



Cool Christianity. Hillsong and the Fashioning of Cosmopolitan Identities, *written by* Christina Rocha

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Cool Christianity. Hillsong and the Fashioning of Cosmopolitan Identities by Cristina Rocha [1] explores the Australian megachurch Hillsong and its influence on young middle-class Brazilians transitioning into adulthood. Cristina Rocha, who refers to herself “as a secular and progressive anthropologist” (19), is currently a Professor at Western Sydney University. Hillsong, as “a global religious phenomenon” (9), became known amongst other characteristics for its music and celebrity culture, and was recently the focus of the news for its “sexual abuse and money scandals [...] in the United States and Australia” (preface, vii).

The book presents various focal points and key questions that support its argument, namely [2] “that Hillsong’s Cool Christian style, not only shapes the subjectivity and aspirations of young middle-class Brazilians but also helps them find a home in the Global North” (31). Relevant key questions (11) include, amongst others, why Hillsong’s aesthetic style appeals to young middle-class Brazilians, the role of Pentecostalism in the lives of Rocha’s informants, and an exploration of the transnational field of Pentecostalism. The analysis of her first chapters starts in Brazil, before proceeding to the stay at Hillsong in Australia. The later chapters focus on the time when her informants return home to Brazil, while also analysing how Brazilian churches deal with Hillsong’s aesthetics. Therefore, Rocha arranges her seven chapters in a specific order, aiming to demonstrate a circular flow of transnational Pentecostalism.

In the introduction, Rocha provides some first essential definitions, which are relevant to [3] the reader for understanding the following structure and content of the book. Of paramount importance is her definition of “Cool Christianity,” since it is an integral part of the book title (see her further definition in chapter one). Additionally, she explains her research approach, using “multisited ethnography combined with analysis of traditional and digital media” (13). Rocha undertook interviews and participant observation in both countries, Australia and Brazil, from 2015 to 2020. The COVID pandemic challenged her to continue her research online (15).

Chapter one further evaluates the definition of “Cool Christianity.” The author highlights how [4] the sacred and the secular become intertwined when churches like Hillsong, amongst others, use fashion trends, celebrity culture, and/or pop music as strategies to attract young people. Based on the “two interlinked concepts of style and sensational forms” (30) by Birgit Meyer, Rocha refers to Hillsong’s “Cool Christianity” style as a new sensational form. Meanwhile, the author explains that “Cool Christianity” offers her target group an identity and a feeling

of belonging to the Global North. She also highlights how her informants consciously try to distinguish themselves from their own Brazilian Pentecostal background.

“Fandom,” the name of chapter two, analyses how Hillsong and its “cool” aesthetic style took root in Brazil. Therefore, the author first provides an overview of Pentecostal history in Brazil. Hillsong became known to young people in the country through music, particularly its band Hillsong United. Moreover, her informants equate Hillsong with Australia, describing both as dream-like places which they associate with excellence and perfection. Here, Rocha uses the term “mattering map” (65), meaning engagement and effort for Hillsong gives them a sense of purpose. This illustrates how fandom provides young people with an identity. Thus, it is also perceived as God’s dream for them to travel to Hillsong. Additionally, she points out that the result of Hillsong’s mingling of the sacred and secular is that the church gets criticised for the fact that it relies heavily on celebrity culture while at the same time lacking depth in theology. [5]

Chapter three, “Resting in God,” focuses on her informants—young Brazilian people who travel to Australia to join Hillsong. By highlighting what it means to be a Brazilian living in Australia, the author provides insights into challenges her informants face. This includes the challenges of the visa system, being on their own away from family and friends for the first time, adapting to a foreign language, and experiencing downward mobility. Consequently, many Brazilians express their faith in God and refer to His control over their “migration project” (91) despite these precarious circumstances. Moreover, the church community they find in Australia serves as their new family while they are away from home. [6]

Chapter four, “Living the Dream,” continues the exploration of the described dream-like experience of young Brazilian students, now focussing on Hillsong College. While Hillsong College emphasises leadership, it offers its students a sense of freedom and autonomy in their lifestyle—something they often miss in their Brazilian churches. Another characteristic of Hillsong Church is that Hillsong College students are required to perform volunteer work, at the same time meaning that for the church to function, it relies on this mandatory volunteering. Here, Rocha discusses advantages and disadvantages of volunteer labour at the church. Serving at Hillsong provides her informants with the aim of bringing change, and furthermore enables them to connect globally with others. [7]

“Transnational Infrastructures of Circulation,” Chapter five, focusses on the infrastructures that facilitate the circulation of the “Cool Christianity” style. The author analyses Hillsong’s choices overseas not to construct and build their own spaces but to use rented buildings instead. Again, here she further demonstrates how Hillsong, as a seeker church, mingles the sacred and the secular to attract its audience and new members. Furthermore, the author examines the online infrastructure. It was already well-established pre-pandemic but became increasingly relevant when Hillsong transitioned its services and activities online due to COVID restrictions. As a result, the author notices amongst her informants a strong sense of belonging to this “‘global church family’ (an expression dear to Hillsong)” (133). Moreover, in this chapter she analyses Hillsong’s church network. Rocha comes to the conclusion that such infrastructures function as “an architecture or a system through which people, religious ideas, practices, beliefs, and materialities circulate” (142). [8]

Chapter six, “The Return,” explores the challenges faced by the cohort of young Brazilian individuals when they return home from Hillsong College. Here, the author explains how her informants attempted to initiate changes in their churches based on what they learned at Hillsong. Being back home in Brazil, they struggled with their former churches, and in [9]

many cases, their pastors did not listen to the suggestions and ideas they brought with them from Hillsong. Consequently, many people struggled to find a new church, as they engaged in church shopping with the aim of seeking a church more similar to Hillsong's approach.

The final, seventh chapter, "Taking Root and Spreading Shoots," examines the Hillsong branch in São Paulo. It was ultimately established in 2016 after being announced in 2015. Here, the author again highlights the clash between Hillsong's aesthetics and the further conservative Brazilian Pentecostal churches, resulting in complications when starting and establishing the church plant. Furthermore, she closely examines some of those churches in Brazil that have adopted or copied the Hillsong style, for example Lagoinha (179–182) or Igreja no Cinema (183).

In the conclusion, Rocha focusses on the scandals of founding pastor Brian Houston. The disclosure of "breaching the Hillsong code of conduct" (preface, vii), after previously facing "criminal charges for covering up his father's child sexual abuse" (189) led to his resignation as Senior Global Pastor in 2022. Adding a new focus to her findings with Hillsong's recent history, she discusses how damage control was managed and maintained within the Hillsong Network. Here, she shows how Hillsong was able to take advantage of its local network to protect its branch in Brazil from the consequences of the scandal. Rocha concludes by emphasising the book's significance: "It shows that the local [...] is key to how religion globalizes" (195). In this way, the conclusion also functions as an outlook.

The publication is of interest to informed scholars who engage in anthropology, religious studies, and its related fields. Rocha's findings are a valuable contribution to the academic discourse of global Pentecostal studies and of material religion. As she states, most research so far focusses on Hillsong in the Global North (11). By including and basing her findings on these results, she offers new insights and approaches with a focus on the Global South, thus the transnational Pentecostal field between her two chosen countries. Furthermore, the book offers enriching perspectives on the discourse of religious abuse and damage control in religious institutions. Hillsong's strategy to minimise impact on the Brazil church branch depicts an interesting example. This is noteworthy because, according to Rocha, the Hillsong case contrasts with another example of a megachurch scandal (see her remarks about the comparison with Mars Hill megachurch in the conclusion). By offering extensive explanations, the author hence broadens the book's appeal to a non-academic audience.

Rocha's work demonstrates how class distinction, social status, and its attempt to overcome these circumstances influence the dreaming and aspirations of young Brazilian people to become part of the Global North. Thus, the importance of the English language provides her informants with a cosmopolitan perspective. *Cool Christianity* also highlights the challenges that many scholars had to face in 2020 and beyond during the COVID pandemic. The book functions as a positive example of a successful contribution of research under challenging circumstances. The author here profited from Hillsong's rapid change to online services and activities.

To conclude, the book stands out due to multiple aspects: First, apart from Hillsong, the author based her findings on research at two other churches which embrace "a similar style to Hillsong—Australian megachurch C3 [...] and CJC, a Brazilian migrant church" (15). Next, Cristina Rocha's profound research demonstrates how deeply familiar she is with her research field. As she mentioned in the introduction (19), she left Brazil to study in the USA—at an age similar to that of those Brazilian students who leave for Hillsong after finishing high school or during their studies at university (106). This determining factor allowed her to connect

with her informants on multiple levels, such as communicating in Portuguese, and therefore carrying out in-depth ethnographic research. Furthermore, through this perspective, she was able to help the reader understand what young people find so attractive about Hillsong and its “Cool Christianity” style. Above all, she demonstrates how to keep a well-balanced and reflective stance as a researcher. Rocha ensures that the reader can easily follow the flow and structure of her analysis. She repeats her main findings, observations, and arguments throughout the book. In doing so, she interweaves many personal stories of her informants in her analysis, which makes her book relatable.

Overall, *Cool Christianity* is a well-considered and thought-through book which offers the reader recent insights into global Pentecostalism and its new forms, and its flow between two countries in the Southern Hemisphere. In addition, it provides valuable insights on culture and religion in Australia, and also particularly in Brazil.¹ [15]

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