depth of content often determines whom we follow, whether politically, economically or spiritually. Often, as the global financial crisis shows, we are over the edge before we awaken from the spell.

As a writer, thematically this satire was inspired by the fervour of the evangelical church and its battle between its religious morals and Western liberal yearnings. The theatricality of persuasion played out from the pulpit, online and in television and radio was a creative swimming pool I wanted to dive into. Infested with sharks of all breeds, this was a dangerous water to swim in. Believer versus non-believer, believer versus different believer; everyone has a point to win and concedes nothing.

In the centre of this theatrically fertile space stand the men peddling their own brand of truth. *I Want To Be Slim* looks at one man who works to

build his church and in doing so must destroy the part of him that doesn't fit the perfection he preaches.

### **Church to theatre: congregation to audience**

An understanding of the relationship between church and theatre is relevant in the script's attempt to replicate a persuasive space for an audience. There is no one defining interpretation of text and performance—neither for deliverer nor receiver. Social, historical, cultural, psychological, group and individual settings influence the message transmission and reception. In this way, the understanding of the meaning of the service/text is interpreted from a very particular position.

Bond (2008), in her thesis *Exploring Evangelistic Performance*, acknowledges the similarities between theatre and church, but stresses the differences. Theatre today in Western culture is largely an entertainment, distant from its roots in ritual practice. Unlike a congregation in a church, a theatre audience is not deemed to share any religious beliefs although, she stresses, theatre does proceed on the understanding that an audience may have some commonality of social and cultural understanding (Bond 2008 p6).

Church, like theatre, is contractual for a participant and this is something *I Want To Be Slim* seeks to play with. By construing the

theatrical space as a church, with the audience role-playing as a congregation, the work seeks to create a sense of 'uncomfortableness' or more ambitiously 'tension' in the space. The relationship between the evangelist and his congregation through the ritual of evangelism makes a group of spectators into a congregation, altering the relationship between those present, and 'making the others, we' (Bond 2008 p23).

There is generally no assumption that words spoken in a theatre are true, but rather, the audience agrees to suspend its disbelief for the duration of the performance. The assumption is that dramatic words are fictional, and there is (in the conventional theatre at least) no expectation that the words spoken need be believed later when the performance is over (Bond 2008 p6). However, in the case of *I Want to Be Slim*, those who never engaged, refused or opposed notions of church find themselves in an embodied religious experience (albeit faux). My uses of theatre allow atheists, agnostics and the doctrinally un-positioned to experience some aspect of a spiritual collective. What does it feel like to shout out Hallelujah with others? What does it feel like to be called 'loved' and 'family' by strangers? What does it feel like to have a message presented that you may actively *agree* with (though you are anti-church) and one that you steadfastly *disagree* with but that is presented to you as if you are in agreement by your mere presence in the room? The form of the evangelist

service demands a performance of togetherness from its participant audience.

In her analysis of liturgy and performance Megan McDonald states that a key element in the discussion is that performativity builds over time, through repetition, iteration and practice (Macdonald 2013 p3). Meyers offers a philosophical analysis of performative utterances that differentiates the first utterance of, for example, 'I believe' and all subsequent utterances. The first utterance is simply a statement whereas all following utterances are performative, building on and validating the original and each other. According to this argument, belief becomes stronger and more serious with each repetition of the action—that is, with each performance. The combined assertions of all those present for each enactment are coupled with weekly, monthly or yearly repetitions that confirm the utterance's performative power (Meyers cited Macdonald 2013 p3).

In *I Want To Be Slim* the performance runs in real time, without a break, deliberately seeking to compound the experience. There is no interval to relieve the tension or dissipate the intensity through conversation with friends in the foyer. There is no reprieve. To leave you have to exit in front of everyone—including Slim, who is likely to comment. Real church services have no intervals. The aim is not to be long

and dull but to use the duration, with no interval, as a dislocating technique. While an individual audience member's attention may ebb and flow as they listen to the narrative text, the experience as a *whole* is the desired effect. The show allows a form of embodiment for the religious uninitiated or opposed, an opportunity to experience beyond their own preconceived ideas or assumptions. Bond reinforces this, concurring that what is said in a context such as this is not as important as *how* it is said: the words become a communal experience of repetition, a tool for creating a sense of community (Bond 2008 p34).

Concurrently, those who bring an affirmative spiritual position to the play may find themselves in disagreement with the text's positioning. This places the writer in a no-win situation, unable to create a work that offers a single interpretive or evaluative position for the audience. This I find has been liberating.

The intent of *I Want To Be Slim* is to offer a personal interpretation of the value, concerns, joy, dangers and, importantly, the complexity of the church experience. This will likely not satisfy a listener who is hoping that the work will reinforce his or her own position.

This interpretive position of an audience has comparisons with the interpretive position of a congregation. Each projects into the space, onto



the preacher, actor, text and sermon his or her own political, social, cultural, psychological wants from a creative work about church or from church itself. The question arises as to what sorts of meanings are produced in these exchanges. Evangelist performances appear to rely on the impossibility of an absolute and literal transmission of rational meanings. Rather, what is communicated is something beyond words: a sense of emotion, a communication that is not confined to a rational understanding (Bond 2008 p26).

A successful preacher, like a successful creative text, can bring the disparate needs or interpretations of all individuals present, into a focused central one, if only temporarily or for fleeting moments.

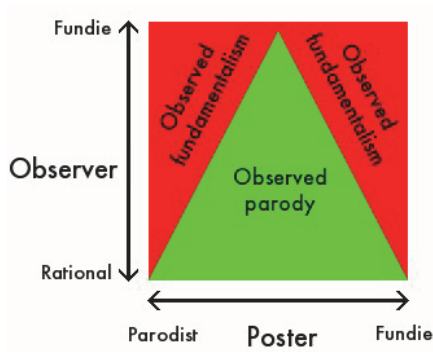
One aspect of the performance in *I Want To Be Slim* is the loss of the so-called 'fourth wall'. Slim interacts directly with the audience. MacDonald's work suggests that a church minister is not there only to be watched as in theatre but to facilitate all other participants to take part in the evangelical rituals of the service (Macdonald 2008 p149). As in an authentic evangelical service, I was looking for a level of participation from the theatrical audience. My script therefore needed to establish a performance space that would allow anyone to engage (Macdonald 2008 p149). No prior training or familiarity was possible for the audience who may be attending a performance of *I Want to Be Slim* for the first time.

Therefore performative actions were scripted to establish for the audience the participation rituals of the faux service. These include that the characters dialogue, interact and even directly touch the audience, along with the collective singing, standing, clapping, recitation and interaction with fellow audience members. As the congregation, the audience becomes a (collective) character in the show, with each performance unfolding differently depending on this character's personality. Permission is given to respond and feel. There is no passive viewer.

In contrast, in church there is no such suspension of disbelief: there is no disbelief at all, at least as is recognised within the service. The truth of the Word is not under question, and its truth is ongoing. The Word is not more or less true in the context of the service, but is fundamentally and eternally true in all conceivable circumstances (Bond 2008 p7).

The script was not a reproduction of a church service but a creative imagining with a narrative arc that encompassed the elements of the research. I needed to decide on a style of writing for the work to guide the development of the script. In the next section I discuss why I chose the comedic device of satire.

### *I Want to Be Slim* and its relation to theories and studies of satire



**Figure 6.3: Poe's Law meme 2014**

(Source: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/poes-law>)

Poe's Law states:

Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humour, it is impossible to create a parody of Fundamentalism that SOMEONE won't mistake for the real thing. (Aikin 2009)

Poe's Law is an axiom, originating on the internet, which states that it is difficult to distinguish extremism from a satire of extremism in online discussions unless the author clearly indicates his/her intent. The Law suggests that ambiguity is most frequently observed with discussion of highly divisive topics like religious fundamentalism and bipartisan politics. Poe's Law came into being during a discussion on a Christian Forum in 2005 when Nathan Poe, an atheist, made a comment about creationism. He himself decreed his comment a law. The thread gathered

numerous replies and views over the coming years and entered the lexicon of information sites such as Rationalwiki, Conservapedia, and Wikipedia. Poe's Law further points out that it is hard to tell parodies of fundamentalism from the real thing since they both seem equally insane (Poe's Law meme 2013). Conversely, *real* fundamentalism can easily be mistaken for a *parody* of fundamentalism (Aikin 2009; Rationalwiki 2013).

### **Satire**

Poe's law gained momentum because it's a pithy and insightful comment. Its premise of fundamentalism, absurdity and authenticity provides an entry point into the discussion of message building in *I Want to Be Slim*.

Traditional research into rhetorical persuasion has focused on serious texts yet humour is a fertile persuasive space. Hobert et al. (2013) focus on political satire as persuasion and its influence, intent and message strength. Nabi et al. (2007) discuss the potential persuasive effects of socially conscious humour. Baggini (2006) has highlighted the interplay between satire, religion and philosophy in the TV show *The Simpsons*, concluding that the show had the power to reveal truths about human nature. In her commentary on satire and dissent, Day (2011) discusses at length ironic authenticity, 'truthiness' and consequences in parodic news, and how satiric documentarians spearhead debate.

The use of humour, especially satire and irony, is purported by Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) to be a dominant rhetorical strategy. However, writing satirically poses distinctive challenges for an author (Gring-Pemble & Watson 2003 p136). While satire and irony can be powerful ways of writing, to produce impact these humorous devices need to connect with the audience's social, political and material reality.

Satire is defined as using humour as a means to expose and criticise people's stupidity or vices or hold shortcomings up to ridicule. As a creative form it works to reveal the machinations and inner workings of its target. It blends 'ironic humour and wit with criticism for the purpose of ridiculing folly, vice, stupidity—the whole range of human foibles and frailties' (Morner & Rausch 1991 p194).

However, satire has been described as having altruistic elements. Its greater purpose is often viewed as constructive social criticism—using wit as a weapon and as a tool to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society (Elliott 2004), or as Morner and Rausch put it, 'Satire seeks to correct, improve, or reform through ridicule' (Morner & Rausch 1991 p194). As a literary form it has been described as able to, 'produce maximum consciousness,' enabling people to transcend their individual weaknesses and foibles by noticing their problems and errors in a 'charitable manner' (Burke cited Gring-Pemble & Watson 2003 p136).

Cuddon describes a satirist as a, 'self-appointed guardian of standards, ideals and truth; of moral as well as of aesthetic values' (Cuddon & Preston 1998 p780).

Two of the main types of satire are Juvenalian and Horatian. While both share the objective of exposing human folly, their message types are different. Sander points out that if we look at the traditional dichotomy of tragedy versus comedy, Juvenalian satire would be best classified as tragedy and Horatian as comedy (Holbert et al. 2011 p191; Sander 1971). Both forms of satire contain 'humorous material that can make an audience member laugh, and both forms of satire also retain an inescapable aggressivity' (Bogel 2001 p50). However these two forms of satire differ in how they try to persuade (Holbert et al. 2011 p 191).

Juvenalian satire has been described as humour that retains a tone that is 'bitter and harsh, more acidic', (Holbert et al. 2013 p172), 'savage and merciless' (Sander 1971 p254). It is a form that 'laughs with contempt at [humanity's] pretensions and incongruities and base hypocrisies' (Sander 1971 p235). Juvenalian laughter is meant not to heal but to wound (Holbert et al. 2011 p192). Examples include the Australian TV series *Angry Boys* and *Summer Heights High* by Chris Lilley (discussed below), and the British political satire *The Thick of It* (2005–12), the films *Network* (1976)

director Sidney Lumet (about the television industry) and *The Player* (1992) director Robert Altman (about the film industry).

Horatian satire is defined as lighter than Juvenalian satire, with its ultimate goal being 'the production of a wry smile in audience members' (Sander 1971). It is a form that seeks 'to please ... while at the same time pointing out human follies' (Holbert et al. 2011 p191), or 'to tell the truth with a smile, so that he will not repel audience members' (Highet cited Holbert et al. 2011 p191). Examples include *The Chaser* (an Australian topical political sketch show), *Frontline* (1994–97) (current affairs), *The Hollowmen* (2009) (about Australian government public relations) and *Utopia* (2014) (about government authority), *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* (US politics), and the US animated family sitcom *The Simpsons* (1989–current). Films include Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979) (about religion) and *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) (about US Society). Theatre examples include Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

I believe that *I Want to Be Slim* is primarily Horatian satire. The characterisations and script work to create a 'wry smile in audience members'. There are strong absurdist elements toward the end of Act 3, and the characters have clown-like qualities. The show has too many 'laugh out loud' moments to be Juvenalian satire, although the over-

arching themes are potent. A comparison can be made to Stanley Kubrick's movie *Dr Strangelove or How I learned to love the bomb* (1964). This satire of the Cold War and of the foolishness of the nuclear arms race was an interesting example of where Horatian techniques were put to a Juvenalian end.

From its Latin source *satura*, satire means a poetic medley (Elliott 2004), an amalgam of many different message elements. It is therefore difficult to situate within the context of persuasion (Holbert et al. 2013 p172). The difficulty is that satire—this 'poetic medley' or 'mixed dish' as Holbert describes it—reflects any number of different balances of rhetorical argumentation and narrative storytelling (Holbert et al. 2013 p172). Satire can take many different forms, as Holbert elaborates, making it difficult to isolate as a persuasive technique.

One potential problem with satire is the failure of some listeners to recognise when it is being used. George Test in *Satire: Spirit and Art* suggests that:

For satire there are immediate problems, namely the failure of some to understand or correctly interpret the work ... Satire in effect asks—demands—that its audience engage in a dialogue of a special kind. In addition to making associations, the audience is expected to assimilate the special mixture of aggression, play,



laughter and judgment that is set before it. Each of these alone can create difficulties. Aggression may cause resentment or other unfavourable reactions. Differences of opinion concerning the judgments are potential sources of contention. The playfulness of satire, especially when yoked to serious questions, may disconcert some ... satire usually causes trouble because it is an attack and a judgment, but also, at its most complex, demands its audience be sophisticated, sensitive, and sympathetic: sophisticated about the audience context in which the satire transpires, sensitive to the means at work, and sympathetic in sharing the aggression and judgment.

(Test 1991 p32)

Satiric humour requires the audience to interpret the discourse in terms of some external context—one's view of the external circumstances to which the satire refers is integral to how one understands the satire (Gring-Pemble & Watson 2003 p139). For the satirist to be effective a 'mutual understanding' must be formed between the satirist and the satiree. This is grounded in the understanding that the object being satirised is at least worthy of being satirised and that the satirical message is, 'justified by the values articulated or implied in satire' (Knight cited Holbert et al. 2011 p193).

Holbert stresses that the motivational and ability levels of the satiree are central to the discursive act:

In short, the onus of message deconstruction and reconstruction is left largely in the hands of the recipients ... Therefore if a potential recipient is not interested in politics [or religion or any object being satirised], then the likelihood of taking time to engage a political communication-based persuasive message, even and entertaining message, is substantially reduced.

(Holbert et al. 2011 p193)

The perception of persuasive intent is crucial in the processing of persuasive messages. When people know that a message is attempting to persuade, they may avoid the message, counter-argue the message or engage in biased processing to protect their pre-existing beliefs. When it comes to the study of message effects, persuasive intent is in the eye of the beholder. Audience interpretations of a satirist's underlying motivations are of primary importance, while formal authorial intent is secondary (Holbert et al. 2013 p173).

Furthermore, in terms of ability, if a satirist has limited or no background knowledge of the object of the satire, then their cognitive ability to read the layered message of the satire is diminished. While they may enjoy it on one level, they may have no access to a deeper satirical level. In his *Literature of Satire*, Knight argues that, 'The referential function of satire implies an audience sufficiently informed of the context for the message to be comprehended' (Knight 2004 p45). Holbert concurs:

The degree to which audience members have a basic level of understanding of the topic of the satirical message will influence the overall persuasiveness of the message.

(Holbert et al. 2011 p193)

Satire, despite its risk and complications, is an important tool to help reveal new understandings, create new insights and raise consciousness about the target of its attack. Many writers have used satire as a tool for 'bringing to light' evangelism as a performance with persuasive objectives. The perceived humour of my play, as discussed, will be in the eye of the beholder and will be dependent on their level of understanding of multiple messages. The targets of satire include religious themes (historical and contemporary), doctrinal (simple Sunday School style parables to complex analysis), denominational interpretations and rituals plus significant figures or players (both contemporary and historical).

How close to reality do you go before you 'become' what you are questioning? If you play a scene as if it were real, and if you give a performance that is not about humour but about representation, then there is a risk that the performance could be interpreted as 'real' or 'the truth'. This may make the audience vulnerable to 'giving over' and joining as they may believe they will get something out of doing that.

At which point in this style of performance would you reveal that it was all made up and fictional, thus isolating those who seriously believed? The middle ground I believe is satire where the performance is played as truth but in hyper-real way to draw attention to, or even to hold up a mirror up to reflect on, the 'truths' the character or organisation espouses. This style allows the audience to participate and to experience but protects them from the possibility of truly believing or being coerced, convinced, conned or converted.

**When satire crosses the line: case studies of risks**

As many satirical writers have discovered, not everyone will see the humour as tasteful or informative. Some may interpret it as mocking, judgmental or in bad taste.

Satire, as I have defined it above, seeks to make the internal machinations and workings transparent whilst the machine goes about its normal business. The Australian television series *Summer Heights High*, created and performed by Chris Lilley, is such an example. The representation of the high school, the teachers, the students and all their intentions are recognisable and gives us the space through laughter to ask questions and critique. Importantly, we may cringe or squirm at some of their actions of but we still see the characters as real.

For example, *Summer Heights High* had one story line about the arts teacher, Mr G, who wanted to create a musical about one of the school's students (Anna), who dies of an ecstasy overdose. Instead of upsetting him as the audience might expect, news of Anna's overdose excites Mr G. As an audience we can see and hear his mind mulling over the 'opportunity' as he sees it, while to his peers in the show he expresses compassion. However, just prior to the time of broadcast a real girl called Annabel died of an overdose of ecstasy. The family complained to the broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that *Summer Heights High* was in bad taste. However the producers indicated that the episodes had been written and filmed prior to the real Annabel dying. The family conceded that it was coincidence and the ABC acknowledged this by putting up a screen at the start of the episode stating that 'all characters and stories are fictitious' (Lawrence & Downie 2007). Paradoxically this reinforced the fact that the satire was about the real and the observations were sharp and astute. Through humour we (the audience) were in some way able to debrief the tragedy of the real.

Chris Lilley followed up *Summer Heights High* with the TV series *Angry Boys*, a study of masculinity. Response to this show was split, with ratings falling after the first episode (Quinn 2011). Feedback indicated that certain sections of the audience found the characters offensive, foul-

mouthed and not funny. Both professional commentators and amateur bloggers said the show's characters were too intense and black (emotionally dark) and that the series lacked laugh out loud moments, which were very present in *Summer Heights High*. As a counter, other commentators described it as a great program that pushed and challenged the characters, storylines and thus the audience. Was this too real a window into a world that part of the audience did not want to see or accept? Were the characterisations too realistic to be interpreted as representations of character types? The creator had chosen difficult unsympathetic characters and subject areas in order to provoke.

S. Mouse, a black (skin colour) US rapper, was the most heavily criticised of Lilley's characters. Commentary revealed that a high proportion of viewers saw his satirical observations as out of date and old news. Most criticism was aimed specifically at his representation of the rapper as black, for which Lilley (a white Australian) needed to use black make up. Commentators asked why Lilley had not chosen to portray a white-faced rapper with otherwise similar characteristics. Lilley's choice to do a 'blackface' drew discussion away from the subject and into race issues that many felt could easily have been avoided if he had 'stayed white'. As evidence of satire's ability to arouse contradictory responses, other commentators argue that S. Mouse was his most successful character (Shea

2011). Jeff Weiss—hip-hop journalist for *The Los Angeles Times*, sums up his position on Lilley's satire:

To Lilley's credit, he's not necessarily parodying the street rap guy; he's parodying the fake rap guy, which I think in his mind allows him a certain immunity. But at the same time, it just feels like he picked up his version of hip-hop at a point that was convenient to him, and didn't do any of the legwork. The best parodies are incisive, and they're researched, and they're sharp ... Lilley's stuff is just a really flaccid and flabby attempt at satire—it's just toothless: what are you parodying? (Weiss cited Shea 2011)

Another example where satire seemed to go too far for some is *The Chaser's War on Everything*, a satirical sketch show on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). In 2009 it screened an episode that included a skit about the Make-A-Wish program where people donate so that terminally ill children can have a 'last wish' fulfilled. The Chaser's satirical skit was called 'Make a Realistic Wish Foundation' and asked the children for their dying wish, their aim being to help 'thousands of kids to lower their extravagance and selfishness in the face of death'. The implied commentary was that wishes were conventionally centred on consumable items or expensive overseas trips rather than more meaningful exchanges—a boy who asked to go to Disneyland and was given a pencil case (Cooper

2009). This sparked an outrage from the community, including the then Prime Minister who via the media called for the show to be axed (Devine 2009). An arbitrary line had been crossed. However, a rigorous debate defending and deriding *The Chaser* took place in the newspaper comment pages.



**Figure 6.4 A scene from the controversial segment on *The Chaser's War On Everything***

(Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/tv--radio/theyre-going-to-die-anyway-calls-for-chaser-to-be-axed-overcallous-skit/2009/06/04/1243708544308.html>)

In my creative work the Reverend Slim also targets the weak and the vulnerable as he goes to a terminally ill child in a hospital seeking his last wishes. There is a tip of the hat to *The Chaser* crisis when Slim asks terminally ill Luke in his hospital bed, 'If you could have one more Make-a Wish what would it be?' However, in this case the satire is firmly directed at those who take at advantage of the vulnerable by purporting to sell them something that will alleviate their 'ills'. In Slim's case this



reward is a whole theme park called Bibleland, or at least the promise of one.

Bibleland is itself a satire on real biblical theme parks with examples including ARK Encounter (Ark Encounter 2013), The Holy Land Experience in Florida USA, (Holy Land 2014) or the abandoned and derelict Holy Land USA (Abandoned Bible Theme Park 2013).

This raises the question of how far you can stray from that arbitrary satirical line and still have success. If you don't get close enough to it, the work will lack observation, courage, and rigor. Go too far and you will be accused of bad taste or incorrect politics and it can make it hard for the allies of satire to support you.

Writer-performer Sacha Baron Cohen pushed this boundary with his fictional character Borat (2006) from the documentary style movie of the same name. Cohen has been accused of exploiting his subjects who claim they were deceived about his intentions and about the fact that it was a performance. In other words, they claim Cohen misrepresented himself to get a response. The government and people of Kazakhstan (Borat's country of origin) state they were denigrated and stereotyped. People in the US where Borat visited felt duped and set up because in their

interactions with Borat they were trying to genuinely assist and accept him. Commentator Miranda Devine states:

But the Borat-style prank humour—ridiculing trusting, ordinary people for being trusting and ordinary—is ultimately soul-destroying, for its makers and its viewers ... Americans are easy targets, not because they are stupid or gullible, but because they are polite and tolerant of eccentricity. Living in a large melting pot, they are used to encountering people with habits, behaviours and values different from their own, so are more accepting of bizarre antics that would raise the ire of a less diverse culture. This is one of America's greatest qualities, and those who sneer at it are exposing their own lack of sophistication. (Devine 2009)

A satire must at some point reveal itself to be satire. However, a question must be asked as to how much can be revealed before the audience or the subjects disengage.

*Summer Heights High* was scripted and cast in a professional television studio, creating a closed and controlled universe. By contrast, Borat takes his universe into the real world and the satirical humour comes from his interactions in that 'real world'. A third example would be where the audience knowingly gives over to the performer, i.e. they enter the space aware that this is a performance and they give over to the character

and the universe created. In its live performance elements *I Want To Be Slim* firmly in this camp. In its scripted television elements it is like *Summer Heights High*.

Performative comparisons can be made between the Reverend Slim Limits and the Reverend Billy, the pseudonym of performance artist Bill Talen who created the character and his Church of Stop Shopping in 1997. Lane describes Talen's character as 'offering a send-up of the abominating fundamentalist rhetoric that characterises the rise of the religious right in the US' (Lane 2002 p78). As photos 3 and 4 below show, both the Reverend Slim and the Reverend Bill Talen's Billy are middle-aged white men. Both dress in similar white suits, have wild hair, and use liturgy and evangelical performance platforms for political commentary. Billy is a Catholic evangelical while Slim is a Protestant evangelical.



**Figure 6.5 The Reverend Billy with the Stop Shopping Choir**  
(Source:www.revbilly.com)



**Figure 6.6 The Reverend Slim Limits**

Talen uses performance as a site of ongoing performative self-fashioning that relies on irony. This ironic self-fashioning is most apparent in his comic theatrical (church) service. These performances are structured as church services, complete with readings from the saints (or the devils), public confessions, collective exorcisms, the honouring of new saints, donations to the cause, a lively choir and a rousing sermon (Lane 2002). I observed aspects of this religious ritual at a protest concert against Coal Seam Gas exploration in New York City (pers. com Catsi 2012). Based in New York City, Reverend Billy rails against consumerism, the loss of public space to private interests and the corporatisation of the urban landscape with the proliferation of companies of the like of Disney and Starbuck's.

Lane quotes Talen who says he originally devised the Reverend persona out of a desire to 'create a comic spiritual strategy for urban

people who normally approach experience through habitual irony' (Lane 2002 p63).

Reverend Billy has the ability to 'walk on both sides of the street' — in the roles of a left-wing protestor and as a Catholic priest who has access to off limits areas. Lane states it, 'offers a theatrical and political equivalent to negative dialectics in practice' (Lane 2002 p79). While Reverend Billy preaches anti-consumerism sermons, Reverend Slim is somewhat a reverse negative: he is a right-wing preacher; he espouses the words of bigoted preachers; and he preaches pro-right wing sermons. By putting the actual words of real preachers into a theatrical context, my aim is to 'bring them into the light' and have them heard for what they are. As the creator of Reverend Slim, I share Bill Talen's political intention to expose contradictions: both characters inhabit a blurred space between real theatre and real church (Lane 2002 p80).

### **Farce and parody**

Representational comedy, which often can be confused with satire, would be *farce* where the character and situation is knowingly absurd, with cartoon-like representation and absurdly unrealistic situations, e.g. the television show *Father Ted* gives insight into the Catholic Church in Ireland by drawing on observed elements but everything is heightened. *Parody*, however, can be difficult to distinguish from satire. It seeks to

comment on, trivialise or send-up an original work or genre, or to create through ironic imitation. All these definitions overlap to a certain degree and it could be argued by some that the Reverend Slim is a parody, at least in parts. The ways in which readers read, respond and react to satire, farce and parody show that the workings of these forms are, as Amber Day reminds us, integrally dependent on the particular social and historical circumstances of their deployment (Day 2011).

In my creative work I have endeavoured to question, subvert and at times invert Biblical interpretations and mix this up with liberal moral positions. For example, the Reverend Slim, while believing in his universe of God and himself as a figure striving for pseudo Christ-like perfection on earth, questions the virgin birth, not from a technical 'sexual conception' standpoint but from a moral perspective. Slim thus provides a dual commentary on, firstly, external critics such as atheists who use scientific reasoning to deconstruct literal interpretations of the Bible, and secondly, on internal Christian subtleties of biblical interpretation. Slim's position demonstrates that there are many ways of reading a biblical passage and that the message extract becomes the framework of your church's reasoning. Slim does not question the impregnation of Mary by God as a literal act, thus supporting biblical literalism or anti-scientific reasoning; he takes issue with the immoral behaviour of God in sleeping with a married

woman, thus subverting the biblical literalism and imposing a meta-biblical reasoning that would be unpalatable to current biblical thinkers. Slim's literal interpretation is that God was an adulterer. The play thus satirises the ambiguities of atheistic and fundamentalist viewpoints. It is an attempt to subvert literal reasoning by countering with literal reasoning of a scientifically impossible act.

Using Amber Day's description of satire and dissent, we could say that *I Want to be Slim* aims 'to be a particularly performative form of satire that injects the satirist's body into the traditional political world and as he or she physically engages, interrogates and interacts with the real' (Day 2011). There are however challenges.

### **Challenges of representation when presenting religious theatre**

#### **Case Study: Hell Houses**

Creating theatre within an evangelical context presents a unique set of challenges of representation and of interpretation by either a liberal or a religious audience. *Hell Houses*—a morality play that has been steadily growing in popularity in the US—provides a comparative case study. Churches can buy 'Hell House Outreach Kits' for US\$299 from Pastor Keenan's New Destiny Church. The kits include music, scripts (that churches can adapt) and a 'how to' guide to staging that includes

instructions on how to make fake blood and how to respond to media questions (New Destiny Christian Center 2014).

In August 2012 Back-to-Back Theatre (Geelong, Australia) staged a production of *Hell House: Provocation, Belief and Morality* in Melbourne, which I attended. It was an authentic mounting of a Keenan script and staging guidelines, for the purpose of Back To Back Theatre observing the work as an artefact. The program stated, 'as a museum would exhibit a cultural or religious artefact this event is a presentation of a recruitment drive for evangelical belief. It is also a public discussion about matters important to us all' (Hell House program 2012).

Hell Houses are designed to scare you towards Jesus. Staged tableaux depict moral sins and their consequences. These are played out to a targeted teenage audience. Instead of vampires and werewolves, guests are treated to scenes such as a young girl having an abortion, a gay man suffering from AIDS, a teenager dying in an auto accident for not obeying his parents, date rapes and drug-induced suicides and more. In each scenario, these presumed sinners are tormented by actors dressed as demons. The purpose is to give a prospective Christian audience an evangelical perspective on the characters' actions, portraying them as evil, and salvation as the only safety. Keenan has stated that he prioritises the



two topics of abortion and homosexuality in each performance 'until God gives him a sign otherwise' (Pellegrini 2008 p352).

The implication, none too subtle, is that each sinful character deserves to suffer and merits a one-way ticket to damnation for not having chosen Jesus Christ and continuing to follow his teachings. The gay man, who may have been molested by his uncle as a child, *chose* to have sex as an adult and contract HIV. The teenage girl *chose* to get drugged at a rave, leaving her vulnerable to rape and the consequent pregnancy. The boy in the car wreck *chose* hell because he refused to listen to his parents' religious teachings.

The message of these Hell Houses is that the same fate awaits us all—but there is hope. These terrifying shows always conclude with first a glimpse of hell as a place of fire and damnation complete with a lascivious Devil and his cohorts. This is followed by a glimpse of the peace and serenity of heaven and the opportunity to give one's life to Jesus.

In their Melbourne production, Back-to-Back staged this redemptive scene in a pure white room, featuring angels and a serene Jesus figure to provide a calming force after the traumatic tableaux. Back-to-Back created a final room that mimics a church hall. Here, cordial and biscuits are

served while music plays and church members mingle with the audience to talk, debrief and invite them to accept Jesus and come to church.

However, the Hell House approach is not universally supported as a Christian way to impart the teachings. Reverend Brian Kirk, a pastor from Missouri, states:

all these hell houses, supposedly aimed at pointing teens toward wholesome lifestyles, reek of irony. In their efforts to offer a Christian alternative to supposed pagan elements of Halloween, they end up using the worst cultural elements to attract teens: violence, sex, blood, and carnage. (Kirk 2011)

An important staging note reveals Keenan's concerns about the persuasive elements of performance and theatre. He specifies that in the gay marriage scene that leads to death from AIDS, the roles are played by a man and a woman dressed as a man. Here, Keenan attempts to minimise the risk to both audience and actors of actually believing and consequently enjoying a male with male experience.

Pellegrini explores the risk of porousness that the Hell House tries to control. She argues that the audience bring their own set of expectations and vulnerabilities and that the emotional reach of theatre and performance cannot so easily be micro-managed. Where one audience member sees a woman dressed as man, another sees two men. Herein lie

the promise and the power of theatre to transform, but as Pellegrini points out, the way an audience interprets is still beyond the reach of the theatre maker (Pellegrini 2008 p351).

Hell House embodies all that a theatre maker strives for: a captive engaged audience, a strong political statement or script with meaning, grounded in research, and an ability to emotionally move an individual or a group to shift positions by illuminating a perception or belief. In Hell House's case the meta-objective is for the audience to accept Jesus and join the church:

More than theatre, more than religion: Hell House defies neat boundaries between audience and performer, secular culture and religious event. (Pellegrini 2008 p351)

The theatre of Hell House is overtly political, a call to join a group with a defined ideology. I see this as no different in intent from theatrical stagings by the political left, for example stagings by the Melbourne Workers' Theatre or anti-war or feminist groups. Hell House reclaims the notion of political theatre as not exclusively the realm of left-wing ideology. Pastor Keenan's web site says, 'Hell House is a live theatrical outreach event structured in a tour production format that takes its visitors on a seven-scene journey portraying the consequences of sinful choices' (New Destiny Christian Center 2014). Take away the word sinful

and it reads like many a theatrical media release. Emotionally manipulative story telling is great, as long as we agree with the message (New Destiny Christian Center 2014).

By embracing theatre as the tool by which fundamentalist religion can save the eternal lives of its youth, the fundamentalists by default endorse theatre's persuasive influence. Theatre, to Keenan and his Hell House, is transformative and a powerful weapon of choice for his proselytising. Just as the fundamentalists make masterful use of cross-media digital communication tools while at the same time condemning their secular content, Hell House embraces the tool of theatre while condemning and rejecting theatre's secular content. Secular culture's flirtation with the devil is an evil to be destroyed.

Pastor Keenan claims of Hell House that 'it's not just a play, it's not just a theatre thing. It is something that has tremendous spiritual significance for people's lives' (Pellegrini 2008 p353). Keenan is alluding to the religious devotion a Christian feels when doing service in Christ's name. This sense of devotion is what a non-Christian group that tries to replicate Hell House or the elements at play cannot duplicate or capture, no matter what their commitment is (Pellegrini 2008 p353).

Back-to-Back's production, while authentic in script and staging, seemed to me to lack one crucial element: belief. The performers and presenters did not seem to believe in Jesus, nor did they believe that the staging that could save teenagers' lives by bringing them to Christ. By staging *Hell House* as a museum piece, Back-to-Back ran the risk of emotional disengagement from the subject matter of the play, and a devaluing of urgency for which good acting could never compensate. This would have been relevant had I decided to perform a sermon directly as written by Pastor Danny Nalliah of Catch the Fire Ministries.

These risks are relevant to *I Want to Be Slim* — sailing too close to reality with no humour or sense in the audience of the parody. An audience attending a non-Christian theatrical production on the theme of religion is likely to enter the theatrical space, bringing their liberal and cynical points of view and interpretive orientations. That is, they may project their liberalness onto the performance. Presenting a satirical evangelistic production to a secular audience therefore poses challenges to a director's goal to realise an authentic experience. In essence, the impact on me of Back-to-Back's production was counter to its intent. Rather than drawing me towards Christianity, it demonstrated to me the potentially destructive effect of the fundamentalists' urgency to influence teenagers,

young people who may have self-doubt around gender, sexuality or even fleeting feelings of rebellion.

The risk of presenting a work that directly foregrounds religion was evident in the show's reviews. Cameron Woodhead was scathing in his review giving, the production one star (out of five):

Pastor Roberts' *Hell House* promotes intolerance and a lack of empathy ... yet, by ripping the work from the religious communities that created it, and placing it before an audience hostile to the beliefs portrayed, this production is just as guilty. (Woodhead 2012)

The notion that the work was an anthropological study was always going to be problematic. Woodhead felt the production failed to embrace the ethics of anthropology, invoking the code of conduct of the Australian Anthropological Society. This code demands that its practitioners 'be candid about their qualifications and political or philosophical biases', and requires that the information they acquire from the groups they study not be used 'against their legitimate interests by hostile third parties'.

With these thoughts in mind it was not surprising that some members of the audience revelled in the show as a lampooning of evangelical Christianity. In defence of right-wing Christians, however, Woodhead described the staging of *Hell House* as a vehicle for educated

left-wing liberals to mock extreme religious conservatives, rather than to try to understand them (Woodhead 2012).

### **Creative reflection on *I Want to Be Slim***

#### **Draft stages: roadblocks, diversions and decisions**

A central challenge in the theatrical scripting of *I Want to Be Slim* was to achieve authenticity in the representations of evangelical persuasive techniques, whilst being comedic.

Every preacher and religion seeks to grow its audience by attracting converts, particularly from other religions. Churches struggle with competition for subscriber numbers, like any sporting group, corporation or community group. As their core product is marketed as the 'truth', truth itself becomes, I suggest, flexible in interpretation. Proselytisers seek a new angle on 'truth' to differentiate themselves in a crowded market. To an outside observer these new angles can seem extreme, exaggerated and at times asinine or absurd. This becomes problematic for a writer who is exploring events, people or situations that are strongly deviant from the norm. The question arises: Is it too absurd to be true? Comments like 'you couldn't imagine it' and 'truth is stranger than fiction' capture the dilemma of writing it as it actually is without the work being deemed a work of the imagination.

For example, I interviewed a man named John who had visited a healing service run by a Pentecostal Bible-based fellowship in a country town of Australia. John recounted how, during the healing service, the evangelist called out for people with ailments. John raised his hand as he had a rash on his face at that time. The evangelist said that it was not a well-known fact but a rash on the face can be caused because one leg is shorter than the other. He then sat John down on a chair in front of the congregation and held his legs out to measure them. He demonstrated that one indeed was slightly shorter than the other (John disclosed that the evangelist did pull one leg slightly harder than the other). The evangelist then called out to the congregation, 'There it is, brothers and sisters, proof.' The preacher asked the congregation to pray, which they did individually out loud, some talking in tongues, while he prayed over John. Finishing with a loud crescendo of prayer, the evangelist then rechecked the length of John's legs. Getting another member of the congregation to confirm, the evangelist declared they were now equal. John describes how in a squeal of joy, to which the congregation responded, he called out, 'Your rash is now healed and will vanish over the course of days' (Catsi 2011).

This raw material was included in the earliest *Gods Cowboys* script as part of its representations of healing. It worked well when parodic comedy was the aim. No-one ever believed it to be true. Audiences saw it



as absurd, even though it was in fact true. However, when I moved to make the script more satirical this scene diminished in power and I chose to remove it.

The evolution of the show can best be traced through the central directorial challenge: the layering of the comedy. As a writer of comedy, I found that it became absurd to be trying to write comedy that wasn't overtly funny. The humour needed to be created in ways that it didn't overshadow or distract from the more complex analysis of the subject matter. That is, I needed to make the script not so funny as to render the character a caricature and the satire impotent.

I presented initial drafts of the performance and visual references in shows at the Adelaide Fringe (2009), Vanguard (2009) and the Adelaide Fringe (2010). The final script revealed a progression of this satirical realignment. My supervisor Gillian Leahy and other key creative supporters commented on the earlier attempts at satire, saying 'It's too funny' or 'It's too knowing here and here'. I countered this by pulling in the opposite direction, supported by other followers who enjoyed the straight-up comedy. A key factor that led me eventually to pull the show towards the satirical was my instinctive belief that satire offered the best vehicle for integrating the academic research and the creative work, and provided a platform for a more engaging discussion and analysis. Each

reader or observer of the work will evaluate the success of this differently, depending on his or her own position with respect to both religion and comedy. However, my goal was to attempt to shift, even momentarily, the audience's preconceived ideas and expectations—to draw them into the work by convincing them of the work's creative merit by using the same tools and techniques as the evangelist.

I began to look at my own experiences and draw on them for emotional and narrative inspiration. This gave the material a depth and resonance that was based on genuine understanding and experience and that helped shift it towards the satirical.

The challenge I set myself was to present a more revealing psychological exploration of character that exposed the machinations of both Slim's internal world and his external world, that is both how Slim thought and how he ran his church. Around this I wanted to weave the external manifestations and the internal justifications of his persuasive tools and techniques. Instinctively, or perhaps stubbornly, I was hanging on to the device of having the character interact directly with the audience; I wanted no fourth wall for all, or at least, part of the show. The aim was to produce a compelling theatrical experience that was thrilling, uncomfortable and seductive.

## Key Creative Input

### Feedback from Chris Mead

Chris Mead, the then Artistic Director of Playwriting Australia, gave feedback on the draft script (Mead 2011). On discussing scripting the work in *real time* and using *back-stories*, Mead stated that these were only useful if they were going to contribute to ongoing action. The backstory, Slim's personal story of Blaspheme, his best friend cow, is an important psychological indicator of Slim's emotional compass. I rolled this into the religious device of sharing one's personal experiences to draw an audience inwards. Structurally this has two functions: to build real-time empathy between preacher and congregation; and use character backstory to explain and advance the narrative. Interpreted through attribution theories, we can say that Slim enhances his authority (ethos) by having the audience attribute real suffering to him. Billy's talk about Malagash Bible camp, which is derived from the actor John Knowles's personal experience, also helped reveal naivety of character while hinting at some sort of childhood abuse.

Mead identified the need for an inciting incident. This became my focus in redrafting the script. I chose to establish the premise that Slim is growing the business, and that after this service he would fly out into the world to build another church as part of his global expansion. Billy would

stay behind to run the church and this service would be his training session. This construct allowed the characters to discuss why certain actions are taken and provided a forum to reveal satirically the workings of their enterprise.

The device of 'teaching the business' drew on my research into the tools and techniques of persuasion, allowing me to communicate through the characters how the internal workings of evangelism might go about attempting to convince, convert and keep followers. This artifice was not unrealistic, as an employer in a mainstream business would publicly talk through such steps with a new employee, often with customers present. This device needed to be stylised as a private moment during a public display (discussed later in this chapter as private versus public). Over time this became the device for unravelling Slim. In any business training, there is what is said in the training room, and there is what is said to the customer. The training room may be the place where sales techniques are discussed and this would not be for the customer's ears. Concurrently, a trainer may offer personal opinions about the customers, which may not be favourable. This would also never be for public consumption. Billy, in his naivety and enthusiasm, shares with the congregation training room information they were never intended to hear. This reveals the true nature of Slim behind his facade.

***Preconceived notions that audience brings***

An audience may be cynical and may approach the show with the preconceived idea that evangelists are frauds. This is a difficult dramatic context, because if you assume Slim is a fraud then this show becomes a show about how Slim gets money out of us.

It is my intent to portray Slim not as a deliberate fraud but to suggest that in his universe he does have a direct line to God. He truly believes. This is in contrast to a character like Big Dan Teague, played by John Goodman, in the Coen Brothers movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). Big Dan is a travelling Bible salesman who is corrupt and exploits the vulnerabilities of his customers. He has no belief in God.

I believe a character is only as interesting as the forces of antagonism against them. I was inspired by a 2011 production I saw of *Diary of a Madman* by Nikolai Gogol, starring Geoffrey Rush (Belvoir Theatre stage production Jan 2011). It was an example of a slide, a slow descent into the inner psychology of the character and a revelation of his 'madness', psychosis and neurosis.

Approaching my work from this angle, I decided on two key drivers to motivate Slim's actions, based on merging groups and individuals I had researched. First, the case studies (discussed in chapter five) provided a model for Slim's internal psychology, which shows that

he is at times deluded and disturbed. I determined that this would be what unravels him. Any external pressure on his internal world would eventually reveal cracks along these fault lines. Secondly, evangelical organisations and their pursuit of growth are the external drivers on Slim: his need to expand his church into a global organisation with extensive media reach, along the models of Hillsong, the Swaggart family Empire and Pastor Danny Nailliah and his political aspirations.

***Public versus private staging: structural challenges***

In a **private** performance structure, the fourth wall is up and anything on stage is constructed as contained within the universe of the performance. The audience are passive observers of the theatre and the characters do not interact with them.

In a **public** performance structure there is no fourth wall between the performance and the audience. Anything Slim and other characters say or do on stage is deemed public in that they are directly communicating. In the public performance mode, the audience of *I Want to Be Slim* become active participants in the universe that the characters allocate to them, i.e. as a congregation.

Thus, to choose a public performance structure would seemingly mean I'd work to remove nearly all private encounters and instances that would normally be private moments. However, in discussion, Mead

offered a personal perspective on the difficulties of achieving this public/private balance. In the 1980s, playwright Nick Enright workshopped a play (Mead would not reveal the name) set in mid-west America with Tammy and Jimmy Bakker-type characters exploring the disintegration of their church. Mead was dramaturge. Mead stated that the project did not go into production because of the difficulty inherent in expressing this private/public duality. Mead stressed that the nature of the subject lends itself to interacting with an audience (Mead 2011 pers comm.) As will be discussed, I opted to try and circumvent this problem by pursuing the script fully played to the public.

### ***The comedy***

There are gags where you as the writer are laughing at the characters and making the audience do the same. To laugh at Slim, Mead and I felt, would diminish what is at stake and make the play's outcome more parodic. Parody was creatively easier but was, I felt, too knowing, leaving the scriptwriter's hand evident all over the work. Humour needs to reveal aspects of Slim's personality that become critical to the narrative drive. For example, the audience needs to see him exercising his authority through reprimand and put down, as when Slim calls the chair a dog. This absurd action is reinforced by the fact Billy that accedes to this absurdity.

### ***Tone***

The tone of the dialogue between Slim and Billy defines their relationship and reveals the shifts, if any, in the characters. Slim's crafted public persona, which he relentlessly presents and maintains, allows few opportunities for this internal world to emerge. The pressures on Slim through internal rather than external forces can be expressed through the Billy – Slim relationship. In fact, this is almost the only opportunity to find and exploit cracks. In this context, tonal shifts in how the two relate expose the unstable machinations at play. With the whole project played out in the public domain, the tone of dialogue with Billy is very controlled and measured, with subtle shifts when retribution is intended. This is to ensure that Slim does not lose face in front of his congregation.

### **Feedback from Rick Miller**

Canadian Rick Miller was the performer and writer of the international stage production *Bigger than Jesus* (Wharf Theatre, Festival of Sydney Jan 18-25, 2011), which I saw on Jan 19<sup>th</sup> 2011.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>(Theatre notes) *Bigger Than Jesus* is a 'sinfully funny' and poignant multi-media 'mass' that questions the mysteries of life and historical and modern viewpoints on Christianity. Weaving together the Catholic liturgy, the gospels, and some good old-fashioned bible-thumpin' it is a truly unique theatrical experience. Director Daniel Brooks and performer Rick Miller carefully juggle reverence and irreverence ... although challenging traditional belief, it never seeks to trivialize it. Instead, what emerges is a 'celebration of human spirit' that transcends organised religion (Blake 2011).



Miller, whom I met, is a key creative collaborator with the internationally renowned theatre creator Robert Lepage. Miller encouraged me to keep him informed of script development.

In an earlier draft I had Slim and Billy die at the end of the show. Miller questioned why I killed them. The script had worked to build a construct whereby the audience (as congregation) were buoyed along by Slim. This artefact was destroyed when I killed Slim. Miller said this was inherently *theatrical*: 'The death makes the theatre apparent, in many ways it lets the audience off the hook, and they can reconcile that Slim was bad' (Miller pers comm. Catsi 2012). The congregation was allowed to become an audience again and, in doing so, could disconnect from the emotional narrative and their part in it. They were no longer asked to 'join him', and instead became observers rather than participants. This question of why I was killing Slim and Billy off was also raised by Gillian Leahy, who concurred with Miller's notion that it amounted to letting the audience off the hook.

In talking to Miller, I described how in my earlier manifestations of Slim, he would end the service on a high note, then music would swell, and he would ask the congregation to accept him into their lives and join him in spreading the word after the show. Against a background of joyous music, Slim and Billy would then move through the audience and shake

their hands as they left the theatre. Miller reinforced my initial instincts that this would be a more powerful way for the audience to leave the theatre. He described it as the final persuasive clinch in a hard sell (Miller had done extensive research for his theatre show *Hardsell*). It is difficult, he stated, to feel one can fully reject the character when he is at the door shaking your hand, while looking you directly in the eye, thanking you for coming and hoping to see you again. Slim and Billy physically engage with the audience one last time, thereby completing the seduction circle. By keeping Slim alive, Miller argued that I could ensure that the audience still needed to interact with and interpret him (Miller pers. comm. Catsi 2012).

### **Feedback from Roslyn Oades**

I approached Roslyn Oades, director, writer and theatre creator, for dramaturgical support for the script. In giving feedback she volunteered the information that her father had been a Presbyterian minister (Catsi 2012).

Ros's key suggestion that the audience's witnessing of the all-confident Slim unravel could be taken further and his emotional journey more deliberately shaped. Ros suggested I explore Slim's mounting self-delusion and insecurity. The point where Slim says 'Lock the doors!' and the audience's feeling of being 'locked in', raised the stakes. Up to this

point, the show appears to be a send-up of evangelical religious practice. But when the doors are locked it shifts to also becoming the siege of a demanding cult in which we are being forced to participate. That sense of us being Slim's prisoners creates a dramatic arc with thematic resonance. The question of 'Who will be our saviour?' suddenly becomes real as the world we find ourselves trapped in becomes increasingly surreal and extreme (Oades 2012).

What do I want people to leave with? As discussed earlier, I anticipated that the theatregoers would be liberal in their ideology and inherently sceptical about religion. I expected them to be already questioning the truth and people who claim to hold the truth. The overall aim was therefore to have them experience some of the seductive techniques that lead to the conversion experience. Through their own experience, audience members might register some empathy towards those drawn to religion. This might lead them to question their own seeds of *disbelief*. Slim may say outrageous things, yet the audience still finds him likeable. This may be the jumping off point to a broader comparison the audience may make: that of the seductive tools used by charismatic leaders outside of religion.

Oades suggested that, externally, Slim is like a celebrity who needs other people around to validate him/herself. They ground him, give him

purpose and cover up his self-hate. Internally, he is covering the pain of rejection and loss (Oades 2012).

As the show uses direct address, Oades suggested I create more moments of active interaction with the audience. For example, rather than talking about a petition in the foyer we can sign, hand one around (as occurs in the final draft). Oades suggested I always try and keep the action as present as possible so that things like ‘locking the audience in’ could have more weight (Oades 2013). Oades suggested that direct address enables the religious performativity to be activated, though repetitive incantations, singing, call and response.

I therefore changed the ending and left the two characters very much alive. Slim and Billy emerge from the healing with Slim declaring it a true miracle—he has actually been born again. Slim is now more determined to convert the hordes and get his quota up. I aimed to leave the audience wondering over a residual ambiguity: did Slim really unravel on stage, go through the torturous self-loathing, confess, re-gather through the healing and emerge triumphant, a changed man now cleansed of his sin? Or was it all part of the persuasive play on the congregation? Was it all in fact a show within a show, doing whatever it took to convince the audience to convert? Was Billy complicit in this? Slim and Billy shake

hands with the congregation as they leave, and audience members have to look Slim in the eye.

The emotional device of having Slim seek 'perfection' gave a vehicle for the psychological concerns. Perfection was something unattainable that would always cause him to flounder. I linked this to the backstory of his father and mother, and to his idolising Billy Graham and his drive for acceptance from this paternal substitute. It allowed a mirroring with Billy, who in many ways was perfect in his honesty and in his open, unconditional love.

I named the three acts of the play 'To Convince', 'To Convert' and 'To Keep', reflecting the research that lay behind script. For my own guidance I thought of them as light, grey and dark, reflecting where Slim's emotional and psychological compass needed to be. This three-act structure was incredibly liberating and became the key narrative driver. Gillian Leahy provided valuable insight on shaping the emotional and narrative arc of the acts. The key decision to close Act 1 with the doors locking became pivotal in the audience's journey through the narrative.

I decided to raise the stakes for the audience as Slim emotionally destabilised. The congregation in this public interactive space had to *feel* his degeneration and possibly *fear* it. One device to achieve this was

having the doors locked (metaphorically) to protect the audience from outsiders trying to destroy Slim's sanctuary. At this point Slim starts to use the word 'compound' in place of church. Slim also spends more time directly confronting the audience, especially in Act 3: he expresses his disdain for their lifestyle; he passes around an actual petition for people to sign requesting Green renewable energy be used for electric chair executions; and two audience members are singled out as attempting to leave and are then isolated physically from the group. The audience is left to think, if it could happen to those two, then what might Slim do next that may include me?

Finally, Slim asks the congregation to reach out and touch each other in the 'Howdy Partner I love you' part of the service, and in the healing. This plays with people's natural barriers and inhibitions. Strangers would touch each other and in doing so connect as a group but are likely to feel unsettled as individuals. This was a concerted effort to fragment individuality. One audience member said to me, 'Why did you make us touch each other? I found it very uncomfortable especially as you didn't say stop touching and someone kept their hand on me for longer than I wanted' (Stephens pers comm. Catsi 2013).

The final script aimed to enhance the verisimilitude of the creative work by making the time the audience is watching the performance

coincide with the time in which the entire action takes place, and by placing the action in a single location. The singular location locks the audience in to the action. They have the course of the church service to decide if they will accept Slim into their lives and join the church.

To create this verisimilitude, the work needed to include enough credible dimensions to convince and possibly unsettle an audience. A question that I asked myself throughout the creative process was: Would the audience have a seed of doubt that the character and context is close enough to the real? Making the script as real as possible gave it gravitas, I felt. I brought authenticity based on my research into the real lives of real pastors and converts. While the play is my version of selected lines and events, it strives to create a recognisable evangelical figure.

### **Performance parallels between theatre and church**

From a performance perspective, I suggest there are many parallels between a theatrical performance and an evangelical church service. For example, there are parallels in how performers convey their characters to audiences, how writers relate to the characters they create and how evangelists relate to their congregations. The preacher sells a message while the performer and writer 'sell' a character or an imagined world. The audience, like the congregation, are present because they want to believe

in something. They want to believe that the message is relevant to them or that the show is what it is imagined to be. There is, then, a similarity between preacher and performer. Both strive to communicate and connect (with their congregation/audience), convey an idea, convince people of its truth (or the truth of the created universe), convert the listener to the validity of the idea and finally keep their converts (followers or audiences who join or subscribe).

One measure of success for an evangelist is their conversion rate. Theatrically, this may manifest as an audience member recommending the show to others or becoming a follower of a certain performer, writer, director or even theatre company. The aims of both the church and the theatre are comparable: to get people to fill the seats, to keep coming back, to tell their friends and contribute financially along the way. The term 'fanatic' could be used here in a positive way to describe both a religious and an artistic follower. In *I Want to Be Slim* I play on these parallels by trying to persuade the theatrical audience to become a believing congregation.

In summary, *I Want to Be Slim* works to navigate the complex world of evangelism and infuse it with the technical aspects of persuasion, while constituting an enthralling and entertaining theatrical work.



This chapter has reflected on how I drew on my research into persuasive tools and techniques to write the creative work, and how effective the play is in replicating persuasive techniques in the theatrical setting. I have discussed theoretical, theatrical and performance aspects of my research into evangelism and the creative choices and challenges I encountered writing the script. The discussion comparing church and theatre revealed strong parallels around liturgical repetition, proximity, directness and intent.

My discussion of theories and styles of satire and their application in *I Want To Be Slim* revealed the complexity of satire. I explored the pre-conditions of knowledge of the satiree and perceived worth of subject to be satirised and how the satirist and satire need a shared understanding for the humour to be effective. I reviewed Holbert's key claims that message deconstruction and reconstruction is largely left in the hands of the recipient, and that the recipient's interest in the subject affects the likelihood of engagement with a persuasive message.

In this chapter I have described how this interplay of persuasive messages in a satirical context challenged me to anchor the script with authentic examples in the Reverend Slim Limits' speech. I have also argued that research indicates that theatre and satire are legitimate forms for a discourse on the persuasive techniques of evangelism. ■

## Chapter 7

# Conclusion

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This thesis has been in two parts: the creative work, *I Want to Be Slim*, seeks to create a social/political debate about evangelism that will encompass believers and non-believers. To achieve this it ideally would be performed in a major theatre with art-direction, musical direction including live band and gospel choir plus audio-visual screenings. The exegesis worked to contextualise this creative work.

My research questions were: 1. What techniques do evangelists use to get a following? Relatedly and related to the creative work: 2. What means can I find, given my skills in comedy writing and performance, to raise political and social awareness about the techniques used, and dangers of, evangelism?

This exegesis has argued that there is a problem with evangelism and the medieval rise of fundamentalism around the world and how widespread evangelical beliefs are in the US. It has shown that evangelists have had significant influence on politics in recent times, compared to a previous period in the west in which churches were more at arm's length to secular governments. These recent political moves by evangelists present a threat to secular democracy.

Then the exegesis moves to the question of the attraction of evangelism. It is argued that the persuasive methods identified by psychologists and sociologists, are in fact used by evangelist preachers. And it has been shown that the predisposition to conversion may be in part determined by sociological factors. This exegesis has illuminated the ways in which evangelists use the tropes of persuasive performance to encourage and support people to bring their inherent search for identity and meaning to a structured conclusion. The exegesis has demonstrated that these techniques may lead to adverse outcomes when evangelical preachers behave in errant or extremist ways. I have cited research and examples showing that the same techniques that evangelical preachers use can be applied in other discursive contexts, such as politics.

The case studies in chapter five have demonstrated how, wittingly or unwittingly, evangelist preachers use the same persuasive techniques identified by psychologists that are also used in marketing and political campaigning, as well as more generally.

How can one have an effect on slowing the progress on evangelism? For me, as a writer and comic performer, this was a question relating to my creative work. The case studies and my own experiences provided me with much material for a satirical, comedic performance. The exegesis then examined theories of satire and comedy and I finally argued that Horatian satire was most able to entertain audience and critique evangelism.

**Why does it matter?**

The behaviour of certain Christian fundamentalist evangelicals has been provocative and divisive. As shown in chapters two and three, the use of modern communication strategies by evangelical groups to disseminate an absolutist point of view has allowed their message to reach beyond local borders. This parallels the growth of fundamentalist Islamic groups such as the *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*, who have used social media to attract foreign fighters to key battlegrounds (Melchior 2014; O'Callaghan et al. 2014).

Drawing on research and case studies, I have shown that dislocation, disenfranchisement, rapid globalisation and unemployment provide fertile contexts for the use of evangelical rhetoric. In their quest to influence and convert, contemporary evangelical groups can convey their messages through extensive and well-organised media, achieving significant power and influence. For example, the aspirational and affluent Hillsong Church here in Australia has developed into a global evangelising force. This suggests that dislocation and disenfranchisement may exist even in economically positive contexts. I have suggested that the appeal of such evangelical movements may increase when people feel disconcerted by their own affluence or aspiration, or where they may be seeking definitive meaning in the face of a rapidly changing society that may appear frightening and uncertain.

Dialogues about religion matter because morality and ethics, both conservative and liberal, permeate all aspects of our society and determine the borders of scientific, medical and cultural research. In chapter three I reflected on this interplay between morality and the law, and discussed the profound influence religions have had in the governance of America and Australia.

This influence is further highlighted by news from the United States that emerged as I concluded this thesis. In February 2014 the Lower House of the Kansas Government passed, 'An Act concerning religious freedoms with respect to marriage' (Committee on Federal and State Affairs 2014 Feb). Concurrently, a similar bill successfully passed both houses in Arizona. These bills were sponsored in response to the perceived discrimination and persecution some religious people are allegedly experiencing at the hands of homosexuals. The Kansas bill states:

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, no individual or religious entity shall be required by any governmental entity to do any of the following, if it would be contrary to the sincerely held religious beliefs of the individual or religious entity regarding sex or gender:

(a) Provide any services, accommodations, advantages, facilities, goods, or privileges; provide counselling, adoption, foster care and other social services; or provide employment or employment benefits, related to, or related to the celebration of,

any marriage, domestic partnership, civil union or similar arrangement;

(b) solemnize any marriage, domestic partnership, civil union or similar arrangement; or

(c) treat any marriage, domestic partnership, civil union or similar arrangement as valid. (Committee on Federal and State Affairs 2014)

As drafted, this legislation would theoretically legalise segregation based on sexuality. Businesses could tell gay couples to leave their premises if an employee or owner believes homosexuality to be a religious sin. Government employees could also refuse service to gay couples. Employers could deny benefits to gay couples or dismiss gay employees without recrimination. No civil recourse would be allowed. This legislation parallels prior racial segregation bills. It aims to use discrimination against gays to counter a perceived threat of discrimination against religion. Sullivan, a left-leaning Protestant writer comments:

Even if you believe that gay people are going to Hell, that they have chosen evil, or are somehow trying to subvert society by seeking to commit to one another for life, it does not follow that you should ostracize them. The entire message of the Gospels is about embracing those minorities despised by popular opinion. Jesus made a point to associate with the worst sinners— collaborating with tax-collectors, prostitutes or lepers whose disease was often perceived as a sign of moral failing. The idea

that Christianity approves of segregating any group is anathema to what Jesus actually preached and the way He actually lived. (Sullivan 2014)

Sullivan is not alone in arguing that Christians should not be telling homosexuals to leave the store or denying them a hotel room or firing them from their job, but such laws and debates demonstrate the contemporary relevance of research into evangelical persuasive techniques. Further commentary challenges the Christianity of 'Christianism' – a term used by Sullivan and others to refer to members of the religious right who use the Gospels to pursue fundamentalist political aims. At the time of writing the Governor of Arizona, a well-known conservative, vetoed the bill, after coming under immense pressure from both fundamentalists and liberals (O'Malley 2014). The Kansas Senate, who needed to ratify the bill to make it law, deferred the vote and referred the bill to a judicial review committee.

This bill and the dialogue around it highlight the complexity and tension around topics that are moral rallying points for religion, such as homosexuality and abortion. This tension is heightened in the US where both conservative Christians and non-Christian liberals must publicly declare their stance on these issues.

On the other hand, this exegesis explored the premise that those seeking to 'out' fundamentalist churches as havens for the ignorant, the bigoted or the

naïve tend to dismiss or overlook the value and benefits some evangelical communities provide for members. I suggested that what to an outsider can be heard and dismissed as fundamentalist rhetoric must provide some inherent perceived good to those who join and participate. I reaffirm my key point that to critically focus on the *content* of what Christian evangelicals espouse while ignoring the *context* that draws people to join is to discard the value that these millions of churchgoers receive from membership.

However, membership growth is important. Like all businesses or organisations, to be financially sustainable evangelical churches need members. Individual preachers therefore seek to grow their audience, attracting new converts, both among the previously non-aligned and among other religions, denominations or even like-minded evangelical churches. This process could be described as competing for subscriber numbers, as any corporation or sporting and community group does. Each proselytiser promotes their angle on their product, the 'truth'. They sell their church by differentiating themselves in a crowded religious market. As I discussed in chapter six, this can manifest in what appears to an outside observer to be extremist, exaggerated and at times asinine or absurd behaviour.

This exegesis opened with the Reverend Jim Jones and my reflections on the reasons for the mass suicide at Jonestown. However, fundamentalists like the Reverend Jim Jones are in many ways an easy target when it comes to a



critical discussion about extreme behaviour by religious leaders. Atheists, spurned believers and critics of organised religion can too easily use the Jones experience to conclude that all religion is inherently 'bad' for individuals and to argue that Jones was just an extreme example of something that is inherently problematic.

On the other hand, fundamentalists deal with cases where preachers overstep the fine line between 'difference' and 'deviance', as construed in their fundamentalist terms, by identifying psychological instability as the cause, not the religion per se. Even within the fundamentalist worldview there is a concept of deviance (deviance from their norms).

The debate about whether extremism is evidence of inherent systemic failures or the result of individual deviance is used not only about the church but also the military. For example, there are parallels between the Baptist Church's management of the extreme fundamentalism of Westboro Baptist church and the US Army's management of the behaviour of marine Staff Sergeant Robert Bales who killed 16 harmless civilians in Afghanistan (AAP 2013). The viability of the church/military is maintained by locating the deviance in the individual, not the institution. Critics of the church/military may argue it is the systemic failure of these institutions to screen their recruits psychologically, on a regular basis, through their councils, internal judiciaries and systems of recruitment and discipline.

## **Persuasion**

The fact that many who hear are not converted – whether to a religion or a political view – indicates that the use of persuasive tools and techniques does not guarantee an outcome. Charisma is also a factor, and one that is difficult to analyse and quantify. However, if both persuasive rhetoric and personal charisma come together, then research suggests that the possibility of a persuasive outcome is enhanced.

In his discussion of leadership, Popper distinguishes between irresponsible and responsible leaders. Popper lists three types of leaders who represent a more responsible approach: the leader who derives his authority from the law and the constitution, the leader who is a role model and the leader who is a facilitator:

The charismatic leader will say, 'I will be good for the nation' and win applause. The authoritative leader will say, 'There are rules, there are laws, we will act according to them (or create them).' The role model will say, 'Follow me, I have knowledge and personal experience,' while the facilitator will say, 'Let's sit together and I'll try to persuade you.' Because this model does not say, 'Run after me,' he has no chance of winning applause in the city squares, but this model requires thinking and maturity from all sides. (Popper 2001 p102)

In the Reverend Slim Limits I have created a leader who is what Popper describes as ‘an irresponsible theatrical, charismatic figure that plays a game that revolves around him’ (Popper 2001 p102).

### **Case Studies**

The case studies in chapter five have been selected to articulate the application of these tools and techniques of persuasion and their relationship and effect on the follower. I have explored examples that range from prosperous, growing churches such as Hillsong—for all intents and purposes a company with a successful brand with a global reach—through to Tinker Tailor—a now disbanded group that was centred around the use of power and control to undermine individual decision-making abilities and to encourage dependence. The case studies also show that indeed, in the selected samples, a range of persuasive techniques identified, are used by evangelists. Concurrently, in this chapter it was highlighted how the case studies were directly integrated into the script.

### **The theatrical script and performance**

In chapter six I discussed the challenges I faced in combining satire, character and plot in *I Want To Be Slim* to produce a creative work that would resonate as authentic. I suggested that the evolution of the show was best traced through this central directional challenge and how it affected the layering of the comedy into satire. I discussed the problem of using actual events, or people, or

situations that audiences might consider 'not authentic', 'too unreal' or parodic even though they had been based on actual events, characters or conversations.

I reflected on the formative influence of the question of authenticity and explored how, as a writer of comedy, I found it absurd to be trying to write comedy that wasn't overtly funny, or that could be described as 'knowingly' funny. I sought to position the humour so that it didn't overshadow or distract from the more complex analysis of the subject matter. For example, I tried to avoid making scenes so funny that they might render the character a caricature and thereby make the satire impotent. I show that I found that my work best fits the definition of Horatian satire, and I argue that this form of satire may best suit my overall purpose.

I concluded that the need to find a balance between the real and the fictional did not obviate the need for the work to be engaging as well as analytical. My objective became to produce an entertaining creative work that had intelligent comment. In chapter six I reviewed the risk involved in satire. This is principally that not everyone will see the humour as tasteful or informative but may interpret it as mocking, judgmental or in bad taste. I argue that *I Want To Be Slim* achieves a balance between entertainment, engagement and the critical application of persuasive techniques. However, as with all creative works, others will decide whether I have achieved my objective and produced a compelling product.

After presenting a first reading of the script for examination, I can recognise that it requires dramaturgical refining. In places the dialogue needs to be more elliptical—I need to find more opportunities for the audience to ‘see’, rather than have the characters ‘say’. At the moment some of Slim’s dialogue is too close to the research and is not true to the character voice. Before full production, I need to reduce the amount of text, consider more concise ways of revealing character and plot and remove repetition and unnecessary verbosity. My further ambition is to adapt the script for television. However, I recognise that it will be a challenge to market a script about religion.

The Reverend Slim Limits is the theatrical manifestation of the exegesis’s main themes about suspending critical thought and just believing. A final quotation from *I Want To Be Slim* captures the fundamentalist preacher’s sometimes dangerous appeal to the convert whose dream may be slipping ever closer to nightmare:

SLIM

*Brothers and sisters, it is difficult to express to someone who doesn't have this ... family experience we are having here today. But in time when those on the outside say, 'Why didn't they leave?' Why didn't you leave cause it's evidently so terrible, so horrible. It's because you put yourself in a position where actually you're working for a cause, a dream that you believe in. When you give your life over to something you must give your everything to it. (Catsi 2013 p29)*

This study of evangelical persuasive performance has focused on what makes followers follow leaders. However to conclude by summarising what is this exegesis's 'truth', is as challenging as trying to answer the questions, 'why do we follow?' or 'what is funny?' Offering a single answer feels dangerously reminiscent of evangelical belief. Given this, I hope this exegesis is a work that opens windows and provides a springboard to further questioning.

This exploration in the exegesis has also served as a means of contextualising the script *I Want to Be Slim*. On the one hand I have examined psychological and social theories pertaining to evangelism along with an outline of the relevant persuasive techniques used by evangelists. On the other hand, I have examined the script in terms of its relationship to comedy and satire and also the process of writing it.

In this doctoral project I have used a theatrical performance, case studies and text-based academic research to explain the attractions of fundamentalist evangelism and to describe the techniques of persuasion evangelical preachers use. This research is important because of the social and political imprints of evangelism and fundamentalism. Further research would be valuable in this area because fundamentalist beliefs can be dangerous for humankind. Extreme fundamentalism can occur in any social or political arena where views are tightly held and contested—from the far left to the far right in religion, politics, environmentalism and economics. As the opening example of Jonestown

reminds us, in exploring fundamentalism we are addressing a serious question with potentially life-changing consequences: How can we identify and, where necessary, resist the persuasive techniques of fundamentalists, so that they can be prevented from leading their followers into the abyss?

In post-modern globalised times older mass churches have lost their pull and are being replaced by churches that appeal more to individualist thinking. Fundamentalists, in which I include US evangelists and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), are using very effective techniques of persuasion across a range of media to gain a following. My thesis aims to have a political effect by making their methodologies more transparent and raising a discussion on fundamentalism. Such discussions are very important in these times and so are works like *I Want to Be Slim*, which critique fundamentalism and evangelism.■

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