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New Media Making and Breaking Religious Leadership: the case of Hillsong Church

"... not what media says that will hurt you; it's what the media says that is *true*. Therefore practicing what we preach and doing the journey in front of our church family and community, and *openness and transparency* is paramount. ¹ Brian Houston, senior pastor Hillsong Church, (emphasis added).

Introduction

Global megachurch networks are intriguing sites to investigate how religious authority and leadership are established and challenged through media and media technology. The rapid growth of the Australian Hillsong Church network, having its center in a Sydney megachurch, demonstrates how the integration of new media technology - in particular the Internet - creates favorable conditions for the expansion of innovative networks of churches on a national and even a global scale. The Internet not only enables interactive communication between churches and believers but offers also opportunities for religious leaders to profile themselves. Focusing on the question how religious authority can be authenticated and negotiated in the current media age, this chapter discusses the media performances of Hillsong Church's senior pastor Brian Houston when he was confronted with the public exposure of the allegations of sexual child abuse against his father. The question raised in this chapter is how the media and in particular the development of media technology, including the Internet, are affecting the legitimation of the religious authority of megachurches and their pastors.

Religion and New Media

The involvement of media in all spheres of life implicates that media increasingly becomes relevant for the ways we come to know and understand the world.² While some scholars argue that media practices themselves could count as 'religious' qualities, both media and religious institutions participate in acts of meaning making and the generating of symbolic power.³

Evangelicalism and the Pentecostal movement have throughout their history been at the forefront of integrating new media technology in their practices.⁴ Informed by their mission zeal, they

¹ Houston, Brian. *Live, Love, Lead*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2015), 106.

² Couldry, Nick. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 137; Hoover, Stewart M., and Nadia Kaneva. "Fundamental Mediations: Religion Meaning and Identity in Global Context." Hoover, Stewart M., and Nadia Kaneva, eds. *Fundamentalisms and the Media*, (London, New York: Continuum, 2009), 1-22.

³ Couldry, *Media, Society, World*, 151.

⁴ Horsfield, Peter. *From Jesus to the Internet. A History of Christianity and Media*, (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell 2015), 248.

were among the first to embrace the possibilities of television giving rise to the phenomenon of televangelist.⁵ With the introduction of the Internet a similar development took place, as many saw the Internet as a God sent medium to finish the Great Commission and reach the world with the gospel.⁶

The rapid development of media technology has affected and transformed the relationship between media and religion. This is in the first place observed in the representation of religion by media. Media coverage of religious movements and the representation of religion are no longer confined to local or national contexts but reach a global audience. Both the scalability and the persistence of information through the Internet bring in a new dimension of communication, as information can easily go viral and is there to stay.⁷

Secondly, in new ways, media shape religious institutions and religious leadership. Because of the digitalization of information and the information abundance, the basic conditions for institutional power changes: controlling communication is no longer possible, which makes institutions porous⁸ and vulnerable for misrepresentation. Also, the integration of media technology in church practices, like the use of screens and videos, brings about shifts in the meaning of the church as a community and in the relationship between pastors and the congregation.⁹

Thirdly, the innovation of media also facilitates and benefits religious organizations. Having one's own media channel and media company, for example, are important means in establishing authority. Particularly for charismatic leaders, media performance is crucial for acquiring and sustaining their religious authority. Similar to political leaders, a growing number of neo-Pentecostal¹⁰ pastors use new media technology like online communication, which can be seen as a form of "personalization" of religious leadership. However, highly personalized authority is vulnerable for scandals and reputation damage. As public figures, neo-Pentecostal pastors need a certain amount of media-related symbolic capital that is related to "showing and be shown".¹¹ In short, evolution of new media and media technology poses challenges and opportunities for upholding the credibility and reputation of religious institutions and their leaders.

Hillsong Church, media, and authority

⁵ Ibid, 251

⁶ Campbell, Heidi. *When Religion Meets New Media*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 38.

⁷ Horsfield, *From Jesus to the Internet*, 265.

⁸ Couldry, *Media, Society, World*, 154.

⁹ Klaver, Miranda. "Media Technology Creating "Sermonic Events". The Hillsong Megachurch Network". *CrossCurrents*. (forthcoming 2015).

¹⁰ Since the 1980s, the terms "New Pentecostalism" and "neo-Pentecostalism" have been used by independent churches to distinguish themselves from denominational Pentecostal churches such as the Assemblies of God. See Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 158). However, Pentecostal churches voluntarily choose to affiliate and cooperate as a movement. The Australian Assemblies of God has limited oversight of its affiliated churches, which are considered "autonomous", as the findings of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse illustrate.

<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/ac52bfd-95d8-4c58-a659-67d86025e92b/Report-of-Case-Study-No-18>, accessed November 24, 2015.

¹¹ Horsfield, *From Jesus to the Internet*, 265.

Since the turn of the century, the neo-Pentecostal Hillsong megachurch in Sydney, Australia, has developed into a global network of churches in major global cities in Europe, in urban centers in South Africa, in New York City and Los Angeles and recently in Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo. This network of churches is characterized by entrepreneurial charismatic leadership and displays a vibrant form of neo-Pentecostal Christianity that is accessible and appealing in its use of music and multimedia.

Brian and Bobby Houston founded Hillsong Church which began as the Hills Christian Life Centre in the suburbs of Sydney in 1983. Born and raised in New Zealand, Brian Houston followed his father Frank Houston who moved to Australia in the late 1970s and who founded the Sydney Christian Life Centre in 1977. By the time Frank Houston retired, the two churches merged in the year 2001¹², and were renamed the Hillsong Church. Since the turn of the century Hillsong Church expanded rapidly and grew into a global network of churches in a number of cities in different parts of the world. Local Hillsong churches are regarded as extensions of the Sydney megachurch as the Hillsong network is understood as “one house with many rooms”. Hillsong Church network operates as an independent church although it is a member of the Australian Assemblies of God.¹³

Hillsong Church has created a powerful media presence through several media outlets. This is foremost established through their music ministry, being one of the leading producers of Christian Contemporary Music for evangelical and Pentecostal churches around the world since the 1990s. More recently, Hillsong Church was among the first to create a powerful presence online through their website, including the Hillsong TV channel, the websites of the local Hillsong churches, and extensive use of social media by Hillsong pastors through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Like in most neo-Pentecostal churches, religious authority and leadership is foremost located in the senior pastor and his wife. Different from the scandals of televangelists in the 1980s, Hillsong’s church senior pastor Brian Houston and his wife belong to the new generation of megachurch pastors who acknowledge their audience’s distrust towards institutions and therefore invest in relationships and emotion.¹⁴ This is observed in the leading metaphor of Hillsong Church of the church as a “house”, the signs in every Hillsong Church “Welcome Home”, and Brian and Bobby Houston calling themselves “the mom and dad of the house”.¹⁵ Personalized, charismatic leadership is not a given but is unstable, as there is a close connection between ascribed authority and the perceived integrity of the leaders.¹⁶ Charismatic leadership is constantly in need of legitimation and authentication: it needs to be demonstrated in character and achievements of success, and is often authorized on the experience of divine calling.

¹² The actual date of the merge of the two churches is not clear. According to Houston (*Live, Love, Lead*, 63), He and his wife Bobby took over the leadership of his father’s church in 1999. During the hearing of the Royal Commission it was said that Hillsong Church was founded in 2001.

¹³ Hillsong Church is member of the Australian Christian Churches, formerly known as the Assemblies of God. The name was changed in 2007. See <http://www.acc.org.au>, accessed November 28, 2015.

¹⁴ Bowler, Kate. *Blessed, A History of American Prosperity Gospel*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110.

¹⁵ Based on personal observations visiting Hillsong churches in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, London, and New York City in 2012-2014 and observed in Hillsong’s online resources.

¹⁶ Horsfield, *From Jesus to the Internet*, 257.

Accountability structures within the Hillsong Church are located in the relations between the Houstons and their self-appointed board of elders.¹⁷ The absence of formal church membership (and voting rights) exposes an understanding of authority that is based on divinely appointed leaders, who have been specially anointed by the Spirit. Like many Pentecostal churches, the relations between the leaders of the church and the visitors are primarily based on trust, characteristic for charismatic leadership.

The Hillsong Church has had several harsh critiques from both secular newspapers and other media outlets in Australia. Hillsong Church's tax exemptions, while making huge revenues with music productions and the investments in real estate have raised critical voices. Also from a very different group of critics, Hillsong Church has been confronted with a church watchdog site,¹⁸ started by a "group of concerned leaders, pastors and elders from various denominations around Australia" with the mission "to warn and inform people about this church".¹⁹ This anonymous group claims to be orthodox Bible-believing Christians. Hillsong Church is being exposed as a money making machine and a cult, and Brian Houston being portrayed as a heretic, false teacher and fraud on this website.

Clearly, media technology not only facilitates journalists' stories to go viral through the Internet but also enables ex-church members and heresy watchers to use the Internet as a free space to give voice to their opinions, disappointment and discontent, reaching even a global audience. Thus today, religious leaders, believers, secular media critics, and ex-believers all partake in a myriad of media practices that are based on the notion of open access to information, legitimized on the value of transparency and truth. Together they foster a power play where religious authority is being challenged, established, undermined, debated, and criticized.

In this media arena with several audiences and critics, it is a challenge for megachurch pastors to authenticate and legitimate their religious authority within their own church, towards the larger Christian community and towards the secular public audience. Pentecostal pastors often use a performance of transparency to authenticate their authority. Transparency is the effect of a practice of self-disclosure, allowing the outside world to have access to what is viewed as one's inner self.²⁰ It relies on a discourse of authenticity that is a central notion in our contemporary society²¹ and part of the widespread therapeutic ethos.²² As Foucault has pointed out, practices of self-disclosure and transparency are sites of power and can be used for social control.²³ Here an intriguing link with media

¹⁷ Tangen, Karl Inge. *Ecclesial Identification beyond Late Modern Individualism? A Case Study of Life Strategies in Growing Late Modern Churches*, (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 54.

¹⁸ www.hillsongchurchwatch.com, accessed October 24, 2015.

¹⁹ It is not clear when this website was founded. The first comment on the <http://hillsongchurchwatch.com/about/> page suggests that it started in 2013. However the churchwatch website seems initially to have started as a critical response to the C3 church in 2012 and has expanded to critical watch site of other churches including Hillsong Church. Accessed November 21, 2014.

²⁰ Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *AuthenticTM: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*, (New York City, NYU Press, 2012), 60.

²¹ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 473ff.

²² Illouz, Eva. *Saving the Modern Soul. Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 9.

²³ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977, 1995).

comes to the front as media in the broadest sense also implicates a practice of revealing, of disclosure, and making information public.

Establishing and maintaining a position of religious authority is particularly hard work for megachurch pastors in times of crisis. This chapter will look into one of the most difficult crises that Hillsong Church senior pastor Brian Houston had to face: the exposure of his father Frank Houston being a pedophile in 1999 and his stand as a witness by the public hearing at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in October 2014. As this case study reveals how Brian Houston narrated the child abuse accusations against his father Frank Houston (who died in 2004), it exposes how neo-Pentecostal theological views cultivate a problematic view on the past and it demonstrates the consequences of highly individualized concepts of faith for charismatic leadership.

The Royal Commission: the public story

In October 2014, Brian Houston had to appear for the Australian “Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse”.²⁴ Through this commission the Australian government is examining how institutions, including Pentecostal churches, handle sexual abuse claims. One of the cases involved allegations of child abuse against pastor Frank Houston, Brian Houston’s father.

During the investigations of the Royal Commission, Brian Houston had to take the witness stand in Sydney (October 9 & 10, 2014) and testify for what he knew about the sex abuse allegations lodged against his father and give account of the way he handled the situation being the president of the Australian Assemblies of God (AoG).²⁵ During the hearing of Brian Houston, questions were asked about the conflict of interest that could have been at play being the president of the AoG, the pastor of two churches, and being the son of the accused perpetrator. Also the committee questioned the ways the situation was handled according to the complaints procedure set out in the Administration Manual of the AoG, and other AoG representatives were interviewed.²⁶

Brian Houston stated that he had heard of the complaints of sexual abuse against his father in 1999. Being the president of the AoG Australia at that time, he confronted his father with these allegations in a private meeting and his father confessed. According to Brian Houston, he personally suspended his father from the church and called for a meeting of senior Assemblies of God members. There it was decided that the allegations were not to be made public and that Frank Houston would

²⁴ <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au>, accessed October 19, 2015.

²⁵ See note 13.

²⁶ The transcripts of the hearing of Brian Houston are published online <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/610f6115-eb55-4d6f-96f8-6b05a4ae4415/case-study-18,-october-2014,-sydney>, day 87 and 88, accessed October 20, 2015. The findings of the investigation are published in Case Study 18: “Response of the Australian Christian Churches and affiliated Pentecostal churches to allegations of child sexual abuse” published November 21, 2015. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/ac52b1d-95d8-4c58-a659-67d86025e92b/Report-of-Case-Study-No-18>, accessed November 24, 2015.

retire early. No allegations of sexual abuse were referred to the police, not even when more abused victims emerged in the year 2000.²⁷

The victim (referred to as AHA), who was aged seven when the abuse began, told at the hearing that Frank Houston, who lived in New Zealand at that time, would visit his family in Sydney in 1969 and occasionally stay over. The abuse continued for several years. Although he had told his mother about the abuse at the age of 16, it was hard for her to accept because “the Houstons were considered almost like royalty in those circles”.²⁸ Many years later, the abuse came to light when she mentioned the story in another church. Frank Houston contacted the victim in 1999 and offered him a payout of \$10,000 for the matter to be over.

The examination of Brian Houston and the hearing of one of his father’s victims by the Royal Commission received extensive media attention.²⁹ The public character of the hearing further enhanced this, as a live webcast of the hearing was accessible online. After the hearing, all documents and transcriptions of the interviews have been published through the website of the Royal Commission.³⁰

The Hillsong Church released two public statements on their website to give “their side of the story”, one before and one after the hearing.³¹ The first statement (October 7, 2014) opens as follows:

“Hillsong Church welcomes this Royal Commission and fully supports its objectives. We believe that exposing child sexual abuse and the response of institutions to that abuse, and allowing survivors to share their traumatic experiences, is a powerful step in the healing process. While our involvement in this commission does not involve abuse that happened at our church, and there are no allegations against me or Hillsong, I have been touched by the horrific act of child sexual abuse in a very personal way. Having to face the fact that my father engaged in such repulsive acts was – and still is – agonising. However as painful as this is for me, I can only imagine how much more pain these events caused to the victims, and my prayer is that they find peace and wholeness.”³²

A week later, after the hearing had taken place, a second more extensive statement was published on the Hillsong Church website (October 12, 2014). The tone of this statement is that of a personal address of Brian Houston to his readers:

“This past week was a challenging time for me personally and for our church. I’m sure you have seen media coverage around my appearance at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.”³³

²⁷ In a large article on Hillsong Church in the Sydney Morning Herald in 2003, the story of Frank Houston being a pedophile was mentioned and according to the newspaper, Brian Houston said that more than one victim was involved. <http://www.christian-witness.org/aog/hillsong3.html>, accessed October 27, 2015.

²⁸ <http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/610f6115-eb55-4d6f-96f8-6b05a4ae4415/case-study-18,-october-2014,-sydney>, transcript Day 86, October 7, 2014, page 34. Accessed October 20, 2015.

²⁹ For example <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-07/royal-commission-child-sexual-abuse-investigates-hillsong/5795308> ; <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-08/hillsong-leader-speaks-about-abuse-claims-against-his-father/5798342> Both accessed October 21, 2015.

³⁰ www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au, accessed October 21, 2015.

³¹ <http://store.hillsong.com/media/statement-regarding-the-royal-commission-into-institutional-responses-to-child-sexual-abuse> Statements published on October 7 and October 12, 2014, accessed October 21, 2015.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

On the website Brian Houston addresses the extensive media coverage around his appearance at the Royal Commission. He wants to help his audience to understand what it was all about “because it is difficult to get a true picture from media reports”, since they only have “a few minutes or a few lines to report so they can’t give you the full story and sometimes the headlines can be misleading.” In this statement, Brian Houston takes the opportunity to give his perspective on the hearing and what had happened in the past. He distances his father’s crimes from Hillsong Church by emphasizing that the abuse happened more than 40 years ago, before Hillsong Church existed.

As most of you know, I have spoken about the crimes of my father many times over many years. I have shared that when I first found out about this, I immediately confronted my father and ensured he never preached or served in any ministry capacity again. There was no delay in action - from the moment we knew and he confessed, his ministry stopped. I then consulted the elders of what was then Sydney Christian Life Centre and we referred the matter to the national executive of the Assembly of God. The investigation and subsequent actions were then handled by the AOG without my interference.

The church is given thanks for their support and prayers as Brian Houston emphasizes the emotional exhaustion he experienced being confronted with the publicity around his father’s personal life. Finally the church is asked to keep praying for the affected by sexual abuse as only God can heal the afflicted.

Hillsong Conferences: the honest story

Two months earlier, in July 2014, at the Hillsong Conference held in Sydney, Brian Houston shared the personal story of his father in front of thousands of attendees in the session “Let’s talk church”, focusing on leadership and leading in crisis. An unauthorized video of this session and a full transcript of his talk is put online by the Hillsongchurchwatch website.³⁴

Informally sitting behind a desk, Brian Houston presented his story as if he was talking to everyone privately. Several times, the audience expressed their sympathy by applause. Houston recalled the worst day of his life when George Aghajanian, the general manager of Hillsong Church walked into his office with the terrible news of the allegations against his father of sexual child abuse in 1999. Emphasizing that the abuse had taken place more than 30 years ago, Houston retold how he had to confront his father, who was his “hero”, and that his father confessed that the abuse had happened. Brian Houston stressed the different roles and responsibilities he was having at that time:

“... but for me it just hit me at degrees and to be honest I think I had to deal with it as at those time, at that time I was president of a denomination of 1100 plus churches. And I was pastor of a church, of which only 9 months before that we had taken on what was my parents church and it had become a campus of our church, so I also had to negotiate it as, if you like pastor of the church he had pastored for over 20 years. And then of course [...] had to navigate it and negotiate it as a father. A husband and a father.”³⁵

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiDDFFO0tpk>; <http://hillsongchurchwatch.com/2014/09/24/brian-houston-sins-of-my-father/#comments>, accessed November 25, 2015.

³⁵ Ibid.

The rest of the story revolves around the consequences of the scandal for his family, siblings, his children, and his personal life, and being torn between the loss of his hero, the desire to protect his father, and at the same time having to take measures. In his own words:

“But I did what I had to and took it to our denomination, which I led and they asked me to stand aside from the investigation. And they investigated it fully and the end result was he never preached, he never ministered, he was never in leadership again.”³⁶

The high toll it took for him personally resulted in a panic attack a few years later and being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress.

In his story Houston emphasized his personal suffering and trauma being confronted with the knowledge that his father was not the man he thought he was. Drawing the attention to his personal tragedy, his responsibilities being the pastor of two churches and the president of the Assemblies of God seemed less important. Little was said about the victims of his father. They were mentioned only once after first stating that his father had been a blessing to many people:

“So a lot of people knew my father, he blessed a lot of people and to this day, I know thousands of people who only have good memories of him. And I’m grateful for that. But obviously this caused pain, real pain for real people. There’s victims involved there’s you know, it was horrific.”³⁷

Three months later Brian Houston hosted the Hillsong Conference USA, held October 16-18, 2014, in Madison Square Garden, New York City. This conference was only a week after the hearing by the Royal Commission. The news of the public hearing had reached the USA as well, as Brian Houston was asked questions about the Royal Commission at a press conference in NYC.³⁸ In this interview he explained the role of the Royal Commission installed by the Australian government with the purpose of leading to better practices preventing child abuse. He continued about the status of the Commission, not being a courtroom but still a place where one has to take an oath and tell the “truth and nothing but the truth”. Next to his stand at the hearing, Hillsong Church had to turn in all documents about handling child abuse, he explained. Houston retold the story of the darkest day of his life when he had to confront his dad, his hero. Emphasizing that the abuse had happened before Hillsong Church existed, he had tried to be honest and transparent handling the situation, he said, and had never thought about a possible conflict of interest. Also there had been no cover up, as the people in the church had known about his father, 15 years ago.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The press conference has been recorded and is published online: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/hillsong-pastor-brian-houston-hammered-with-questions-about-sex-abuse-homosexuality-finances-at-start-of-nyc-conference-128240/>, accessed November 25, 2015.

³⁹ Sydney Morning Herald, Greg Bearup, January 25, 2003 <http://www.christian-witness.org/aog/hillsong3.html> accessed October 27, 2015. According to Hillsong critic Tanya Levin, Brian Houston announced in a church service in 2002 that his father was found guilty of “serious moral failure” and his credential were taken away from him. Levin, Tanya, *People in Glass Houses: an Insider’s Story of Life in and out of Hillsong*, (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2007), 116.

During the New York Conference, Houston shared the story about his father similar to the Sydney script. He retold his personal crisis, the loss of his hero when his dad was exposed being an abuser, the consequences for his denomination and his own family, including the diagnosis of posttraumatic stress. Again, Houston primarily narrated himself in the role of being a victim while leaving out critical questions about the way he handled the situation in light of his responsibilities. The audience appreciated the openness and authenticity of Brian Houston, as his vulnerability made a deep impression.⁴⁰

Houston's performance of leadership in this time of crisis raises a number of questions with regard to charismatic personalized leadership. Why, for example is there no reflection on theological questions concerning the moral failure of leadership, or why are accountability structures within Pentecostal churches like Hillsong Church not addressed? Why, for example, is a perspective on evil missing, is the issue of restitution not addressed, and why is the impact of abuse by leaders on the church as a community lacking? In order to understand the performance of Brian Houston and his interpretation of leadership and religious authority, his recent book *Live Love Lead* offers intriguing insights in the implicit theological framework exemplary for neo-Pentecostal churches today.

Live Love Lead: the real story

In the summer of 2015, Brian Houston published the book *Live, Love Lead*. This book is presented as a book about leadership for the global Hillsong Church and the Christian community at large. The book was announced through the Hillsong Church website,⁴¹ presenting Brian Houston "as a leading voice in the shaping of leadership values and church culture". Befriended megapastors endorse his book on the Hillsong website praising his transparency, vulnerability, and authenticity.⁴²

The book *Live Love Lead* presents the history of the Hillsong Church by the personal life story of Brian Houston and his family including the story of his father. This leading narrative is embedded within Bible quotes and stories, which have served as material for Brian Houston's sermons over the past years. Each chapter starts with a quote from one of the more recent Hillsong worship songs. The book is divided in four parts signaling four successively stages of life, based on Matthew 7:13-15: A Big Life, A Difficult Path, A Narrow Gate and A Glorious Future.

The book begins with a positive story of Brian Houston's early years: being blessed with a loving family and growing up in the church in New Zealand. Houston points out the similarities between the humble background of Jesus "the greatest leader" with that of his own: born in New Zealand - which he states as one the smallest countries in the world - and being raised by parents who

⁴⁰ Based on personal interviews/conversations with attendees of the Hillsong Conference NYC 2014.

⁴¹ <http://brianchouston.com/livelovelead/> accessed October 27, 2015.

⁴² Craig Groeschel: "Brian Houston is honestly one of the best leaders I know. I'm incredibly grateful for his transparency, vulnerability and leadership advice in his new book *Live, Love, Lead*." Rick Warren: "This is a remarkable book by a remarkable man. Brian Houston has poured his heart into this book with the hopes that by authentically sharing his own spiritual journey, you will be encouraged and challenged to trust Christ more deeply. You will love his transparency and passion, <http://brianchouston.com/livelovelead/>, accessed October 24, 2015.

served in the Salvation Army.⁴³ His father has had a profound influence on his life. He has always been his hero and role model: “so much of my motivation for wanting to serve God and build the church came from my father”.⁴⁴ From a young age Brian Houston believed that God had called him to be a leader and to build the church,⁴⁵ writing “deep down I knew I was alive for a purpose bigger than I was, something more important than I could even understand or imagine as a young boy”.⁴⁶ As is often found in the biography of charismatic leaders, the notion of calling is prominent. The leader fulfills God’s plan and purpose, which is demonstrated in success of the ministry, growth of the church, and increasing influence. As Houston writes: “God continues to pour his favor on Hillsong Church”, and “seeing Hillsong reach millions of lives around the world ... - it’s witnessing God’s power in action”.⁴⁷ The Big Life is summarized in what Houston describes as “Blessed for success”: “When you’re living the full abundant, wide open life for which you were designed, everything you do will be characterized by passion, purpose, perspective, and peace. Doing what you were made to do is being your most authentic self, liberated by the grace of God”.⁴⁸ It is about being a passionate, pioneering leader who follows Jesus the first pioneer. Yet the Big Life can often be hijacked by unexpected setbacks, Houston states at the end of part one. These “stumbles” set the stage for what Houston calls in part two, “the worst day of his life”.

More extensively and with more details, Houston’s again recalls the day that general manager and friend George Aghajanian entered his office, telling him about a phone call that had come to the office of a pastor who had spoken to a woman who exposed that Frank Houston had sexually abused her son. Brian Houston describes his initial disbelief when hearing these words: “the things George was saying about my dad – things that seemed so out of character for the man who had raised me, loved me, and taught me so much about God and the ministry – was, to say the least, *unbelievable*. [...] My mind quickly moved from the facts, to recognition that this happened to a boy who was not even ten years old at the time, and I thought to myself, this is not just immoral – it’s criminal. My father committed pedophilia. In fact, it dawned on me in these moments that I myself was only a youth at the time of these events”.⁴⁹

Houston continues how he was not only in the position of being a pastor but also the president of a denomination.⁵⁰ He confronts his father with the accusation and his father tells him it was true. Being the president of the denomination, Houston writes, “it was my responsibility then and there to suspend him from ministry and ask for his credentials. I believe he left my office that day knowing

⁴³ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 2.

⁴⁴ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 71.

⁴⁵ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 3.

⁴⁶ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 8.

⁴⁷ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 10.

⁴⁸ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 28.

⁴⁹ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 72.

⁵⁰ The Assemblies of God is not mentioned in the book.

that he would never preach again – and he never did”.⁵¹ His father died five years later: “my disgraced hero was gone”.⁵²

It is remarkable that also in the book, the victim is hardly mentioned, except for “I also lived with the awareness that there was someone out there who was hurting so much more than I – an innocent victim whose life had also been forever changed”.⁵³ The focus of his story is primarily on Brian Houston’s own pain and suffering and how he needed to draw his strength from God in order “to remain the leader God had called me to be for the church and the denomination.”⁵⁴

Houston recalls that he spoke to the elders of his father’s church and the national executives of the denomination. What was said and how the denomination dealt with the situation remains unclear in the book. More attention is given to the consequences of his father’s fallout for himself, his family including his children. He describes how he was traumatized by this experience and collapsed with a panic attack and was diagnosed having a posttraumatic stress syndrome.

Houston offers a clear way out of dealing with trauma and distress. “Immediately I took a few days off to think on my priorities and I changed the way I had been living and leading. I made some big decisions about the way I approached both travel and ministry [...] I let God take control of the stresses that were weighing me down. [...] I bounced back quickly. I have never had another panic attack. I believe life is all about choices, and we can choose to cooperate with the words of death and sickness spoken over our lives, or we can choose to rise above them”.⁵⁵ In this part of the narrative the emphasis on choice and decision-making stands out. Leadership is not only about making the right choices but also fixing one’s mind and thoughts on the positive, and away from the hurt, the negative and the past. As Houston continues: “If I had fixed my thoughts only on what my dad did and all the terrible repercussions, then I could have indeed become paralyzed with sorrow, anger and bitterness. So I had to keep my perspective focused on Christ. *What you focus on in life determines whether or not you will experience peace in your heart.*”⁵⁶

Triumphant Suffering Leader

The performances of Brian Houston at the Hillsong conferences in Sydney, NYC, the interviews and press releases on the Hillsong website together with the book *Live Love Lead* offer intriguing insights for the self-understanding of leadership of how Brian Houston makes sense of the world. In light of the success story of Hillsong Church being one of the most influential churches of the last century,⁵⁷ the public investigation of how Brian Houston handled the accusations of abuse against his father as president of the AoG could damage the reputation of the church. The extensive media attention and

⁵¹ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 73.

⁵² Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 78.

⁵³ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 74.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 84-85.

⁵⁶ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 92.

⁵⁷ According to Elmer Towns in his book *The Ten most Influential Churches in the Last Century*, (Shippensburg: Destiny Image, 2014).

accessibility of the Royal Hearing's interviews and documents challenged Houston's credibility as a global pastor⁵⁸ and leader of a megachurch. Anticipating on the story of the victim and his own appearance for the Royal Commission, Houston puts forward consistent narrative that suggests the "real story" with a specific role of empathy.

What stands out is the way Brian Houston portrays himself as a suffering leader. As observed in all Houston's public performances of narrating "the darkest day of his life", he presents himself as a victim of his fathers' misconduct. While recognizing that there are 'real' victims suffering the consequences of his father's abuse, it is his own suffering of being a child of a pedophile that dominates. Houston frames his own suffering in light of the life of Jesus, who - when He suffered - did not take a detour but had to walk the difficult path before him.⁵⁹

To authenticate his story, notions of transparency, honesty and vulnerability are used in the performance of telling his story in front of his church, the larger Christian community at the conferences and in his recent book. For example, he justifies his actions by stating he "handled in an impossible situation with transparency and honesty" and that he tried to act the best according to what he knew.⁶⁰ Yet, question is why he considered being in an impossible situation? He suggests that there were no other options in handling the situation. But why not consult others in such moments of distress and agony? Houston presents himself as the strong independent leader who has to operate on his own and make decisions according to his own judgments. And he qualifies his approach as being transparent and honest.

In the book, reflection on how an influential pastor with charisma and with a large following can be troubled by a 'dark side' and be capable of abusing children is not being raised. In just one episode of the book the question what he has learned from the situation is being answered: "Yet I learned that when we walk through the valley of the shadow, when we turn a corner and glimpse a difficult path filled with pain and heartache ahead, *we can only go forward*" (emphasis added).⁶¹ "Can such a tragic situation ultimately work for good? Is it possible that anything of worth can come from a circumstance where lives were shattered and deep pain was experienced? I cannot speak for the real victims of my father's actions, but I have seen firsthand fallout among his children and his grandchildren. [...] yet I can see glimpses of light at the end of a very dark tunnel".⁶²

One of the explanations for the lack of reflection and not asking the hard questions about his father's misconduct is related to Houston's' orientation towards the future, and his anticipation on what lies ahead.⁶³ Central to this orientation is the neo-Pentecostal emphasis on living the life of a

⁵⁸ The title "Global" Senior Pastor emerged on the front cover of *Live Love Lead*: "Brian Houston Founder & Global Senior Pastor of Hillsong Church".

⁵⁹ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 76

⁶⁰ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 252.

⁶¹ Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 78.

⁶² Houston *Live, Love, Lead*, 252.

⁶³ In the words of the apostle Paul: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead (Phil. 3:13,14).

saved person, free from sin, shame and condemnation, who reaches his full potential, and is “flourishing, ruling and reigning”.⁶⁴

This outlook on life is rooted in the Pentecostal experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, understood as the last stage of history before Christ’s second coming. The Spirit signals that God is doing something ‘new’: reviving the church and renewing and the lives of believers. Also, the Holy Spirit is associated with the empowerment for personal growth and transformation, and as a power for witness and evangelism.⁶⁵ Here we encounter a revivalist concept of conversion that implies a radical break with one’s sinful past and being made into a new creation. In Hillsong Church like other neo-Pentecostal churches, accepting Jesus as ones Savior means receiving total forgiveness and living by grace. Not in terms of “an old sinner being saved by grace”, but being a saint who has been given a new identity and is righteous and acceptable for God.⁶⁶ Consequently, when believers fail they do not have to ask God for forgiveness as this something He had already done once for all. This concept of grace renders a problematic concept of sin. In an often used book in Hillsong Church “Classic Christianity”, spiritual growth and living by grace is explained by making a distinction between punishment and discipline. Punishment is a penalty imposed on an offender [...] by looking *backward* to the offence, is impersonal [...] and its goal is justice.” Discipline is *training*, is looking *forward* to a beneficial result, and is personal with its goal the benefit and development of the person. The distinction between justice and personal development made by contrasting living under the law and living by grace, strongly affects the question of taking responsibility for one’s past. Sin is discussed in terms of making mistakes and wrong choices but they are effectively turned around as opportunities for learning and for personal growth but at the expense of justice.⁶⁷ But as Houston’s narrative also displays, there is also a concept of evil that turns sin into tragedy: attacks from demonic forces are recognized as spiritual battles that according to Bobby Houston are “a sure sign that you are doing something right.”⁶⁸

This neo-Pentecostal worldview reflects a new style of prosperity gospel that associates the new life in the Spirit with “Gods favor”, with “being blessed” and with leading an “abundant, prosperous life”.⁶⁹ Looking back and reflection on the past is problematic as the gospel of Brian Houston can be summarized in his favorite sentence that “the best is yet to come”.

Brian Houston considers himself to be a pioneer and has set his goal on taking the gospel to new territories. For him, the future entails seeking new opportunities for growth, expansion and multiplication. Looking back, and looking at past mistakes is negatively valued and associated with the devil, as Brian Houston states: “Don’t allow the enemy to taunt you with your past mistakes. God

⁶⁴ Houston, *Live, Love, Lead*, 97.

⁶⁵ Smit, Regien. *More than Conquerors : Space, Time and Power in Two Lusophone Pentecostal Migrant Churches in Rotterdam*, (Dissertation VU University Amsterdam, 2012), 191.

⁶⁶ George, Bob. *Classic Christianity*. (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers 1989), 73.

⁶⁷ George, *Classic Christianity* 176, 177.

⁶⁸ Houston, Bobby. *I’ll have what she’s having*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 90.

⁶⁹ Bowler, *Blessed*, 236.

doesn't remember them, why should you? You live by faith, not by shame".⁷⁰ The consequences of this mindset are striking. It leads Pentecostal leaders (and believers) away from reflecting on their own deeds and reduces their accountability concerning decisions and actions. In the case of Houston, it results in framing the offenders, in this case his father, as being the totally different other, which hinders self-reflection on his own fallibility, temptations, and failures.

Next to the problem of the past, Houston's narrative also reflects a strong individualized understanding of faith, based on individual choice and personal responsibility and primarily concerned with one's relationship with God. Believers (including pastors) who are part of the church as a community and the body of Christ are left out. Not only his father, the "fallen hero", is being isolated from the Christian community, also the victim is left with God's help for healing only. This is individualized understanding of faith has far-reaching implications for the evaluation of religious leadership. As Horsfield points out "leaders not only interpret the ethos of a community, they also represent it. When Christian leaders fail to act in situations of sexual abuse or violence within religious communities, they create a crisis of integrity".⁷¹ When sinful actions are addressed as mistakes and framed in terms of an individualized relation between God and the believer, forgiveness is often demanded at the cost of the acknowledgement of committed injustice from the side of offenders.⁷² Not surprisingly, in Houston's narrative of how he and the AoG acted towards the abused victim, and notions of restitution and reconciliation are absent.

The individualized theological framework of Brian Houston, encountered within his book *Live Love Lead*, is exemplary for neo-Pentecostal leaders. Informed by this theological discourse, Brian Houston's frames his father's misconduct as a personal crisis, while portraying himself as a triumphant suffering leader. Interestingly, Houston's story resembles a therapeutic narrative of the self that according to Illouz has a wide cultural resonance in contemporary modern society.⁷³ It "merges two contradictory constructions of self [...]: the self as (potential or actual) victim of social circumstances and the self as the sole author and actor of one's life".⁷⁴ It is the suffering leader who is victim of something beyond his control but also the willful leader who manages to overcome the trials by making the right choices and staying positive. He portrays himself as the leader who took his responsibilities in times of crisis while leaving out his own involvement being the son of the accused, and the conflict of interest that arose in that situation. Brian Houston's narrative fits well into a neo-Pentecostal theology of prosperity balanced with the reality of emotional hardships, that resembles a therapeutic discourse of self-improvement. He reclaims his authority by consistent performances of the inner, vulnerable self, as a means to convince his audience of the authenticity of his suffering.

⁷⁰ Houston, *Live, Love, Lead*, 102.

⁷¹ Horsfield, Peter. "Forgiving Abuse-An Ethical Critique", *Journal of Religion and Abuse* 4/4 (2003), 62.

⁷² According to the victim, Frank Houston offered him money and asked for forgiveness.

<http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/610f6115-eb55-4d6f-96f8-6b05a4ae4415/case-study-18,-october-2014,-sydney>, transcript Day 86, October 7, 2014, page 8. Accessed October 20, 2015.

⁷³ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 183.

⁷⁴ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 184.

However, narratives are never innocent representations of the past but they are told from a certain perspective and informed by power relations and interests, as this case demonstrates. Therefore Houston's story is part of a politics of transparency that renders his story to be recognized as true. By his personalized performance of "triumphant suffering" – online, in his church and in his book – Houston avoids critical questions with regard to his own interests, loyalties and position in the situation. By presenting his own honest and authentic story at different media platforms, he strategically claims his integrity and authority not only within his own global network of churches but also within the evangelical and Pentecostal community at large.

In November 23, 2015, the Royal Commission published its findings of "Hillsong Church, Assemblies of God and Frank Houston". The commission stated that Brian Houston and the Assemblies of God did not refer the allegations against Frank Houston to the police. According to the commission, Brian Houston had a conflict of interest in the allegations against his father being the AoG president and the son of Frank Houston. The report concluded that senior staff at the Assemblies of God failed to follow their own protocol regarding sexual abuse claims and did not support the victim.⁷⁵

Hillsong church responded the same day with a statement on their website: "We are confident that the actions of Pastor Brian, from the moment he discovered the news about his father, were done with the best intentions towards the victim." And: "in terms of the findings of a 'potential or perceived' conflict of interest, it is easy to look back many years with hindsight, however Pastor Brian acted in the best way he felt at the time and took decisive and immediate action against his own father."⁷⁶

Conclusion

The development of new media challenges the basis of institutional power and religious authority as controlling communication is no longer possible in the Internet age. As the case study of Brian Houston, senior pastor of the Hillsong Church demonstrates, different from the past, stories of sexual abuse are more difficult to be silenced within Christian communities.⁷⁷ A strategy of reclaiming and maintaining religious authority is observed by skillful use of the media and a communication strategy to project a particular image of the religious leader who conquers through suffering. In the neo-Pentecostal megachurch context of Hillsong Church with personalized leadership, performance of transparency and selective openness can be an effective means to exercise control, and gain credibility. In the words of Brian Houston:

"I'm convinced that when you let people know what's going on and where you are at, with transparency and authenticity, they respond positively and want to rally behind you".⁷⁸

⁷⁵ <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/public-hearings/findings>, accessed December 5, 2015.

⁷⁶ <http://hillsong.com/media-releases/response-to-royal-commission-report-from-hillsong-church-board-and-elders/>, accessed December 21, 2015.

⁷⁷ Horsfield, *From Jesus to the Internet*, 277.

⁷⁸ Houston, *Live, Love, Lead*, 112.

