

PERFORMING ETHICS

Ritual practice and performance in the ethical lives of
two Australian religious communities

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Thesis Summary

Performing Ethics investigates the ritual practices and performances of two religious communities. It examines ritual action as it shapes their ethical values and frameworks, individually and collectively.

The thesis analyses ethnographic fieldwork at the Hillsong Conference in 2009, and with a monastic group, the Urban Neighbours of Hope, in 2010. Despite contrasts in the scale and aesthetic of their rituals, these communities both express the same Protestant Evangelical tradition and worldview, and operate nearby one another in the western suburbs of Sydney. Each upholds a cohesive ethical vision of the world through their ritual practices and performances, and their members embody these throughout their everyday lives.

Performing Ethics is grounded in the discipline of performance studies. The thesis analyses discrete ritual events rather than the 'scripts' upon which they are based (whether a liturgy, or a traditional 'way' of doing things). It also employs dramatic concepts – particularly the notions of *rehearsal* and *improvisation* – to organise the theoretical approaches to ritual from the social sciences, the humanities and from the religious traditions themselves, upon which it draws.

This thesis discusses the roles that rituals play in *rehearsing* patterns of action and intention, which are subsequently deployed in the real world. Ritual practices provide opportunities for participants to familiarise their bodies with sequences of action; ritual events create a world in which the presentation of an identity can be rehearsed. Through their strategic deployment, ritual codes meter time and indicate moral boundaries. They mediate the passage of transgressors out of the community (through exclusion from participation and by dictating identity), and back into the community (through schemes of repentance and reintegration).

Rituals invite mimetic reproduction of axiomatic knowledges about the cosmos. The Hillsong conference performs for its mammoth crowd a representation of a grand cosmic, historical and theological narrative. The conference's core rituals enable the crowd to embody this order, which rearticulates traditional Christian tropes and ethical imperatives within a Hillsong-centric vision. In the Urban Neighbours of Hope (UNOH), members privately rehearse a moral identity based on

a concept of 'downward mobility.' This enables them to enact their missiological vision in the public spaces of the depressed neighbourhoods they seek to empower.

Hillsong and the Urban Neighbours of Hope showcase a singular tradition, contextualising its core practices to address local concerns. These two communities create space for *improvisation* as times change and as new situations emerge. Both groups adapt their ritual performances and practices with the intention of producing wished-for social outcomes. The possibilities for ritual's deployment in an instrumental capacity, and the ramifications of democratised ritual experiences, are considered.

Performing Ethics applies recent thinking on ritual adaptation to scenarios local and contemporary. It synthesises recent theological writings on ethics and ritual change with the predominant approaches of the secular sciences. It finds in performance theory a locus for engagement with religious and secular explorations of the relationship between rituals and ethics.

I certify that this work does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Tim Kurylowicz, 24 November 2013

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I am lucky to have such encouraging, curious and forgiving family.

To my beloved Sophie: thankyou again and again, forever and a day.

Rites ... extend the forms of love and reverence, and step by step bring to fulfillment the beauties of proper conduct. And weeping, happiness and sorrow are opposites, yet rites make use of them all, bringing forth and employing each in its turn.

– Xunzi (Kline, 2004, p. 203)

We can opt for a series of fixed texts that wear out and have to be constantly changed, or we can choose the metaphor of the jazz session that constantly makes new music by listening to what's happening around it and applying the best of what is left of the tradition to the current context. The genius of improvisation seems to be a better metaphor for actual human moral experience than struggling to apply a single text to every situation. God invites us to join in the music, to listen and adapt to one another, to keep the melody flowing.

– Richard Holloway (1999, p. 33)

Ritual appears to be a bit of psychosocial alchemy as nimble and as inexhaustible as our imaginations and our memories.

– Catherine Bell (2006, p. 409)

Christians are made, not born

– Tertullian (Ferguson, 2009, p. 340)

