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Towards a definition of Christian Mega-Events in the 21st Century

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Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful for insights in this paper from Silviu Cobeanu, of Leeds University, UK; Dr Jorgen Hellman, of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden; Dan Lomax of Leeds Beckett University; and Dr Eddy Plasquy of the University of Leuven, Belgium.

Towards a definition of Christian Mega-Events in the 21st Century

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In an age in which the numbers of people attending churches in the UK has been falling consistently for several decades, a trend that applies across Europe and North America, there is a marked contrast in the burgeoning growth of Christian religious encounters - including church attendance - around the world, particularly in the Global South (Avis, 2007). Amongst the characteristics of this growth is the emergence of large-scale mega-events, commonly held across Africa and the Indian sub-continent, as well as smaller but significant events held around the world.

The emergence in the modern day of large-scale Christian events began in the UK with Billy Graham's evangelistic crusades in 1954, attended by 1.3 million people over a period of three months. Thirty years later, over one million attended 'Mission England' mass rallies, held in football stadia. But whether these meetings were merely 'public spectacles' (Guest, 2007:25), or had any measurable impact in terms of numbers attending church, at the time they certainly achieved media coverage and public visibility. The original evangelistic events in the UK were able to build on knowledge that many children gained in school and at Sunday school, which, some would argue, has been eroded by secular influences on education and society in general (Savage, Collins-Mayo & Mayo, 2006:3).

This research seeks to develop an understanding of the emergence of different types of these large Christian events, focusing on the mega-events in Africa and India where preachers with a global reach, such as the German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke (www.cfan.org.uk) and American Joyce Meyer (www.joycemeyer.org) are joined by less well-known speakers. The growth of megachurches and global worship brands in Australia and the USA provide another strand for comparison. Warner (2015:121) concludes that 'what is obvious about gatherings of Christians that attract large numbers is that the quality of worship is one of the drivers in sustaining and expanding their number'.

Key Words : mega-event, church event, Christianity, eventization of faith, megachurch

Introduction

In contrast to a recent conference theme of 'revivalism of religious encounters in the modern world', the dominant discourse about the church is one of death and decay, not of growth or revival. The numbers of people attending churches in the UK has been falling consistently for decades (Brierley, 2014), a trend that is reflected across Europe and North America. However, there is a marked contrast to this decline, in the burgeoning growth in Christian religious encounters - including church attendance - across the rest of the world, and particularly in the Global South (Avis, 2007). Amongst the characteristics of this growth is the emergence of large-scale mega-events, most commonly held across Africa and the Indian sub-continent, as well as smaller, but perhaps also significant events, held elsewhere.

This research seeks to develop an understanding of the emergence of different types of these large Christian events, focusing on the mega-events in Africa and India where preachers with a global reach, such as the German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke (www.cfan.org.uk) and American preacher Joyce Meyer (www.joycemeyer.org) are joined by less well-known speakers. The growth of megachurches, and global worship brands from Australia and the USA provide another strand for comparison.

So what is the purpose of studying such issues? Deacy recognises the 'value of exploring issues of religion

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and the sacred in relation to cultures of everyday life' (2009:1), arguing for the relevance and importance of the study of religion in its contemporary cultural context, seeing religion as not just 'bound up with God, the Bible and the Church' (Deacy, 2009:7), but relevant to ordinary life, and society. Green's (2009) guide to practical theology underpins its importance for clergy and students of theology.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate this dominant discourse of religious decline, and in Christian terms, the 'predictable, weary refrain that the church is dying' (Tomlin, 2015: 127) in the light of an apparent resurgence, not only in the developing world, but even in countries where Christianity has long been part of the established state. Evidence suggests that the numerical fall in what might be viewed as 'Western' Christianity is slowing, and new churches are emerging to replace the dying congregations of more traditional denominations (Brierley, 2014).

But, according to Goodhew, a portrayal of church growth 'subverts the dominant narrative in much of academia and the media, a narrative which influences many church leaders as well as wider society' (2012:3). His examination of data from the 2011 British Census leads him to urge caution in interpretation of these statistics; that study focuses

not on national statistics, nor on national leadership via bishops, synods or conferences, but on local congregations and particular neighbourhoods (2012:4).

In common with other theological studies (Hopewell, 1987), Goodhew chooses to observe congregations and their local narratives in preference to wider statistical analysis,

not because the wider picture is unimportant, but because national observations often miss local dynamics, because congregational life is at the core of Christian identity and because the argument for the secularization of Britain rests heavily on the presumption that local congregations are in deep decline (2012: 4).

This methodological approach enables the identification of groupings of growth. Clearly, there are many churches in decline, and the available statistics do not paint a picture that might encourage church leaders, especially in the UK, across Europe, and the USA. Elsewhere, Warner (2015) cites evaluations of the rise and fall in numbers of religious adherents, with evidence published by Johnson and Grim (2013), and Brierley (2013), that there exist substantial examples

where churches are growing, even in the West. Despite this evidence, there appears to be an overwhelming 'resignation' by many churches in Britain, 'as if church decline was a given', with this narrative 'creating an ecclesiology of fatalism' (Goodhew, 2012: 18-19).

Hence, this examination of the large events that do occur is relevant to the development of a picture not only of church activity, but of church revival, whether in new or mainstream denominations. Woodhead summarises Berger's analysis of the secularisation of European culture as the erosion of 'denominational religion' (2001:116), noting the emergence, around the world, of large and popular churches with no affiliation to traditional denominations. Goodhew cites Dobbelaere's typology of secularisation as encompassing a 'whole society', alongside the 'organisational decline of churches', and levels of 'individual subscription to Christian faith' (2012:10), whilst Tweed asserts that 'religions are simultaneously individualistic and collective' (2006: 64).

Goodhew also argues against the accuracy of the assumption that the recent past was 'very religious', asserting that:

Some churches in some regions are declining, but . . . substantial and sustained church growth has also taken place across Britain over the past 30 years. This growth is large-scale; it is occurring across a wide geographical range; it is highly multi-cultural in its social reach; and it shows no signs of slowing down. The current consensus, by focusing almost exclusively on decline, is seriously mistaken (2012: 3).

Many British church growth research studies assume serious if not terminal decline, including works by Callum Brown, Steve Bruce, Robin Gill, Grace Davie, Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (Goodhew, 2012; Flanagan and Jupp, 2010), and such conclusions have become more widespread since the start of the 21st century. Bruce (2002) compares the impact of secularisation in Europe and the United States, conceding that secularisation is neither a universal, nor inevitable phenomenon, and concluding that its reversal is improbable. However, in more recent work, Bruce asserts that the argument for 'using the vitality of religion outside the West as a rebuttal of the secularization paradigm' (2011:180) lacks justification. Goodhew also soundly critiques the dominant secularisation narrative, stating that:

this question at the meta-level is misleading. On the one hand, religion is self-evidently in decline in some parts of Europe and the North

East of America; while, on the other hand, in parts of South America, Asia and Africa it is expanding rapidly. What is needed therefore is the challenging of this hegemonic meta-narrative of 'secularization' with smaller regional accounts (2012: 17).

Davie's early and more recent studies proposed the concept of 'believing without belonging' (1999), suggesting that in the 1990s, many British people voiced a nominal identity as a Christian, for example, when giving information in a census or in hospital, self-defining as Christian, even if they never attended church. Davie concluded that Britain was becoming a highly secular nation and continuing church decline was seen as inevitable. Moreover, the 2011 census data demonstrated a big change, with lower levels of such self-definition. In a critique of secularisation led by Berger (1999), Davie discusses whether Europe was 'the exception that proves the rule' (1999:65), against a global trend of 'desecularization'.

Berger and Zijderveld argue that secularisation has been met with 'an enormous explosion of passionate religious movements' (2010:4); this flies in the face of secularisation theory, recognising that 'most sociologists of religion, with very few holdouts, have changed their mind about the theory' (2010:4). This is partly due to the resurgence of Islam, as people are 'looking to Islam to give meaning and direction to their lives' (2010: 4). Meanwhile, a study of a northern English town by Heelas and Woodhead, argued that 'modern Britain is experiencing a

'subjective turn' away from organized Christianity towards various forms of spirituality which might be termed 'holistic' (Goodhew, 2012:11).

Meanwhile, Buxton identifies that religion in some areas is being 'repackaged as a lifestyle accessory under the brand-label of "spirituality"' (2009:166).

As well as a generic sense of 'spirituality', ethnicity is also a factor, because although

churches and Christians rooted in black, Asian and minority ethnic communities may once have been marginal they are now a substantial section of the population as a whole and of the Christian population (Goodhew, 2012:13).

Estimates claim that between ½ and 1 million Christians attend black majority churches in the UK (2012: 3). So, whilst

large parts of the white British church are declining. Black, Asian and minority ethnic

churchgoing is not declining; it is rapidly on the rise (2012: 13).

In addition, new congregations are emerging across the UK, whether in northern cities such as York, or even in London, where membership of the Anglican Church has increased by more than 70% since 1990 (2012:3). So, depending on who you are, where you live, and your ethnic roots, there has been 'resacralization' (2012:14) alongside secularisation. Church growth might also be associated with the influence of a consumerist mentality on religious adherence and practice, whereby choice is more of a factor than obligation.

In terms of ethnic demographic change in Britain, immigration has influenced church growth, as significant numbers of immigrants were Christians prior to their arrival, with the potential to impact British church life. Goodhew's comprehensive analyses in 2012 and 2015 are underpinned by Brierley's exhaustive statistical evidence that demonstrates the positive impact of both immigration and the development of 'fresh expressions' of church, on attendance in the UK, slowing the overall rate of decline (Brierley, 2014:6).

Context: church attendance

Brierley's 2000 and 2014 studies demonstrate falling church attendance in the UK, across Europe and North America, in contrast to growth in other geographic areas. As an example of the trends in church attendance around the world, the membership of the global Anglican Communion demonstrates the differences in levels of political power wielded by different groups in interpreting doctrine within the church. It is difficult to provide an accurate measure of membership numbers overall, and particularly in the home province of England, but according to the official website of the Anglican Communion, it is estimated that in 2011, there were some 80 million members in 160 countries (<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/index.cfm>). Organised into provinces, more than 32 of a total of 44 are found in the southern hemisphere, the 'Global South'. This demographic phenomenon does not only apply to the Anglican Church, as the former 'Christian world' (Jenkins, 2006:1) in the west is also experiencing a drop in overall population, compared with the south's boom. Avis suggests that the Church of England's 26 million baptismal membership, 'which everyone knows to be a shaky basis for assessing the strength of a church' (2007:59), should not be used to

compare with membership of the southern churches, as they have a completely different (and, Avis argues, more authentic) numerical basis. The Anglican Church in Nigeria alone is estimated to have a larger active membership than the combined active totals of Europe (including the UK) and North America (Church of England, 2011). This issue invites a discussion on the extent to which hegemonic power has been (from an historical perspective) and is still, driving the culture of the Anglican Communion, and the role that cultural imperialism may have played in developing values (such as what discipleship means) within different cultures. It is also possible to consider parallels across other Christian denominations. In understanding this debate, it is helpful to come to a definition of hegemony, and in particular how it might be viewed through the lens of religion. Cox defined hegemony as ‘a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-state entities’ (Ayers, 2008:67). This could apply to the Anglican Communion as a non-state entity, with clergy ruling over the laity by consent rather than coercion, as well as through the historical spread of the Anglican Church across the globe in the wake of British power, in an ‘extension of imperialism’ (Sachs, 1993:164). The question as to the extent to which its power ‘derives from the ways of doing and thinking of the dominant social strata of the dominant state or states’ (Ayers, 2008:67) can be addressed by a simple observation of the composition of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, when over 300 bishops representing the UK, USA and Canada contrasted with some 225 bishops from Africa, out of a total of 750 eligible to attend (http://www.churchsociety.org/issues_new/communion/iss_communion_howbig.asp). Had the numbers of bishops been relative to the proportion of active members, the Church Society argues, there should have been over 2000 African bishops compared to the number of Americans actually present. Such structural inequalities and power may be interpreted as evident through the development of large-scale events around the world, along with the adoption of mega-church practices and theology. And, if the Church of England’s figure was a more realistic 1 million, along with the USA, it would be positioned alongside West Africa and Rwanda, and eclipsed by the church in Nigeria.

An examination of church attendance statistics showed a fall in England from an average of 5.4 million in 1979, to an average of 3.7 million in 1998. Australia fared no better, with some 44% of the population

attending in 1950, compared to 10% in 2000. In the USA, mainline protestant denominational church attendance fell from 13% in 1968, to 7.8% in 1993 (Moynagh, 2001:10-12), demonstrating increasing rates of decline for churches in the UK, Australia and the USA. In 2001 Moynagh predicted a reduction in church attendance by 2016 (i.e., today) to less than 1% of the population. Moynagh compared Pine and Gilmore’s experience economy and the immersive world in relation to church, along with the impact of consumerism, concluding that, even around the millennium, the church was only ‘one click away from extinction’ (2001:7-8). Despite this, Moynagh acknowledged the church’s purpose is transformation of people’s lives, which corresponds with Pine and Gilmore’s analysis of marketing and business.

Characteristics of Revivalism and Growth

Despite the apparent doom and gloom for the survival of traditional church denominations in the preceding section, Berger asserted that in the 21st century, ‘Religion has not been declining. On the contrary, in much of the world there has been a veritable explosion of religious faith.’ (2008:23). The characteristics of this growth are evident in several areas. The first area of growth is in geographic areas which have diverse populations and communities (Ammerman, 2014:96). Martin and Catto note ‘Christianity’s loss of its cultural monopoly as Britain has become more religiously diverse’ (2012:388). Surely this echoes the decrease in attendance noted in the previous section? Yet, despite the tone of secular and academic discourse, there has also been significant growth in ‘dynamic Evangelicalism’ around the world (Pollack, 2014:112). In a significant variation, Berger eventually changed his mind on the impact of modernisation towards secularisation and away from religion (Pollack, 2014). These developments of what might be seen as revivalism will be examined later through the lens of large-scale mega-events, which are discussed in further detail below.

Mega-events – Definitions

In the field of events management, an influential work by Getz (2012) provides the mainstream definitions for many academic terms, including the development of the concept of major, hallmark, or mega-events, as part of his typology of events, although the phrase ‘mega-events’ was coined by Roche (2000), a sociologist. Central events management sources that share this definition include Goldblatt (2008), Bowdin, Allen, O’Toole, Harris and McDonnell (2011), Ferdinand and

Kitchen (2012), Bladen, Kennell, Abson and Wilde (2012), Foley, McGillivray and McPherson (2012), Case (2013), and Kassens-Noor, Wilson, Muller, Maharaj and Huntoon (2015). One of the core aims of this paper is to critique that definition, in an attempt to gain deeper understanding of the nuances of the concept, through assessing large events that might play a part in any Christian revival. Getz claims the size of the event as the dominant feature, citing Marris' (1987) definition that a mega-event should 'exceed one million visitors' (Getz, 2012:44-45). Marris' paper provided a summary of the 1987 Congress of the International Association of Scientific Experts on Tourism (AIEST), in which all contributions were analysed in an attempt to clarify and define the concept of mega-events. The debates and discussions of this momentous academic congress resulted in six main conclusions:

- Definitions could be on the basis of volume (number of attendees, e.g. one million), of cost or income (e.g. revenue to the host area, or the expense of building the required facilities), or the psychological significance to attendees of their participation. A key component of this section was the intended flexibility of the definition, to which Marris accorded primacy (1998:34), the relevance of which may have been lost over time.
- Secondly, the Congress discussed the motives for staging mega-events: these included social, economic and, more importantly, political prestige purposes (1998:34)
- Thirdly, eight factors were identified as having potential positive and/or negative impacts resulting from these mega-events: the amount of tourism; the economic impact on the locality and other industries; new technical developments; the impact on the physical environment; social aspects; cultural changes and traditions; psychological outcomes, such as pride and reputation; and local, national and global significance (1998:34-35)
- The sheer size of the event presents challenges to measuring outcomes, as recognised by the Congress (1998:35)
- The fifth conclusion of the Congress concerned the importance of developing strategies for improving the planning processes through scientific study, in order to make improvements for future events (1998:35)
- Finally, Marris summarised the connectivity between the main event and satellite events, which

might form part of a strategic approach by a locality or even by a country. Almost two decades later, we might recognise this in the hosting of key international sporting events, such as the Football World Cup and the Olympics, in Brazil.

So how does the definition of mega-events develop from here? It is clear that Marris' paper takes a flexible approach to the definition of this term. Getz also suggests that for mega-events, such as 'the Olympics, world's fairs and other major sports events' (2012:45), significance is also a key characteristic, citing Vanhove and Witt's (1987) suggestion that a mega-event should be capable of gaining global publicity. Interestingly, a more recent contribution, from Giorgi and Sassatelli suggested that

cultural mega-events in old and new urban spaces . . . entails an awareness-raising, or even a potential radicalisation, at least in the long term (2011:8).

Getz notes the 'mega' impact of positive or negative effects that a smaller event can have on a locality. This provides us with an element of flexibility in the definition, as Getz concludes that:

mega-events, by way of their size or significance, are those that yield extraordinarily high levels of tourism, media coverage, prestige or economic impact for the host community, venue, or organisation (2012:45).

This flexibility leads us to the possibility of exploring a broader or more nuanced definition of mega-event, in the sense that it might include movements that are spread across a wide geographic area. One such example is the popular Alpha course (www.alpha.org), developed in 1990 as a free short course by the Church of England at Holy Trinity, Brompton, and which now counts over 29 million participants in 169 countries, is translated into 112 languages, and has been adopted by churches of different denominations, including Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as independent churches with no denominational connections (<http://uk.alpha.org/our-story/>). This nuanced definition could equally include a stadium tour, whether by a secular or a Christian band.

A more recent assessment of the historical development of the definitions of mega-events to be 'parsimonious' (Muller, 2015:634) in their restrictiveness, calls for a three-tier system, of 'major', 'mega' and 'giga' events, defined by the number of points scored across four characteristics (*Visitor*

Attractiveness = number of tickets sold; **Mediated Reach** = value of broadcast rights; **Total Cost**; and **Transformation** = capital investment) (2015:635).

In terms of evaluating religious events, and particularly Christian events, these measures may be different again. Many such events are free to attend; they may be broadcast on Christian TV channels or online; their cost may be less due to the lack of permanent infrastructure or minimal frills, but perhaps most importantly, rather than an economic definition of transformation, the question arises about the spiritual aspects and religious impacts, and how or if these might be estimated.

As Muller has questioned the definition of mega-events, this paper continues that debate, in relation to religious events, from a church perspective. Could mega-events also include multiple smaller events? Taking Alpha as an example, if over 29 million people have attended an Alpha course, the sheer size of that number must give it significance, even though a single Alpha course might have fewer than 10 participants, or up to hundreds. But what about 'large' Christian events (e.g. 150,000 participants) that are held regularly? This paper examines aspects of events and specific Christian examples in an effort to identify what the relevant dimensions are that might provide clarity, and answer the question: how can we define mega events through the lens of religion, and not simply through sport or world expos?

Typology

According to Getz (2012:37), the Events Typology is based on the form of the event, although he acknowledges the creation of social constructs in so doing. Meanwhile, from a tourism perspective, Ron's (2009) typology of contemporary Christian travel argues that typologies are dependent on the definitions used for the purposes of the research in question.

The structure of the model that Ron uses recognises the non-linear nature of the items, identifies linkages between the items, and constructs a multi-purpose framework as an output. This researcher has faced the difficulty of developing a typology in the past (Dowson, 2012, 2014), and came to an understanding of the challenges, finding hope in Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance' when defining the components of a model or framework, rather than specific 'constituent parts' (Wittgenstein, 1958:31). So, the question here is whether there might be a typology for large or mega-sized Christian events. Is it multi-

layered? And what might the characteristics be?

Festivals

It is in this vein that this next section considers the history of festivals and festival culture, in order to make a comparison with religious events. According to Robinson,

the growth of festival culture should be understood within the larger context of post-war Britain, marked by rises in leisure consumption, improved employment rates and increased disposable incomes (2016:24).

Robinson charts the rise of the 'mega-festival' (2016:25) and its roots in Hakim Bey's (2003) 'TAZ' concept (Temporary Autonomous Zones) (Stuart and Partridge, 2012:267). The late 1960s saw 'the launch of ambitiously scaled pop festivals'; Robinson notes three influential events in particular:

- In 1968 the 'original' Isle of Wight festival ran for two years with an 'alleged capacity of 600,000' but with a maximum number of 500,000 attending (Robinson, 2016:25-26).
- In 1969 Woodstock took place, 'largely considered a one-off event, despite commercialized revivals of the festival in 1994 and 1999' with a maximum number of 300,000 attendees (2016:25-26). Robinson notes that 'trailblazing outdoor summer festivals took place in the [Woodstock] area every year between 1815 and 1841, staged by the Maverick Art Colony' (2016:26-27), and the 1994 revival had 350,000 attendees (2016:28).
- In 1970 Glastonbury was launched and 'grew to the extremely popular, hallmark festival it remains to the present day' (2016:26), with an annual audience of 150,000 for forty years, recognising its status as a mega-event. In 2000, some 100,000 people broke in to the event without tickets (2016:29-30).

Robinson acknowledges the spiritual aspects of festivals as 'mystification that sets the scene for ritualized performances and practices' (2016:107), and also notes that festivals in the UK are developing a characteristic of 'spectacle' (2015:177), often with the engagement of event attendees, as producers as well as participants, rather than as spectators. Robinson suggests that 'The mega festival was key to establishing broad visibility for what is commonly known as counterculture' (2016:26). The concept of 'belonging and unbelonging' (Gordziejko, 2015:266) is

seen in contemporary and historical festivals, whilst historically, the role of religious and ethnic festivals is linked to expressions of ‘community identity and a sense of belonging’ (Brettell, 1990:74). Such research into contemporary festivals (Fabiani, 2011) adds value to the consideration of the nature of some large Christian events – some of which may take the form of festival.

History of Christianity and Events

There is much evidence of widespread celebration in pre-Christian times to be found in the Old Testament. Berger argues that the origins of these festivals ‘constitute historicizations of previously mythologically legitimated occasions’ (1967:157). Threlfall-Holmes identifies religious revival in the 18th and 19th centuries, emanating from many ‘small charismatic sects, similar to those that had flourished in the experimental period of the English Civil War’ (2012:102). Evangelicalism and pietism were key characteristics of these revivals, which crossed boundaries of denominations and nations. During the same period, thousands of travelling preachers and evangelists also gathered great crowds, as they moved across North America in what became known as the ‘Great Awakenings’ (2012:102), passionate in their efforts for conversion and renewal. There were three waves in the Great Awakenings: 1720-50; 1800-70 and 1880-1910 (2012:102), mainly taking place as large open-air meetings so as not to be restricted by the confines of a building, and resulting in many converts. This fits with the concept and definition of mega-events; even though details of numbers are not available, it is possible to deduce that there was a significant impact, from the creation of new Christian denominations. These crowds could have been considerable in size, although the limitations of voice volume would limit the size noticeably, compared to today. One of the most famous of these early preachers was Jonathan Edwards, a Congregationalist Puritan from Massachusetts, active in the 1730s and 1740s (2012:102; Berger, 1967:157). Threlfall-Holmes concludes that:

The revivals were not part of an organized movement but were instead a series of uncoordinated initiatives by individual evangelists . . . As American pioneers spread West, new forms of evangelism were developed to reach them, notably the camp meeting - a several-day-long gathering with several preachers, musicians and so on. Word would spread and isolated pioneers would gather at the appointed time and place for a few days of

social as well as religious refreshment – rather like a modern-day summer festival (2012:103).

In 1760s England, John Wesley’s open-air preaching also allowed large crowds to gather, as he moved around the countryside, preaching night and day (Berger, 1967:157). Such events led to the creation of new denominations, such as Methodism, whose leaders

became extremely well known for their itinerant and apparently tireless preaching around the country. This preaching often took place in the open air, since they were usually banned from meeting in churches: open-air preaching also had the major advantages that it set no limits on the numbers that could attend, and made it clear that the lower classes were welcome (Threlfall-Holmes, 2012:103)

However, the success of these revivals, when churches were full, lacked longevity, and in between and afterwards, they emptied ‘like a tide’ (2012:113).

At the start of the 16th century, Christianity was largely restricted to the confines of Europe. But 400 years later, it had developed into a ‘truly global religion, with an estimated 500 million adherents worldwide’ (2012:115). In the first half of 20th century Britain, church growth was significant,

‘in the suburbs of London, in Catholicism and in the new Pentecostal churches . . . The period during and after World War II constituted a substantial ‘blip’ in the graph of decline, with a significant reinvigoration of British churches’ (Goodhew, 2012:17).

Threlfall-Holmes (2012) suggests that in the early 1950s, post-war nostalgia led to a short-lived increase in church attendance. In this decade, the most active age-group with connections to church were teenagers (Brown, 2006), although wider society rejected its Christian heritage and explored further and further boundaries, challenging social mores and exploring individual identity (2006:279). During the early post-war period, in Britain there appeared to be a ‘shared cultural framework, or ‘sacred canopy’’ (Brown and Lynch, 2012:331), which enabled communication that was still culturally relevant and meaningful, through which churches could connect with people.

The emergence in the modern day of large-scale Christian events began in the UK with Billy Graham’s evangelistic crusades in 1954, according to Guest (2007:24); these were attended by 1.3 million people over a period of three months. Other figures quote 4 million attendees (Brown and Lynch, 2012:332). Pathé

News reported that ‘Billy Graham and his team have made their contribution towards filling the churches of Britain, which have long been almost empty’ (Wolffe and Jackson, 2012:31). Wolffe and Jackson argued that this

churchgoing resurgence following Billy Graham was not a turning of the tide in London - more a freak wave covering a long-term ebb tide that kept receding through to 1990 (2012:31).

The 1960s saw the advent of the charismatic movement, as Pentecostal churches moved in to ‘the gene pool of wider British Christianity’ (Goodhew, 2012:18). This may not have been unconnected with another demographic change in the 1960s, as immigrants into the UK brought their faiths and practice with them, introducing ‘black-majority’ and ‘Orthodox churches’ (Goodhew, 2012:17). Threlfall-Holmes notes the growing awareness of people of different faiths, and that

large numbers of Christians from other cultural backgrounds have become part of the local church context. One of the great lost opportunities of mid twentieth-century European Christianity was the failure of local European churches to adapt to and accommodate a sudden influx of Christian immigrants, who instead tended to react to the lukewarm or even hostile welcome they received by setting up their own style of churches. Most church growth in Britain particularly in the last few decades has been among these new black-led churches (2012:134-135).

In 1982 Pope John Paul II visited London, taking a Mass at Wembley stadium, and went on to Scotland to Edinburgh’s Murrayfield, and Glasgow’s Bellahouston Park (Brown, 2006:309). This differentiated the Roman Catholic Church from the Protestant denominations who had gathered together to support Billy Graham. Indeed, thirty years after his initial visit, over one million people attended ‘Mission England’ mass rallies, held in football stadia, to hear Billy Graham preach once more. But whether these meetings were merely ‘public spectacles’ (Guest, 2007:25), or even had any measurable impact in terms of numbers attending church, at the time they certainly achieved media coverage and public visibility. The original evangelistic events in the UK were able to build on knowledge that many children had gained in school and even at Sunday school, which, some would argue, has been eroded by secular influences on education and society in general (Savage, Collins-Mayo and Mayo,

2006:3). However, Brown recognised that although the 1984 Billy Graham Mission England resulted in large meetings, ‘the cultural impact was less’ (2006:279) than in the 1950s.

By 2000, an accelerating growth in global Christianity resulted in almost 2 billion adherents: approaching one-third of world’s population (Threlfall-Holmes, 2012:129), and changing the epicentre of the faith from Europe to the Global South, including China and South Korea (2012). Threlfall-Holmes notes that:

It is often said that the typical Anglican is now a young African woman, and a similar shift in geographical weight has also taken place in both Catholicism and newer denominations such as Pentecostalism (2012:129).

This assertion is supported by evidence from Thomas (2008). However, today, Christianity is seen as one choice from many, a lifestyle decision that links to leisure and consumerism. (Threlfall-Holmes, 2012; Moynagh, 2001).

From a sociological perspective, the demographic change by which the Global South population and church have grown contrasts with decline in the north, whilst the political power or hegemony of the USA in military and economic terms may have spilled over into the religious arena where it too ‘oppresses any dissenting voice’ (Douglas, 2004:11). This begs the question: is mega-event Christianity a form of global, religious and/or cultural imperialism? Marshall McLuhan wrote in the 1960s of the ‘global village’, where ‘culture was heavily determined by its medium of transmission’ (Coleman, 2000:54) and the question must be asked: to what extent is McLuhan’s adage ‘the medium is the message’ a factor in these large events? Frost and Hirsch’s summary of McLuhan’s work emphasizes the connectivity of ‘technology and technique’ (2013:187) as extensions of the human body and character, ‘accelerat(ing) and enlarg(ing) the scale of previous human functions’ (2013:187). This concept can logically be applied to events, and perhaps particularly to mega-events, in the sense that an event is one such tool or technique that has the potential to shape humanity, as well as being shaped by humanity. Whilst participating in an event can be life-changing, it can also be shaped by corporate and other influences. Some examples follow in an effort to demonstrate these points.

Applying Theory: examples

In order to test a theory, it is useful to identify a range of examples for application of that theory. As a rationale for the use of examples, Berger cites Durkheim who:

in 'The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life', begins with a substantive description of religious phenomena, particularly of the sacred/profane dichotomy, but ends with a definition in terms of the general social functionality of religion (Berger, 1967:176).

The examples in this paper have been gathered from personal experience, recognising the limitations of such a method. The author acknowledges the limitations of non-random sample selection such as that presented by Moody who discusses the methodology of Internet research, and suggests that the detractors of Internet methodologies 'focus on the lack of representativeness in sampling and thus the lack of general applicability to the population at large'. (2009, 239).

Azusa Street

The source of the 'spectacular development' of the 'global expansion of Evangelical Protestantism' (Berger and Zijderfeld, 2010:4-5) began with the 1906 Azusa Street Revival, in Los Angeles, led by William J. Seymour, a charismatic African American preacher. It started at a meeting on April 9, 1906, and continued until roughly 1915. Seymour's congregation was interracial, and services included speaking in tongues (glossolalia). Coleman suggests that these early origins of Pentecostalism were preceded by 'an outbreak of glossolalia in a Bible college in Topeka, Kansas' (2000:21). On 18 April 1906, a reporter from the Los Angeles Times described the services as a 'Weird Babel of Tongues' (2012:21), demonstrating the 'scepticism and hostility with which it was received in wider, polite society' (2012:21). The charismatic gifts that resulted became embedded in Pentecostal practice, to the extent that the phenomenon of Pentecostalisation and charismatic gifts spread around the USA and then the world. Berger and Zijderfeld describe the Pentecostal movement as 'surely the most rapid growth of any religious movement in history' (2010:5). There are now some 400 million Pentecostal Christians worldwide (2010:5), with 100,000 missionaries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (2010:4). Some of today's Christian mega events have their origins in the charismatic Pentecostal movement, expressing characteristics identified by

Coleman as 'glossolalia, healing and prophecy, personal testimony and consciously cultivated liturgical spontaneity' (2000:21). In April 2016, a televised event was held at the local sports stadium, commemorating the 110th anniversary of the original Azusa Street service (<http://www.god.tv/azusanow>).

Thomas notes the number of tele-evangelists and neo-Pentecostal preachers appearing in India, arguing that 'Christian evangelists are responsible for making faith healing a public spectacle' (2008:91), whether at events or through visual media. Charismatics of varying worship styles and theological standpoints are

some of the best-known participants within a huge and increasingly transnational network of Christians, comprising congregations, networks, fellowships, mega-churches and even so-called para-churches (Coleman, 2000:22-23).

Mega-churches

In 2005, Thumma and Travis undertook a comprehensive study of mega-churches, (defined as those with average weekly attendance of 2000-plus) (2007:193), identifying over 1200 megachurches in the US alone. They predicted increasing growth of large churches, with continued expansion of numbers attending. Leaders of these churches have demonstrated a willingness to review their practices, introducing change and new ideas, rather than solidifying tradition. Thumma and Travis note the 'multiracial nature of many megachurches' as well as the delivery of services in other languages, e.g. Spanish. They also identified Korean, Chinese-American and African-American megachurches (2007:184-185). Many megachurches not only have spacious campuses with large carparks and other facilities, but they also exist online, with 'Internet campuses', blogs, and live streaming of services (2007:186).

Ostwalt identifies conformity to popular culture as a strong characteristic of megachurches (2012:71), with entertainment promoted as part of the Christian lifestyle, for example, 'more than one million people who attend Willow Creek functions [events] represent only a fraction of those who are influenced by the church' (2012:72). Other communication channels utilised include the publication of books, music and online resources. Megachurches generally incorporate elements of entertainment, multimedia and popular music in their services and events (2012:80).

Additional research by Bird, identified 1668 megachurches in the USA alone (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YIKShcapvO6LatV5WG7P4XXcзуoaw9EAfKv3IMJwXnQ/edit?hl=en_US&pref=2&pli=1#gid=0). The following lists some of the largest:

- In the USA, the largest church is North Point Ministries, Georgia: attendance 34,558 (pastored by Andy Stanley)
- At number 5 is Willow Creek, Illinois: attendance 25,000 (pastored by Bill Hybels, a renowned Christian author)
- At number 6 is Saddleback Church, California: attendance 25,000 (pastored by another renowned author, Rick Warren)

But these American mega-churches are surpassed by the largest churches in the world:

- In Seoul, South Korea, the Yoido Full Gospel Church has an average weekly congregation of 480,000 people; pastored by Young Hoon Lee
- In Lagos, Nigeria, the Deeper Christian Life Ministry church has 75,000 attendees, led by pastor William Kumuyi
- In Mombasa, Kenya some 60,000 people meet each week at the Jesus Celebration Centre, led by pastor William Lai
- And in San Salvador, El Salvador there are 50,000 members of the Elim Christian Mission led by pastor Mario Vega

In Nigeria, some church buildings can hold 200,000 worshippers. Tomlin notes that the Winners' Chapel in Otta, Nigeria has an indoor seating capacity 50,000, with additional outside overflow capacity of 150,000 (2015:125). As businesses, Nigerian mega-churches make significant contributions to the local and national economy, employing tens of thousands of people.

Toronto / Pensacola

According to Coleman, in the 1970s, charismatic churches in the USA and across the world experienced what is known as 'a 'third wave' of the Spirit (following first Pentecostalism and then charismatic renewal). This has often been cultivated by independent ministries, and is closely associated with such luminaries as the now deceased John Wimber (2000:23). Coleman explains that John Wimber's followers crossed geographic borders and 'transcended

denominational affiliations' (2000:23), beyond his Vineyard grouping. The Toronto Airport Vineyard church became 'the centre of the so-called 'Toronto Blessing'' (2000:23), spreading across the world in 'the globalisation of religious ecstasy' (2000:67).

Whilst this 'outpouring' eventually ceased, another occurred in Pensacola, Florida between 1995 and 2000, with around 4 million seekers flocking from around the world to these hubs of revival. Coleman argues that such 'contemporary revivalist forms, however, appear to compete with and borrow from a post-modern world of healing movements, the New Age, materialism and pluralism' (2000:24), and there are many critics of these events, both within and outside the church.

One result of the deep relationships developed through this intercontinental travel means that the 'interconnections among conservatives are now highly fluid, and mutual influences between classical Pentecostals and other charismatics have become increasingly evident.' (Coleman, 2000:23). Many 'newer' and mega-churches (including those that are several decades old) focus on events, as 'Conferences, prayer networks and media are valued . . . because they sustain a sense of participation' (Coleman, 2000:67). Strong relationships have grown up between the leaders of many independent churches, including speaking at each other's events. Meanwhile, some churches develop their own event programmes, such as the Word of Life Church in Uppsala, Sweden, which trains Nordic Christians through a one-year programme, as well as organising small events regularly throughout the year, along with a spring festival and summer conference that is attended by over 10,000 people annually (Coleman, 2000:94)

Pope Francis

Any gathering where the Pope appears draws vast crowds, including the largest event in papal history, held in Manila in the Philippines in 2015, with an estimated attendance of six to seven million people. (<http://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/01/18/15/luneta-mass-largest-papal-event-history>).

World Youth Day

The Roman Catholic 'World Youth Day', is held regularly and has grown in size; the 20th event held in Cologne, Germany in 2005 had 500,000 attendees, whilst in Brazil in 2013, three million people crowded onto the Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro. The 2016 event, held in Krakow, Poland attracted only 1.6

million attendees from around the world (www.worldyouthday.com; Pfadenhauer, 2010).

German Protestant Kirchentag.

This event was founded 1949 by Reinold von Thadden-Trieglaff with friends in Hannover, as a ‘movement of Protestant lay people’. Demonstrating its independence from the official state Church, it ‘combines spirituality with a responsibility towards society and the world’, and aims to provide ‘a platform for intensive discussion, a forum for critical debate about current questions’ (<https://www.kirchentag.de/english.html>). The Kirchentag is held every two years, and consists of 2500 smaller events held over a period of five days. There are over 100,000 fulltime visitors, and 30,000 active volunteers helping to manage this complex event.

Hillsong

Hillsong is an Australian-based church, initially part of the pentecostal Assemblies of God denomination, with a global reach. In Australia the church has twelve large campuses. In the UK, the six Hillsong sites include the Dominion Theatre London, packed out five times every Sunday, and there are Hillsong churches in Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, South Africa, Brazil, USA. The name, ‘Hillsong’, identifies a chart-topping global worship brand, whose worship bands are televised on Christian satellite channels and regularly tour around the world. Hillsong worship albums have sold over 12 million copies. They have staged large events for 30 years, and their annual conference, now hosted at the Olympic stadium in Sydney, is the largest conference in the whole of Australia, with a capacity of 20,000 people (www.hillsong.com; Tomlin, 2015:127).

Thematic Analysis

In addition to historical and contemporary examples of large Christian events, there are specific characteristics through which it is possible to analyse types of large events. These are discussed below.

Gender: women’s events

Some large churches focus on different groupings for their events, including women-only events, men-only events and young people’s events (Kinnear, 2016). This section reviews some of the women’s events. The Hillsong Colour Conference is made up of seven multi-location international conferences, led by Bobby

Houston, co-pastor with husband Brian Houston, head of the Hillsong church. The aim of the Colour conference is to: ‘gather, equip and mobilize’ women of all ages, backgrounds and cultures. The ethos is that ‘together we can and will make the world a better place’, focusing on ‘the value, worth and wonder of the feminine heart’ (<http://hillsong.com/colour/london/>). On a smaller level, but using a very similar format is the Cherish Women’s Conference, held each summer in Leeds, England: led by Charlotte Gambill, it claims to be

more than a conference, it is a movement. It is full of fun moments, great speakers, special treats but above all it’s about an army of women who gather together once a year make a difference and to impact in this world (www.lifechurchhome.com/conferences/cherish).

‘Dare to Be’ is an all-female event that travels around the USA; this event aims to enable women to experience the benefits of a large conference in one evening. The format is similar to other women’s conferences: a speaker, concert, teaching, storytelling, worship, recognition and honour (<http://daretobe.com/>). Established in 2012, this event is the concept of Charlotte Gambill (a pastor of UK-based Life Church) and Natalie Grant (an American Christian singer). In 2016, Dare To Be held a simulcast event in cinemas around the world, thereby extending its global reach.

Independent Ministries

Many large Christian events are led from independent ministries, both individuals and organisations. ‘Christ for All Nations’ (CFAN: www.cfan.org.uk) is one such institution, led initially by the German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke, who was more recently joined in leadership by Daniel Kolenda. CFAN host open-air ‘Gospel Campaigns’, where hundreds of thousands of people attend meetings, held across East Africa and West Africa. The organisation claims on its website that in Lagos, Nigeria, 1.6 million people attended a single meeting; and in total some six million people attended five consecutive days of services. CFAN has counted over 65 million responses from people filling out ‘decision cards’ and church follow-up. This primarily evangelistic ministry has published over 179 million books, translated into over 123 languages and dialects, printed in 53 countries, but focuses mainly on Africa for its mega-meetings, whilst the key leaders participate in conferences around the world to

Figure 1: Joyce Meyer event, Mumbai, India with estimated attendance of over 1 million.



(Permission granted by Joyce Meyer Ministries, Photographer: Kevin Kelly. http://40years.joycemeyer.org/images/3.India08JanKK_Pan3.jpg)

encourage others in evangelism. Prosperity gospel critic, Coleman, describes these powerful relationships between individuals and church groupings as strong ‘transnational networks’ (2000:30), acknowledging that Bonnke is recognised by his peers as an ‘influential leader’ (2000:217). He shares examples from Africa, where in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1986, Bonnke addressed 4,000 evangelists from 41 African nations at his ‘Fire’ Conference (2000:217). Also in the late 1980s, Bonnke visited Sweden, where his ‘Just Believe’ message was said to have started a revival (2000:102). Wherever he visits in the world, he is seen as linking that country to ‘a world-wide frame of action’ (2000:102). Even if the statistics are inaccurate (and there is photographic evidence on the CFAN website that suggests they are accurate), Bonnke and CFAN are reaching vast numbers of people around the world, and especially in Africa. Bonnke also ‘claims to own the largest mobile tent in the world’ (2000:155).

There are many individuals who have developed independent ministries, with associated large events. Coleman critiques former Assemblies of God pastor, Morris Cerullo, whose independent ministry ‘World Evangelism’ claims he has ‘personally trained’ over five million people in sharing the Gospel in their native languages (<http://mcwe.com/>). Coleman argues that Cerullo’s organisation has ‘alienated many middle-class evangelicals as a result of its extravagant claims to healing and apparently brash Americanism’ (ibid, p39). Coleman also mentions ‘healing televangelist’ Benny Hinn, whose website claims that he has preached to over 1.5 billion people over the course of a 40-year ministry, including a gathering of two million in Mumbai, India in 2004 (<http://www.bennyhinn.org/historic-crusades/>; Coleman, 2000:33; Thomas, 2008).

Latin American-focused King Jesus International Ministry is headed up by Pastor Guillermo Maldonado, and based in Miami, Florida. His website details many healing and evangelistic events, such as the one held in Caracas, Venezuela in March 2016, attended by 100,000 people, with claims of 5,000 conversions as well as healings (<http://kingjesusministry.org>). Many of their events are televised daily beyond the event venues in South America, India and Pakistan, on TBN, Daystar and God TV Christian channels.

American evangelist, Joyce Meyer’s mission organisation is Hand of Hope, which undertakes pastoral ministry, poverty alleviation, medical and healing support, prisons work and disaster relief around the world. Meyer herself addresses evangelistic events of up to one million people (see Figure 1), and delivers training in 32 languages to local supporters to continue the work, as well as broadcasting programmes on Christian channels (www.joycemeyer.org/handofhope).

Whether these activities are assessed as the cult of celebrity, or personality, or a work of God, there are many such individuals and groupings, and their influence is widespread, and global. Whilst it is difficult to validate the numbers given online, there is photographic evidence of extremely large crowds, in some locations turning out night after night, and supported by multimedia and broadcast programmes, as well as printed materials. According to Coleman, some church leaders, mainly conservative charismatics, have developed a form of structural model in which a ‘multi-purpose organisation’ combines with a ‘congregation, Bible school and media business’ to form a ‘mega-ministry’, building links with preachers and congregations from other

countries, strengthening their ‘transnational networks’ (2000:103). Those individuals listed above, and others, are supported by (and supporting) their own organisations, some of which provide resources such as healthcare and education, whilst promoting their work and sharing their message through Christian broadcast media, but with large events replacing the local congregation element, and also participating in powerful transnational networks. As Coleman observes, in Africa the activities of Christian evangelist organisations feature ‘the convention or conference phenomenon’. Such large gatherings provide occasions not only for bringing congregations together to hear preachers from around the world, but also for ‘opportunities for international products to be marketed’ (2000:34).

Theoretical Issues and Questions

The examples identified raise a number of questions, for which a theoretical perspective is useful. A discussion earlier in this paper noted concerns of a ‘hegemonic meta-narrative of secularization’ (Goodhew, 2012:17), which now leads to the concept of Southern Theory (Connell, 2007). A question emerges: are Christian mega-events in the southern hemisphere an expression of religious or cultural colonialism? Connell critiques the nature of received understanding as emanating from a ‘northern’ or ‘metropolitan’ perspective, highlighting that

the idea of modernity spreading from its heartland in Europe and North America to cover the whole world is probably the most widespread of all views of global society (2007:54).

It is possible to identify at least some of the events delivered as perhaps more American hegemony than ‘northern’, but as Meyer notes, there are also ‘eager participants in the formation of universalized global culture’ (2000:240).

Connell’s (2007) critique addresses the fundamental basis for the development of sociology – including the sociology of religion – as being based on an historical analysis of Australian aboriginal culture, often by anthropologists and sociologists who had never been to Australia, or met an Aboriginal person. Connell’s argument identifies key inaccuracies and falsifications of the data which influenced the construction of core sociological theory in the West, including Durkheim’s 1912 text ‘The Elementary Forms of Religious Life’. Durkheim used a study of the myths and customs of the Aboriginal Arrernte tribe, and Connell asserts that

Durkheim, ‘like most sociologists who wrote about ‘Australians’, understood little of the diversity or dynamism of Indigenous cultures in Australia’, which ‘conceals a radical misunderstanding’ (2007:78) of such cultures. Connell cites Durkheim’s contemporary, van Gennep, whose review of Durkheim’s work ‘pointed out that the book was riddled with doubtful factual claims... that infected the whole enterprise of evolutionary sociology’ (2007:79). The relevance of this discussion underpins a question as to the overwhelming influence of Western concepts - not only about God, or about Christianity, or Christian theology, but also about the practical ways in which churches, denominations and individual Christians promote their religion, through the medium of events, and particularly of mega- or very large events. However, Arweck and Beckford note that globalisation and diversity are now resulting in churches sending missionaries from the developing world (especially the Global South) to the USA and Europe (2012:367, Catto, 2012), in a converse flow from that anticipated.

In addition, Connell’s study cites Shariati, whose 1979 analysis of the influences on Islam demonstrates

a tradition of struggle against domination as the core of religious history, at least in the ‘Abrahamic’ prophetic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism (2007:131).

This is a view echoed by Berger. Shariati’s theological interpretation of Islam views ‘revolutionary religion [as] monotheistic; orthodox state-aligned religion [as] polytheistic and pseudo-Islamic’ (2007:132). Perhaps there is a parallel with faith events and their use by Western organisations and individuals around the world? The global cultural domination of corporations such as Disney, which propagate a way of living and a way of engaging with the world, are interpreted by Connell as ‘propaganda’ (2007:150), encouraging neo-liberal pseudo-authenticity. This problematisation echoes Boorstin’s 1961 consideration of the development of ‘pseudo-events’ by organisations in pursuit of publicity and profit. Robinson condemns the apparent ‘insatiable consumerism’ (2016:178) of contemporary festivals, which appear to encompass

a limitless demand for novelty and the somewhat unflattering human drive towards what Boorstin branded the ‘synthetic happening’ (Robinson, 2016:178, Boorstin, 1992:9).

But surely, of all events, it should be possible to evidence ‘authenticity’ in those that have their basis in faith? Is it possible to prove that a church event is

‘authentic’? And if so, how is that authenticity measurable, if at all? From a personal perspective, as a Christian who attends many events, I have experienced ‘God’s presence’ in some church events. But the challenge still exists of providing wider and generalisable data. The individuals and organisations discussed in this paper would argue that they do provide statistics – of numbers of event attendees, of ‘decisions’ made, of books sold, of media viewings, and so on. Yet another issue arises as to the validity of such numbers – to what extent are they estimations or assumed? How can the academy draw conclusions from data if we cannot justify the validity and reliability of such data?

Furthermore, Connell noted that the indigenous (southern) cultural response often adopted hierarchy, discipline and authority (2007:186). Responding to such power structures, are Christian organisations guilty of promoting Western practices and non-faith values through mega-events, alongside their faith? Are some Christian mega-events subject to the same developments of ‘entertaining gimmickry and not a ‘more meaningful’ mode of engagement’ (Robinson, 2016:178), as commercial festivals stand accused?

Analysis: multi-layered characteristics

With increasing consumer choice available, as ‘modernization produces plurality’ (Berger and Zijderveld, 2010:18), Christians can choose to be Anglican, or Catholic, or another denomination, or none. They can choose to go to church or not. They can choose from a range of spiritual perspectives and

activities, and say they are ‘into Buddhism’, whilst holding some beliefs and practices that previously might have been considered in opposition to one another. Berger and Zijderveld note the ‘decline in church-related religiosity’ in Western Europe, but acknowledge a wide range of ‘religious activity’ outside church, concluding that ‘it cannot be plausible maintained that modernity necessarily leads to decline of religion’ (2010:6). This brief study of church mega-events indicates multiple examples of growth, illustrated somewhat in Figure 2, which attempts to categorise the different characteristics of church mega-events.

The following sections briefly outline the contents of each aspect in the model:

Organisation: pan-denominational / denominational / church / independent ministry.

This describes the organisational basis of the event. For example, Kirchentag is a pan-denominational event, covering multiple Protestant denominations; Alpha is delivered by most denominations, including Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, and; thriving para-church organisations develop ‘networks such as New Wine, which are backed primarily by mainline congregations’ (Goodhew, 2012:6). Denominational examples include the Roman Catholic World Youth Day event. Church-organised events include Hillsong, with its global worship brand; and Independent ministries include Joyce Meyer, and Reinhart Bonnke’s Christ for All Nations organisation.

Place: geographic location / diverse populations.

Berger and Zijderveld identify western and central Europe as ‘the one important part of the world in which secularisation theory appears to be plausible’ (2010:6), and in which generally, church attendance is falling. In contrast, in the Global South, where the majority of the growth in Christianity is occurring, Christian mega-events are more likely to be found, especially those organised by independent ministries, such as Joyce Meyer and Christ for All Nations. Diverse populations are found in major cities, such as London. Goodhew notes the positive impact of immigration on Anglican dioceses, especially in London, with the growth of black majority churches, which are transforming the capital to be, ‘more like American cities such as New York or Chicago which are very far from becoming ‘secular cities’’ (2012:5). There are more mega-churches in such ethnically-diverse areas, as Wolffe and Jackson (2012) conclude,

Figure 2 : Model of Church Mega-Event Characteristics

Organisation	Pan-denominational Denomination Church Independent Ministry
Place	Geographic location Diverse Populations
People	Women Men Youth
Media	Broadcast Media Internet Music Global Brand
Event Types	Conferences and Conventions Festivals Outdoor Meetings Repeated Events Touring

with growth in numbers of churches, of members, as well as growth in proportion to the population. London is a good example of the impact of diverse populations on churches, where even though mainstream denominations may be declining elsewhere, their London congregations are growing (2012:6). Simultaneously, there is ample independent evidence for the growth of 'new' non-mainstream churches. Brierley's 1989-2005 study identified '2950 new churches', and estimated 'that over 5000 new churches have been started in Britain in the 30 years since 1980' (Goodhew, 2012:7). Part of this growth includes the established Church of England which has developed with its partners 'fresh expressions', 'church plants' and 'emerging church' (2012:7), and Anglican churches such as Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) planting congregations in other areas (Wolffe and Jackson, 2012:35).

People: women's, men's and youth events

It is common practice in secular marketing to identify and target specific groupings for specific events, and many church organisations have adopted a similar approach. Hillsong's Colour conference, or Life Church's Cherish conference, both for women, or the Rock Nations youth festival (<http://www.lifechurchhome.com/conferences/rocknations/rn16>) are all growing in popularity and attendance.

Media: broadcast media / internet / music / global brand

Media is used by many mega-churches as part of a successful structural model, which Coleman (2000) describes as including their large congregations, a Bible school or training facility, and a media business, within a multi-purpose organisation. Whether their worship team is a global brand, such as Hillsong, or whether they present their own programmes on Christian TV channels, there are podcasts, live-streamed events and services to internet and cinemas, YouTube videos, and constantly updated social media for many churches, small or large.

Coleman's research identified that for televangelist programmes and channels, viewers 'may prepare themselves ritually before turning on a programme, perhaps by reading the Bible or praying' (2000:168), whilst in mega-churches 'virtually all services are video and audio-taped, and become available for sale and export soon after their occurrence in real-time' (2000:170) Knott and Mitchell acknowledge the impact of this 'transformation of communicative

environments' (2012:245) on religious practice in services and events.

Event Types: conferences and conventions / festivals / outdoor meetings / repeated events / touring.

Conferences and Conventions are a staple of independent churches, denominations and pan-denominational organisations. The Swedish Word of Life church takes such a programme approach (Coleman, 2000:94), as do many mega-churches. Examples of explicitly Christian Festivals have not been mentioned previously, but there are multiple instances, such as in the UK, the Greenbelt arts festival (<http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/>) or 'The Big Church Day Out' (<http://bigchurchdayout.com/>). Outdoor meetings are used, as in times past, to accommodate larger numbers, when adequately-sized buildings are not available. Repeated events, such as Alpha, clearly have longevity - and out of the HTB stable have come similarly designed programmes, from marriage preparation to 'How to Drug Proof Your Kids'. Touring bands have been core to the secular music industry since its existence, similarly, there are many Christian global worship brands and touring bands.

Conclusion

Building on Muller's (2015) questioning of the limitations of the accepted definitions of 'mega-events', in conjunction with Marris' (1988) assertion that the definition should be treated flexibly, it is evident that the lens of religious (and more specifically in the case of this paper, Christian) events, adds insight into our understanding of the mega-events concept and its outworking in this area. Robinson identifies the elements of spectacle in contemporary festivals (2015), and spiritual aspects (2016), which are mirrored in many of these large religious events. Thumma and Travis argue that 'worship in a mega-church can seem like a well-produced show' (2007:149), or a 'spiritual spectacle' (2007:149), demonstrating similarities with high church (e.g. Catholic, Orthodox) and mainline denominations' liturgical services – and sharing more in common with contemporary secular music festivals than either group might like to think. This continuing debate between 'public spectacle' and 'authenticity' in mega-church services and events stands up to comparisons with traditional Cathedral services (Barley, 2012:77-89), and invites further investigation.

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