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The Religion of Success: The Religious and Theological Roots of the American Success Industry of Self-Help, Personal Growth, and Wealth

Sharon M. Lindenburger
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Dr. Gary Badcock
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Theology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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The Religion of Success:
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Help, Personal Growth, and Wealth

Thesis format: Monograph

By

Sharon Lindenburger

Graduate Program in Theology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

The American success industry comprises an \$11 billion for-profit enterprise that is growing by almost six percent every year in the United States and Canada (and increasingly in other countries). Purveyors of success teachings claim that they teach methods by which anyone, with enough commitment and vision, can “have it all.” “Having it all” includes health, relationships, careers, and spirituality, but the bottom line for the success industry is almost always material wealth. This thesis argues that religious and theological memes characterize the *modus operandi* of the success industry, particularly themes derived from American Protestantism, in the form of Puritan theology and the history of revivalism in America. These undercurrent memes bypass critical filters, creating a distorted form of hidden theology of which many consumers of success events appear to be unaware. There is therefore a need for a countervailing response from the discipline of theology to add to the current discourse regarding the effects of the success industry and its role within a consumerist society.

Keywords: success industry, motivational speakers, Protestant Puritan theology, religious revivalism, consumerism, theological critique, popular religion, memes

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Preface

I begin this thesis with a personal preface because it was my experiences with the self-help, personal growth, and success seminar and conference industry that seeded questions that would later come to intrigue me as possibilities for theological research in the field of popular religion.

During my many years as an editor working with several trade publishing houses, I often was assigned to edit self-help books. The authors of these books were usually motivational speakers seeking paying customers for their various self-improvement workshops and conferences. Eventually all these books began sounding similar both in themes and in the types of exhortations communicated to readers. The styles were different, but the messages of the books had a remarkable congruence with each other. In the editing field, this kind of trend can often be attributed to the popularity of the self-help genre itself—a formula that works, i.e., laying out some kind of problem or challenge in a person’s life and then providing methods, usually in steps, to solve the problem.

However, it was not until I actually started attending some of the events hosted by the authors of some of the more popular books that I began to see the possibility that something much deeper could be going on. Sometimes a publisher or newspaper would send me to a motivational speaker’s event to get a better sense of what these authors were actually doing. At one large event held in 2007 at London, Ontario’s Convention Centre, featuring a day-long presentation by a prominent American motivational speaker, Jack Canfield (often dubbed “America’s success coach” and originator of the bestselling *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series),¹ I

¹ London, Ontario was the April 2007 leg of Jack Canfield’s North American tour of his one-day workshop on “The Success Principles.” The workshop, which was more like a conference, given that it had more than 1000 people in attendance, began at 9 a.m. and ended at 6 p.m., with only very short breaks and a 45-minute lunch period. This

sat beside a businessman who seemed to grow increasingly restless as the day went on. Finally in the late afternoon, the man turned to me and said, “I’ve had enough...this guy is preaching. What is this, a posh revival tent?”

His comment took me by surprise. Certainly motivational speakers “preach” their own particular brand of self-improvement and success. But it was the phrase “revival tent” that got my attention. Was there something religious about the ostensibly secular Mr. Canfield? Could the similarity of messages conveyed by motivational speakers not just be the result of persuasive techniques so well-known in the advertising world and in studies of consumer behaviour, but also be the product of a type of theology? Were there hidden theological ideas in these secular presentations? If so, what kind of theology? If such an implicit theology was there, how did it relate to the tradition or traditions from whence it might have originated? Did the attendees at these conferences perceive that there was anything theological going on? The gentleman beside me at the Jack Canfield event appeared to have picked up on an underlying religious tone, but most of the audience remained engrossed with learning Mr. Canfield’s pointers on how to set goals, reframe negative beliefs, make millions of dollars, and have a more fulfilling life. Sometimes success-oriented motivational speakers will deliberately introduce a spiritual element into their talks, such as when Mr. Canfield began using words like “destiny” or “higher purpose.” I wondered then if the attendees connected this to any *specific* spirituality. What effect does this possibly hidden theology (or theologies) have on people lives? Questions like these were, for

extended style of intense interaction with an audience is quite common in many such events, and may be seen to relate to a theme I will take up in Chapter Two of this thesis, namely the methods of revivalism. Regarding the *Chicken Soup* series of books, there are over 200 books published with more being published every year. They are considered the bestselling trade paperbacks in the history of publishing, and a Harris poll found that over 88 percent of the American public recognizes the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* brand. See <http://www.chickensoup.com/newsroom.asp?cid=new.facts>, accessed July 6, 2013.

me, the origin of the topic I have chosen for this Master's thesis—the exploration of the religious and theological underpinnings of what I call “the success industry.”

This thesis will argue that the largely U.S.-based success industry makes considerable use of the roots of Protestant Puritan religion, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, and that specific types of theological ideas—most specifically, the Puritan Calvinist idea of election and predestination, and later the phenomenon of revivalism in American religious history—form a seductive undertow in what in many instances appear to be secular ideas about business, entrepreneurship, the personal acquisition of wealth, and the pursuit of happiness. The focus on these ostensibly secular goals may explain, in part, why so many attendees at these events do not seem to be aware that there is anything religious going on (although the gentleman at the Canfield event, mentioned earlier, did pick up on a religious theme).

As the United States is the world's most successful super-power, it is not surprising that the American ethos that grew out of its founding religious traditions has influenced many other nations. This includes American-style secular motivational speaking and success seminars. The reason this thesis puts an emphasis on the American ethos and its role in creating the success industry is because American ideas of success have infiltrated much of the western world (and in particular the U.S.A.'s nearest neighbour, Canada), and developing nations as well. It should be said, therefore, that the subject of the success industry is one that has relevance to the world beyond the borders of the U.S.A., and that an issue of concern is that it has a certain global reference. As such, it is something that theological scholarship needs to take more seriously.

Chapter One

Introduction and Literature Review

In this chapter I will offer an overview of the context of the American success industry, its reach, the promises it makes, its possible dangers, and its appeal to audiences. I will also look at some sources within scholarly literature that could shed light on the themes I will be exploring. First, however, it is necessary to identify some exclusions.

1.1 Exclusions

It is not possible to cover the entire sweep of “self-improvement” within the limits of this thesis, and thus it is appropriate to note some important exclusions at the beginning. I have chosen to focus primarily on the seemingly secular success industry that is largely aimed at convincing people that wealth and worldly achievements are the path to a good life. I will not deal in any great detail with the field largely known as “New Age” which encompasses a plethora of esoteric spiritual and mystical practices often borrowed from other cultures, other than to indicate that many success teachers do at times use new age practices in parts of their presentations. Also, I do not look at the phenomenon of self-help groups that are not commercially-oriented, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, support groups for various illnesses and mental health issues, and so forth. I concern myself here mainly with the commercial and profit-driven success industry.

There are also certain social questions that cannot be explored. In particular, I have not presented the experiences of African-Americans in the success industries. In the quest for upward mobility, African-Americans have begun to interact with success trainings, seminars, and

motivational speakers, and have produced some influential secular speakers such as Les Brown and Chris Gardner (the subject of the book and film, *The Pursuit of Happyness* [sic]). I will, of necessity, touch upon the vast influence of Oprah Winfrey as she is, in many ways, the success industry's most shining icon. But overall, the complexity of African-American history and spirituality, and its relationship to the quest for success, is beyond the scope of this thesis (but would definitely need to be factored into a more extensive study).

Another area that I touch upon but will not elaborate on to any great extent is the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel or "Word of Faith" movement in many ways mirrors the secular success industry, but its theology is certainly not hidden. However, the topic of the prosperity gospel itself and its roots in Pentecostalism could be another entire thesis project, and as I could not do it justice in this study, it will be left aside.

My focus instead will be on describing and critiquing the profit-driven success industry, the argument being that though the success industry is ostensibly secular, in fact it contains many cultural assumptions from American religious history. In this thesis, most of the examples of success teachers in action reference Jack Canfield and Tony Robbins, simply because of their high profiles in the industry and the fact that I have been able to observe both of them first-hand. As well, Canfield and Robbins are fairly typical of the industry as a whole.

1.2 An Overwhelmingly Protestant Phenomenon?

After the conversation with the gentleman who compared the Jack Canfield event to a revival meeting, I began to wonder if the religious background of the majority of success seminar participants might be Protestant. An actual study of the audiences for such events would be highly interesting as a future research project. At one success and personal growth event I

attended in the U.S.,² I decided to do an informal survey during the break times. I casually asked people what their religious background was. If they said they were “not religious,” I asked them about the religious backgrounds of their parents. Of 40 people to whom I asked these questions, 31 were Protestant (comprising Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, and Pentecostal). Of the remaining nine, five said “Roman Catholic,” two said “Jewish,” and two insisted that neither they nor their parents had any religious affiliation. My little informal survey could hardly be called academically rigorous and certainly did not adhere to expected standards of sociological research. Nevertheless it was interesting to find that the majority of the 40 people I questioned were Protestants. It was also interesting that the event I attended was in Chicago, a city with a large Catholic population that on the basis of my unofficial survey seemed under-represented in the audience. This perhaps speaks to the ongoing power that America’s original Protestant roots continue to exercise in the minds and hearts of Americans, despite the presence of millions of Catholics and the emergence of religious diversity involving other religious traditions in the U.S.A. America is considered by many scholars to be the most religious nation in the world, particularly identifying predominantly as Christian. According to the Pew Forum’s research on religious traditions in America, 78.4 percent of Americans identify as Christian, with Protestants comprising 51.3 percent (of which the largest percentage is evangelical at 26.3; other mainline churches such as Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, and so forth were 18.1 percent, with another 6.9 percent representing

² Chicago, December 3–6, 2008, “Rules for Six-Sensory Living” presented by Sonia Choquette. Choquette’s work is about learning to access intuition (the “sixth sense”) in all aspects of life. Her premise is that a sharpened intuition can lead to success in business, health, relationships, finances, and spirituality. I had been sent there as a journalist to investigate how influential Choquette’s “reach” was in terms of whether or not business people were making use of her teachings. There were indeed people from many professions there, many of them from health care, who felt that greater intuition would make them more successful in their careers.

historical black churches). Catholics represented 23.9 percent.³ Protestantism, then, remains the dominant American religious ethos in a continuum extending all the way from the early history of European settlement to the present. I will argue that the American success industry draws upon these Protestant roots and distorts them.

Meeting this task in an academic thesis presents a challenge. First, there is not a lot of scholarly research on the success industries themselves. Thus I had to do a fair amount of “translation” of religious studies, social sciences, and theological writings in order to apply them to the success industry to see if they could illuminate my research questions. Second, success industry motivational speakers do not communicate in a scholarly or measurable fashion. Getting details about them and their enterprises required personal exposure to success events, interviews with attendees, reading key books by some of the speakers, and following their presence on social media.

1.3 The Need for a Critique of the Success Industry

In October 2009, the success industry found itself in the glare of adverse publicity. A famous motivational speaker, James Arthur Ray, conducted a five-day event in Arizona. He called it the “Spiritual Warrior” retreat. He claimed that it was the culmination of his signature program known as *Harmonic Wealth*, an expensive training program aimed at improving all aspects of one’s life—from relationships to health to career to finances—and most especially promised that participants could get very rich simply by following Ray’s teachings. The cost for the Spiritual Warrior event was \$10,000 per person with food, accommodation, and travel expenses (not to mention the purchase of various James Ray-oriented products) added on as extra

³ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Religion in America: Summary of Key Findings.” <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>, accessed June 4, 2013.

costs, bringing the actual price closer to \$15,000. Ray was known for adding “spiritual” teachings into his events. On this occasion, he decided to use his own version of a Native American sweat lodge (an action that significantly angered Native American communities in the southwest U.S.).⁴ He crowded over 60 people into a 415-square foot sweat lodge after having subjected participants to a prior 36-hour “vision quest” in the desert without food or water. As a result of the extreme heat in the structure, fasting-weakened bodies, and overcrowding, three people died of multiple-organ failure due to heat stroke and more than 20 were seriously injured or sickened, some permanently. Ray was arrested and initially charged with manslaughter. He eventually was convicted of negligent homicide in 2011 and sent to prison for 24 months. As of July 12, 2013, he was released on probation after serving the majority of his sentence.⁵ There is speculation that he plans to start offering success seminars again.

This tragic event shone a harsh spotlight on an industry that has permeated many aspects of American life and that has spilled over into Canada, parts of Europe, Australia and New Zealand, parts of Asia, and even some third world countries. Although James Ray’s event represents an extreme form of the success industry in the sense that it actually caused death and physical harm, Ray’s methods and messaging were similar to other success-oriented motivational speakers and authors who promise to make people successful beyond their wildest dreams and who charge high fees for their events and subsequent coaching programs.

The majority of Ray’s participants could be categorized as upper-middle-class affluent Americans (with some Canadians and a few from other countries). The criminal trial revealed

⁴ <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/06/24/verdict-in-self-help-gurus-sweat-lodge-trial-stirs-reaction-among-native-americans/>

⁵ The James Ray story was covered by numerous media. One such media report is Bob Ortega, “James Arthur Ray Gets Prison Time in Sweat-Lodge Deaths,” *The Arizona Republic*, November 19, 2011. www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2011/1, accessed November 11, 2012. As of July 12, 2013, Ray was released from prison and placed on parole.

many of them to be doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants, real estate brokers, and financial executives.⁶ By most standards, these individuals could be said to be “successful.” Most of them had good jobs and professions, stable families, and a circle of friends. However, they wanted more—perfect romantic partners, bigger houses, more high-end cars, more power in their careers, perfect health, a richer spiritual life, and most of all they wanted more money in their bank accounts. They believed that they could use both practical and spiritual means taught to them by James Ray in the wealth lessons and goal-setting strategies that Ray touted to achieve wealth and a fuller life.

If James Ray’s event represented the high end of individuals drawn to promises of wealth, many adherents of self-improvement speakers are of lesser means. For example, at London, Ontario’s Jack Canfield event in 2007, the majority of audience members were from various London workplaces, including many from non-profit organizations. Some people were unemployed; some were students; and some were retirees. They had all paid the fee of several hundred dollars (there was a lesser general pass and a VIP pass), or alternatively, London businesses had bought up corporate seats and sent groups of their employees. When Tony Robbins, one of the most well-known motivational speakers in the world, did an event in London some months later, the packed convention centre was filled with the same wide range—from students to unemployed individuals to working employees to executives to retirees.

It is important to state that there is nothing inherently wrong with seeking to improve one’s lot in life, or with setting goals, or with having a dream one seeks to fulfill. But is this industry a legitimate way to change one’s life? The testimonials that speakers put on their

⁶ State of Arizona vs. James Arthur Ray, trial transcripts found at <http://apps.supremecourt.az.gov/docsyav/>, accessed March 27, 2012. The transcripts of testimony at the trial reveal the occupations and economic status of many of the attendees who testified at the trial. As of July 12, 2013, Ray has been released from prison and is currently on parole (<http://verdenews.com/main.asp?SectionID=1&SubSectionID=1&ArticleID=55146>), accessed July 12, 2013.

websites contain glowing reports of people changing their lives for the better. However, testimonials do not constitute measurable evidence. The industry does not keep statistics on how many clients actually achieve a good financial return on investment. Thus it is difficult to know the true efficacy of such events, but one suspects that it takes a great deal more than motivational exhortations and the explication of techniques to move people to change their life circumstances. Jack Canfield, in an interview I conducted with him for a magazine article that ended up not getting published due to the magazine in question ceasing publication, indicated that he felt that only approximately two percent of people who attend his events actually make significant changes in their lives. He attributed this to laziness and lack of motivation, and the tendency of people to want to stay in their “comfort zone” and not take risks or learn new habits.⁷ Nevertheless, his events and those of other big-name speakers such as Tony Robbins, Wayne Dyer, and Oprah, to name just a few, continue to draw many thousands of people, all seeking for something they feel they do not have. Why are so many people turning to motivational speakers and availing themselves of expensive programs that have not shown measurable results and that constitute a considerable expenditure from people’s personal incomes should they choose to get involved with one of these programs?

The sheer size of the success industry, with its network of motivational speakers, seminars, workshops, retreats, online and offline programs, and its plethora of published books is astonishing. Market Data, a U.S. company that tracks market trends in various industries, released the findings of its 2010 study of “The U.S. Market for Self-Improvement Products and Services”⁸ (it has not yet released more recent figures). At the time of its 2010 report, Market

⁷ Personal interview with Jack Canfield, February 4, 2010.

⁸ www.marketdatanterprises.com/pressreleases/SIMkt2010PR.pdf, accessed May 1, 2012. Note that Market Data will only provide a summary of enterprises to the general public; the company charges a hefty fee of \$1800 to access

Data indicated that self-improvement is an \$11 billion industry in the U.S.A., growing 5.5% each year. The sales of self-help books are projected to be \$854 million in the U.S. by 2014. This figure increases by another \$409 million if we include audio-books, and does not take into account the recent burgeoning of digital books that would add more millions of dollars. The top ten motivational speakers who teach “success” take in more than \$296 million in one year. These figures show that while the success industry is not the largest American business enterprise—particularly compared to Wall Street’s financial empires that deal in many billions of dollars—it nevertheless is large enough to be taken notice of. It has managed to reach into the hearts and minds of millions of people. Some of the leading success teachers today include Tony Robbins, Jack Canfield, Brian Tracy, John Assaraf, Suze Orman, Oprah Winfrey, Wayne Dyer, and Les Brown, to name only a few. As well, there are hundreds (perhaps thousands) of lesser-known but highly ambitious success industry purveyors, often portraying themselves as business coaches both in large cities and small towns. Most of these aspire to get into the big leagues of speaking and teaching about success.

The first level of contact is usually through reading motivational speakers’ books (or in Oprah’s case, her *O* magazine). Most consumers can afford the \$25-\$30 cost for a book or audio CDs. However, if these books are successful in creating an appetite for more direct contact, it starts getting expensive. Elite coaching programs can be thousands of dollars. One success teacher in the U.S., Ali Brown (www.alibrown.com), charges \$30,000 for her elite mastermind groups, and there are others who charge similar rates. Jack Canfield’s annual five-day *Breakthrough to Success* event costs almost \$4000, plus travel and accommodations. A weekend workshop given by well-known speakers can be in the four-figure range. Small group coaching

the entire report. However, the most salient economic details of the success industry are readily outlined in Market Data’s summary of the industry.

can be more expensive again, and one-on-one coaching can reach into five-figure fees for just a few sessions. One-day speaking events can often cost \$200 for “general seating,” but up to \$500 or more for VIP seating (and a chance to schmooze with the speaker at lunch).

Many speakers and event purveyors will offer “free” events such as a talk in a hotel ballroom or an online teleclass or webinar, all aimed at upselling customers into later expensive programs and products. For example, in late 2012, the motivational success teacher, John Assaraf, who claims to use neuroscience to support his teachings, hosted a six-part video “brainathon” (on how to prime one’s brain for success) as a teaser for people to sign up for his costly year-long coaching program.⁹

One of the most striking characteristics of many success teachers is that they use human and spiritual values as a reason for pursuing material success, in particular the values of compassion and altruism. For example, John Assaraf wrote on Facebook: “Why am I pushing earning money so much in the last week? Because it’s a tool you can use to do more good in the world, to experience different things, to help your family, friends, charities, and more.”¹⁰

Another well-known business coach, Suzanne Evans (www.suzanneevans.com), twists Gandhi’s phrase “Be the change” in presenting entrepreneurial profit-seeking as a noble calling that will elevate people to high levels of income.¹¹ Two other success industry teachers, Bob Burg and John David Mann, stress the importance of giving. The giving is part and parcel of a person

⁹ John Assaraf, www.praxisbrainathon.com, accessed December 1, 2012. The event took place several months ago, but the link now directs people to download the past “brainathon.”

¹⁰ John Assaraf, posting on Facebook, November 28, 2012.

¹¹ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJDMzKTOMdQ> for an example of Suzanne Evans’ pitch for *Be the Change 2013*.

gaining material success. Thus it is not giving for its own sake, but rather giving to get.¹² The idea of using increased personal wealth to be more of a giver to the world is often very appealing to those who seek the help of a success teacher. “Having more to give” has echoes of the Judaeo-Christian values of charity and compassion, and thus makes people feel good about wanting to become rich.

Nobody denies that philanthropy is overall a good thing, and there are examples of wealthy people who use much of their fortune to help others (for example, the massively influential foundation established by Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft). However, most people who attend success events will never be heads of private foundations or become billionaires. It is how the success industry *uses* ideas of compassion, giving, and world service that is questionable because the emphasis on success and self-improvement events in so many cases comes back to the pursuit of wealth, oftentimes portrayed as “abundance” and “happiness,” and the purveyors of success use aspects of spirituality to sell their message of the possibility of unlimited wealth. However, there is a body of research that being rich does not significantly improve “happiness.” For example, Daniel Kahneman et al., in an article entitled “Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer? A Focusing Illusion,” found that “people with above-average income . . . are barely happier than others in moment-to-moment experience, tend to be more tense, and do not spend more time in particularly enjoyable activities. . . Moreover, the effect of income on life satisfaction seems to be transient. We argue that people exaggerate the contribution of income to happiness because they focus, in part, on conventional achievements

¹² See www.thegogiver.com, which claims to “bring new relevance to the old proverb ‘give and you shall receive.’” Accessed December 5, 2012. See also Bob Burg and Daniel Mann, *The Go-Giver: A little story about a powerful business idea* (Portfolio Hardcover, 2007).

when evaluating their life or the lives of others.”¹³ This thesis cannot address the income/happiness research in any detail as it is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead what I seek to explore are the religious roots of the relentless search for success and how these roots continue to drive the behaviour of many millions of people, including many of those who show up at a success seminar or who enroll in either online or live coaching programs.

1.4 Literature Review

In recent years, the success industry has attracted critique—often from non-scholarly sources such as journalist Steven Salerno’s book, *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*,¹⁴ or Connie Schmidt’s well-known blog containing blistering critiques of what she calls “New Wage [sic] hucksters” (www.whirledmusings.com). On the more academic side, but nevertheless written for lay audiences, we can find books such as *Self-Help Inc.: Makeover Culture in America*¹⁵ by sociologist Micki McGee of Fordham University, and *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking is Undermining America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich who holds a PhD in cell biology but who later switched to a career in social activism and social critique.¹⁶ In 2011, Kathryn Lofton, a religious historian at Yale University, wrote a

¹³ Daniel Kahneman, Alan B. Krueger, David Schkade, Norbert Schwarz, and Arthur H. Stone, “Would You Be Happier if You were Richer? A Focusing Illusion.” *Science*, Vol. 312, 30 June 2006, 1908.

¹⁴ Steven Salerno, *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (New York: Three Rivers Press [a division of Random House], 2006). *SHAM* illustrates how “experts” with very little credentials dispense advice on everything from health to relationships to finances to overall well-being.

¹⁵ Micki McGee, *Self-Help Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2009). Ehrenreich’s main focus in *Bright-Sided* is her attack on positive thinking. She attributes the emphasis on positive thinking that has taken such hold of the American psyche, even to the point of creating an academic discipline now known as “positive psychology.” The chief proponent of positive psychology in the world is arguably Martin Seligman (<http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx>). Ehrenreich identifies religious roots in the turn toward positivity but prefers to speak of “Calvinist” and “post-Calvinist” times. I do not think this distinction is useful because Calvinist themes can be found to be very much

significant scholarly book called *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*,¹⁷ in which she uses Oprah as a lens to look at the ethos of success-seeking and its spiritual and religious undertones. These authors do a good job (particularly Lofton) of identifying the manipulation of religiosity and religious themes in the personal growth/success industry.

Research on consumerism can offer some penetrating insights, for example the work of the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, particularly his book *Consuming Life*.¹⁸ There is also, of course, a strong body of work analyzing capitalism, economics, and the effects of income inequality, for example, Robert Nelson's *Economics as Religion* (in which Nelson argues that economics is a religion),¹⁹ William Cavanaugh's *On Being Consumed*²⁰ (in which Cavanaugh argues that consumerism is a symbolic attempt to defeat death by convincing ourselves that consuming more will give us more staying power), and Joseph Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality*²¹ (in which Stiglitz argues that the American dream is, and always has been, an unattainable myth), to name only a few. However, none of these look directly at the role being played by the lucrative industry of motivational speaking and self-improvement events.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in their book, *Selling [sic] Spirituality: the Silent Takeover of Religion*, argue that it is a seemingly free-floating spirituality that has now become “the opiate of the people,” promising to help people improve their level of material success but

operative in the success industry which also emphasizes positivity but uses a fairly “Puritan” form to express it. Thus I have chosen not to emphasize Ehrenreich's book, although it does contain some very useful insights.

¹⁷ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007.) Other salient books by Bauman on consumerism include *Liquid Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), and *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Robert Nelson, *Economics as Religion* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002).

²⁰ William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

²¹ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (London, UK: Penguin, 2013).

in reality keeping them in their place. As such, spirituality tied to success is used as a means of social control by keeping people in a constant but elusive personal quest for more affluence and thus diverting attention from structural issues such as unemployment and poverty, and from the creation of real opportunities through education and enlightened social policy. Carrette and King opine that spirituality and the religious traditions from which spiritualities arise have undergone a corporate takeover.²² According to Carrette and King, religion has been completely co-opted by consumerism, and human desires have been subsumed into this, such that spirituality is commodified and made to fuel unrealistic hopes. Motivational speaking and success seminars can be a key part of drawing individuals into believing that “spirituality” along with some pragmatic goal-setting strategies will deliver a fulfilled and comfortable life.

In this paper I will deal with two major undercurrents or theological strands—the spirituality of early Protestant Puritan settlers and revivalism—that appear to have had a strong impact on how the success industry works and why it attracts millions of people every year to its books, seminars, speaking events, coaching programs, and its vast social media presence. I will use two lenses to shed light on how these two themes got translated into the context of the success industries. One lens will be to look at both Protestant Puritanism and revivalism as memes—the cultural transmission of ideas and themes that remain remarkably persistent in a culture but which also appear to evolve over time. The ideas of Richard Dawkins on memes, found in his book *The Selfish Gene*,²³ offer a thought-provoking way to look at the transmission of religion outside its usual boundaries. Susan Blackmore’s book, *The Meme Machine*,²⁴

²² Jeremy Carrette and King, Richard, *Selling Spirituality: the Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 16.

²³ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 30th anniversary edition, 2006).

²⁴ Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

elucidates more about memes, and will also prove a useful resource. These ideas will be discussed more fully in Chapter Two as we consider the question: How did certain theological ideas and practices from American Puritan history and the history of revivalism that entered popular culture, often in a distorted or truncated form, create memes that operate in the American self-help industry? The second lens I will use—the lens of history—is related to the first. If we are to gain an understanding of the nature of the persistent religious ideas in American culture that now show themselves in many instances as memes or that perhaps could be seen also as implicit religion,²⁵ we need to look at the historical context of the ideas' origins.

1.4.1 The Spirituality of the Puritan settlers

With the type of über-capitalism currently holding sway in world markets, it is not surprising that wealth is seen as a major marker of personal success. However, the obsession with wealth and material possessions is far from new. In general, human beings have always liked wealth, and there have always been people who possess more material comforts than others. However, no nation has come to symbolize wealth and self-made success more than the U.S.A. Industriousness and ambition have been part of the American ethos since the time of its first British and European settlers, and quickly became established as a dominant mover of the culture.

²⁵ In recent years, implicit religion has become a growing focus of study. In the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, implicit religion is defined: “The approach opens up the possibility of discovering the sacred within what might otherwise be dismissed as profane, and of finding an experience of the holy, within an apparently irreligious realm. Above all, in contemporary society it allows for the discovery of some kind of religiosity within what conventionally might be seen as an unrelievedly secular sphere. The concept therefore gives credence to the opinion of the ‘person in the street,’ that while ‘some who go to church really mean it,’ others who go to church ‘really have a different religion altogether’—but that ‘everybody has a religion of some sort,’ a faith by which they live, albeit as an unconscious core at the center of their way of life and being.” (William H. Swatos, Jr., ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary), accessed July 19, 2013). See also the website www.implicitreligion.org. If implicit religion is present in many aspects of society, similar to Robert Bellah’s earlier concept of civil religion, it could ostensibly affect people’s lives either for good or ill. In this thesis, due to length constraints, I cannot offer an extended discussion on implicit religion at this time.

As is well known, American religiosity, particularly Puritan Protestant religiosity, was fertile ground for the growth of capitalism as America's favoured economic system. The topic of how America's economic practices and behaviours have their roots in early Protestant New England has been much written about by scholars from many disciplines. The psychologist Daniel McAdams in *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*²⁶ sees the roots of "redemptive" improvement stories as originating in the values of Protestant New England. McAdams claims that the theme of redemption looms large in the American psyche. In one key study, he investigated how many redemptive themes occurred in magazines and news stories over a period of time. Analyzing news stories, TV clips, and popular magazines such as *People* and *Self*, he found that over 85 percent of the stories involved some sort of rescue or redemption—addicts who overcame addiction, businesses going bankrupt and then getting a new start, an exciting new diet that saved people from the scourge of obesity, stories of miracles such as belief in encounters with angels, or being down to one's last dollar and suddenly getting a job.²⁷ There is a constant theme of being saved from something.

McAdams suggests that the recurring salvation theme we now see in a secular form owes a great debt to early American Puritan beliefs and practices. When John Winthrop, a wealthy English Puritan lawyer and an important figure in founding the Massachusetts Bay Colony, arrived in the new world in 1630, he spoke of establishing "a city on a hill" that would be a beacon for the entire world. McAdams refers to Winthrop as "a latter-day Moses-Joshua" leading a chosen people.²⁸ McAdams postulates that the early Puritan experience in America gave rise to what he calls the Puritan Myth which continues to have significant symbolic power.

²⁶ Daniel McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

This Puritan Myth, says McAdams, was created by linking the American experience to Biblical themes:

Puritans = Israelites, the Chosen People
Coming to the New World = Exodus
Arriving in America = the Promised Land
The city on a hill = the New Jerusalem
Success, good harvests = proof of divine election
Failure, hardship = the devil, proof of falling from God's favor²⁹

This formulation could be analyzed as the key content of a meme that defines much of America's self-image. Although McAdams' equations are somewhat simplistic, they are at least a starting point in looking at what kind of spirituality arrived with the early Puritan settlers.

The most prevalent idea about American Protestant religiosity is that its origins are Calvinist, and that the characteristic Calvinist themes of the ethic of hard work, the stewardship of God's kingdom on earth, and the doctrines of predestination and election are of special importance in this respect. Several current authors have written extensively on the Calvinist legacy in America, such as Thomas J. Davis, ed.,³⁰ Mark Noll,³¹ Martin Hirzel et al.,³² Milan Zafirovski,³³ and Peter Thuesen³⁴. Thuesen, in particular, emphasizes the doctrine of predestination as a major contributor to transferring the idea of being among God's elect to the economic sphere—in other words, people coming to regard worldly success as a possible

²⁹ Ibid., 103.

³⁰ Thomas J. Davis, ed. *John Calvin's American Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³¹ Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³² Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallmann, eds. *John Calvin's Impact on Church and Society, 1509–2009* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009).

³³ Milan Zafirovski, *The Destiny of Modern Societies: The Calvinist Predestination of a New Society* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009).

³⁴ Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

indicator of divine election—and thus I have chosen to draw upon his analysis. None of these authors examine the Calvinistic undertones in the personal growth industry as such, although Thuesen includes a chapter on the Calvinistic themes in Rick Warren’s mega-bestselling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*.³⁵ The challenge for a researcher beginning to look at the theological roots of the personal growth-success industry is to extrapolate which aspects of the Calvinist “meme,” as we shall call it, appear to have found their way into all these “secular” success seminars.

Steven Starker in *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books*,³⁶ suggests that the propensity of Puritan leaders to publish tracts aimed at giving moral guidance to the faithful may have been a precursor to secular self-help books. Benjamin Franklin, born to a Puritan father and raised as an Episcopalian, attended a Presbyterian church for a period of time, then rejected Protestant Christianity altogether in favour of Deism. In 1757 he composed what is believed to be actually the first secular self-help book, *The Way to Wealth*.³⁷ Starker also claims that the idea of predestination became modified by the equally Calvinist belief that God had created a rational universe in which humankind was to work and reap benefits—“To the extent that Man [sic] lived up to his obligation to God, God might be expected to reciprocate.”³⁸

³⁵ Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.) Warren’s book has been on bestseller lists for several years. Ostensibly about our freedom to achieve a good life that includes a good modicum of success, Warren’s book nevertheless contains ideas that suggest divine predestination, including the idea that nothing in human life is arbitrary and that God plans out every detail of one’s life. Concerning Warren’s book, Thuesen writes: “Such a thoroughgoing sense of providence was not unusual among evangelicals, but what struck me was the ghostly presence of predestination, like an erasure still visible on a manuscript page.” (Thuesen, *Predestination*, 210).

³⁶ Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989).

³⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *The Way to Wealth* (most recent re-publication is Thousand Oaks, CA: BN Publishing, 2005).

³⁸ Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket*, 13.

Max Weber’s hypothesis concerning the Protestant work ethic and the rise of capitalism³⁹ advanced the idea that Protestantism, particularly its Calvinistic forms, encouraged people to work hard, to develop their own economic enterprises, and to engage in trade and investment. The purpose of this thesis is not to debate whether Weber was entirely correct—e.g., how his hypothesis needs to be modified or critiqued in the light of current global capitalism which is rapidly loosening its Eurocentric and North American characteristics with the entry of other economic juggernauts such as China and India, where Calvinism has had very little presence. A more useful resource here would be a recent book edited by William H. Swatos, Jr. and Lutz Kaelber, *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100: Essays on the Centenary of the Weber Thesis*, which presents the views of nine scholars evaluating the modern relevance of Max Weber.⁴⁰ My aim, by contrast, is more modest—to indicate how Weber’s ideas, particularly his view of spiritual anxiety arising out of the doctrine of predestination, resonate with the success industry’s focus on entrepreneurship and the ethic that drives people to achieve. The assumption, therefore, will be that it was the Protestant Calvinist ethic that produced “the tough, upstanding, and active mind of the middle-class capitalist entrepreneur.”⁴¹

The massive amount of scholarship on American Calvinism is obviously helpful in setting a context, but the researcher into the success industry is still challenged to build the bridge between this legacy and current motivational speaking and success seminars and books. Particularly useful in this regard is the analysis by sociologist Micki McGee in *Self-Help, Inc.*

³⁹ I used a twenty-first translation of Weber’s work—Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Stephen Kalberg (Chicago: Roxbury Publishing, 2001).

⁴⁰ William H. Swatos, Jr. and Lutz Kaelber, *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100: Essays on the Centenary of the Weber Thesis* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005).

⁴¹ Peter Thuesen, *Predestination*, 58.

She coined the term “belaboring the self”⁴² to describe the effects of continual efforts at self-improvement and success-oriented behaviours. McGee asks where the continual and relentless exhortation to improve comes from. What is the gnawing desire that keeps people coming back for more and more exhortations from success teachers to do more, have more, be more? McGee notes the fact that the English Puritan settlers who arrived in America were not the same as the Calvinists of the European mainland, but instead were highly influenced by a form of covenant theology that was distinctive in English Calvinist and Congregationalist circles. McGee sees the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace (there will be more on this in Chapter Two) as creating an almost unbearable tension that leads to the concept of belabouring the self, which she as a sociologist seeks to elucidate in secular terms.⁴³

1.4.2 Revivalism

The strong presence of religious revival movements in the American experience has, I suggest, provided a significant model for American motivational speakers and their success programs, and it can be argued that, similar to the Puritan Myth, religious revivalism is a powerful American meme. Revivalism has been an important thread of American religious life since the mid-eighteenth century. It was characterized by a seemingly sudden increase in religious fervor and an emphasis on personal conversion. In particular there were two periods, known as the “Great Awakenings,” the first in the 1740s with the esteemed theologian Jonathan Edwards, among others, calling for a renewed focus on the need to hear the gospel and accept it with all one’s will and heart. This revival was intent on injecting new energy into Puritan spirituality. Thomas Kidd in *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in*

⁴² Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, 12–13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27.

*Colonial America*⁴⁴ analyses this crucial period of American religious history, and Marshall Fishwick portrays various periods of revival in the U.S.A. in *Great Awakenings: Popular Religion and Popular Culture*.⁴⁵

In the First Great Awakening, the call was to return to Christian principles, as understood by the Puritan leaders of the past, such that one's conversion was to serve the ideals of the community as well as reinforce one's own holy behaviour. Jonathan Edwards' particular genius is that he preached the message that the "inner man (the revivalist position)" could be affirmed along with the position that "God worked through his Covenant (the orthodox position). Edwards accepted the need for first-person experience, but sheltered it under the umbrella of community."⁴⁶ The Second Great Awakening between 1790 and 1840 brought a new twist. This revival emphasized a personal and individualized relationship with Jesus Christ and a visceral experience of having been saved by Jesus. In contrast to Puritan austerity, the revivals of the Second Great Awakening were highly experiential and emotional, and were characterized by dancing, singing, and public declaration of one's personal salvation. Salvation became increasingly individual, solely dependent on a person seeking an intense relationship with Jesus and the personal consolations this would bring about in people's lives (although we cannot ignore that the Methodist revivals of the time also emphasized social conscience, care of the poor and sick, and the upholding of community).

Some authors such as Fishwick and McAdams credit the period of the Second Great Awakening for creating the pattern of revival evangelism that marks American revival

⁴⁴ Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁴⁵ Marshall W. Fishwick, *Great Awakenings: Popular Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

movements to this day. Indeed Fishwick attributes the solidification of revivalist methods into almost a “formula” (which could be argued became a meme) to the influence of one particularly powerful preacher, Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) who came to prominence in the direct aftermath of the Second Great Awakening. According to Fishwick, Finney, a man with considerable charismatic speaking skills, “transplanted the frontier revival meeting to the newly expanding cities”⁴⁷ with such success that “Finney’s method became archetypal for those who followed.”⁴⁸ In the next chapter of this thesis, I will compare the characteristics of Finney’s “archetypal” method with methods commonly used in the self-improvement industry.

Certain aspects of Finney’s theology are of particular interest, as they inserted a more intense individualistic twist into religious revival—a characteristic that would later be picked up in more secular cultural forms. Finney insisted not only on the idea that salvation results from a choice of the free will of human beings who thus have the power to improve themselves and to gain moral perfection, but also on the idea that material success is totally compatible with salvation. Some of Finney’s critics have accused him of Pelagianism, a heresy promulgated by the Celtic theologian Pelagius in the fifth century CE. Pelagianism was said to have denied original sin and asserted that human beings could, by their own efforts, become perfect.⁴⁹ It is doubtful that Finney would have seen himself as a Pelagian, on fire as he was with what he felt was the movement of the Holy Spirit within him and with his fervor to convert people to Jesus Christ, but he did emphasize the idea of free will, action, and choice in humans’ ability to

⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁹ A useful analysis of Pelagianism is *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1988). Rees argues that Pelagius was not as heretical as his arch-enemy Augustine portrayed him. The Appendix on The Synod of Diospolis in 415 CE portrays the dialogue between Pelagius and the Synod in which most of Pelagius’ answers satisfied the Synod, leading Rees to conclude his book with the words, “. . . Pelagius went scot-free, but his heresy stands condemned!” (Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, 139).

achieve salvation, thereby focusing more on the efforts of individuals than on the sovereign grace of God. It is also the case that many prominent motivational speakers run their events with a structure and fervor reminiscent of a revival tent (except that the tent is now an expensive-looking hotel ballroom or convention centre and the conversion is to making more money or having more success, not to following Jesus or living his teachings).

The trajectory initiated in American religion by Finney would blaze the path for some other religious and quasi-religious beliefs to be preached and adapted to the secular world, and eventually added to the revivalist-type arsenal of many motivational speakers. In the early nineteenth century, a reaction to Calvinist and Puritan severity emerged in the form of new religions such as Christian Science, a “mind over matter” religion founded by Mary Baker Eddy in 1879, a movement called Transcendentalism (most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau), followed by New Thought or Science of Mind (of which Ernest Holmes and Charles Fillmore became the major proponents and still wield strong influence today in the form of a religious denomination known as Unity), and Positive Thinking. These approaches had the common thread of asserting that we can create our own reality with our mind, and that we can manipulate reality to give us whatever we want. The resulting ideas found their way into the secular mindset through the early twentieth-century work of the “positive thinkers” such as Norman Vincent Peale, Dale Carnegie, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, and it was not long before this positive, distinctly American “humans are not sinful” brand of theology and secular thought began to focus on wealth and material success. One book in particular, published in 1937, entitled *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill,⁵⁰ drew upon New Thought ideas and translated them into ideas about achieving wealth by means of one’s own inner guidance and inspiration. *Think and Grow Rich* is still in print today and is one of the most widely read self-help books in

⁵⁰ Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich: the Original 1937 unedited edition* (Wise, VA, 2012).

the world. Indeed, the Napoleon Hill Foundation has just recently announced plans to produce a series of films based on the principles of the book and that of its subsequent followers.⁵¹

Ideas of inner divinity, the concept that we are in our essence identical to God, distorted the traditional Judaeo-Christian concept of “in the image of God” into “being God.” While the number of actual religious adherents of New Thought congregations is small in comparison to mainstream religious affiliations and to secularity, New Thought ideas have gained enormous traction in the secular realm and show no signs of abating, with the result that many of the upscale revival-tent-style success events in hotels and conference centres are permeated with New Thought ideas (and also sometimes with “new age” practices such as energy healing, Eastern meditation, or crystals).

In his book, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*, Paul Heelas identifies the influence of Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, that began influencing western spirituality in the early 1960s, as well as the reaction against the war in Vietnam, and increased interest in esoteric practices. Although he is sympathetic to the “new age” movement, seeing it as a quest for authentic meaning and wholeness in resistance to the dominant materialistic values, he concedes that some of these practices have become commodified as objects of consumption, thereby furthering the very capitalism they purport to resist (a point also made by Carrette and King in *Selling Spirituality*).⁵² Even as new age content has found its way into what journalists today call the “crowd sell” of certain types of events, Courtney Bender, author of *The New Metaphysicals*, shows how much current “new age”

⁵¹<http://unbouncepages.com/think-and-grow-rich-the-movies/>, accessed July 15, 2013.

⁵² Paul Heelas has written a number of excellent books that help one to understand the attraction to “new age” practices in modern society. Among them are *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), *The New Age Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), *The Spiritual Revolution* (with Linda Woodhead) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), and *Religion in Modern Times* (with Linda Woodhead) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000). However, as stated in the Exclusion section of my thesis, I will not be focusing on new age spirituality, other than a passing reference.

activity in fact has its origins in nineteenth century movements such as theosophy and spiritualism.⁵³ The presence of “new age” ideas and practices in today’s society, particularly their attraction for people who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” has not been lost on modern motivational speakers. Many success industry leaders incorporate a number of new-age-type practices into their seminars. Jack Canfield crafts meditations on the so-called “law of attraction.” Tony Robbins urges his followers to do firewalks. James Arthur Ray claimed to transmit teachings that came from ancient Egyptians and Peruvian shamans, as well as appropriating certain Native American practices. Deepak Chopra (whose background is Hindu, not Protestant) claims to teach the principles of 5000-year-old Ayurvedic medicine but with a very western emphasis. Oprah, in her *O* magazine and on her television shows, frequently features the work of practitioners of declarative prayer, past life regressions, and the latest “vibrational” techniques one can use for one’s health and wellbeing. However, as mentioned earlier, I will not be dwelling on the new age aspects of self-improvement due to space limitations.

One final illustration of the success industry’s debt to such movements will suffice: the publication in 2006 of the book, *The Secret*,⁵⁴ which was a milestone in the history of the success industry. *The Secret* was a mega-bestseller and still holds this status, having been read by many millions of people. *The Secret* assures people that they need only ask the universe for boons in the right positive state of mind, and that, in return, the universe will give them anything they want.

⁵³ Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4.

⁵⁴ Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Atria Books, 2006).

It is, of course, one thing for such a book to get published, and quite another for it to become a major publishing triumph. How do we explain the successful marketing of such bizarre claims as are found in *The Secret*? Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self*⁵⁵ and *A Secular Age*⁵⁶ believes that the current emphasis on individualism, self-expression, and self-gratification is the result of the creation of the “buffered self” of secularity (the sense of boundaries separating individuals from communities and most particularly from the sense of a transcendent realm of life). Daniel McAdams, in *The Redemptive Self*, sees the move to interpret one’s life through a secular redemptive lens as a desire for generativity. Other scholars, however, have a simpler explanation; they blame the natural human temptation of greed. These include Jacques Ellul,⁵⁷ Craig Blomberg⁵⁸, Michael Sandel⁵⁹, and Craig Gay⁶⁰, though more could be named. I wish to suggest that much of the success of the success industry itself is owed to Calvinist and revivalist memes that continue to operate in the culture, and thus that the industry requires a theologically-informed interpretation and critique.

1.4.3 The Search for a Theological Response

If the success industry is indeed related to, or even based on, hidden theological ideas, then surely there is a need for a critique from the discipline of theology. There has, however,

⁵⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁵⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power*, translated by LaVonne Neff (Downer’s Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

⁵⁸ Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999).

⁵⁹ Michael Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: the moral limits of markets* (New York: FSG Adult, 2012).

⁶⁰ Craig Gay, *Cash Values: Money and the Erosion of Meaning in Today’s Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003). Gay argues that current market capitalism is a form of nihilism.

been very little theological writing about the success industry itself (although there are some blistering critiques of the prosperity gospel, for example, Michael Horton's *Christless Christianity*).⁶¹ Most existing critiques of the culture of self-improvement and material success as the aim of life have come from psychology, sociology, philosophy, consumer behaviour studies, and a broad-based religious studies perspective. All of these are highly useful, but if the Christian religion is to provide a counter-narrative to the warped theology of success, it must come from theology. This is a difficult task, particularly as much of Christianity has itself been infected by self-improvement ideas, as Michael Horton suggests in *Christless Christianity*—“Reduce Christianity to good advice and it blends in perfectly with the culture of life coaching [a big part of the success industry].”⁶² Many faithful church members of many different denominations also frequent self-improvement events and read self-help books.

To begin to frame a theological response, we can consider what kind of prophetic voices could address the success industry. Immediately the great Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr comes to mind. There is also much to be gleaned from Douglas John Hall's skillful elucidation of the *theologia gloriae* versus *theologia crucis*, particularly in his book *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*,⁶³ which I shall draw upon in Chapter Three. Another fruitful avenue may lie in the application of Catholic social teaching to the patterns of western ideas of success. One Catholic theologian, Kenneth Himes, skillfully uses Catholic social teaching to address consumerism in an extensive journal article, “Consumerism and Christian

⁶¹ Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: the Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶³ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

Ethics.”⁶⁴ Himes draws upon the work of Thomas Beaudoin,⁶⁵ David Matzko McCarthy,⁶⁶ Christine Firer Hinze,⁶⁷ Charles Wilber,⁶⁸ and others. In this, however, we need to somehow translate the macro-level critiques from Catholic social teaching to the micro-level of the behaviour of individuals.

Another approach is to consider the work of theologians who grapple with the theology of money (since money is the ultimate aim in the success industry, even though some of its practitioners deny this). Philip Goodchild, for instance, in *Theology of Money*⁶⁹ takes up theology in a highly unusual approach to dissect why and how money has replaced God. Craig Blomberg looks at the biblical understanding of prosperity in *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*. A very recent and highly trenchant observation about the effects of greed and unbridled consumerism comes from the Catholic scholar, Mark Slatter of St. Paul’s University of Ottawa. His soon-to-be-published paper on “The Secret Life of Greed,”⁷⁰ while not specifically about the success industry, nevertheless clearly identifies, from a theological point of view, many of the

⁶⁴ Kenneth R. Himes, “Consumerism and Christian Ethics.” *Theological Studies* 68, 2007, 132–153.

⁶⁵ Thomas Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2003). Beaudoin is an astute observer of the process of branding in the marketplace and its role in forging a consumer identity.

⁶⁶ David Matzko McCarthy, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004). McCarthy is an advocate of what he calls “middle-class asceticism, which is a lifestyle emphasizing simplicity and moderation.

⁶⁷ Christine Firer Hinze, “What is Enough? Catholic Social Thought, Consumption, and Material Sufficiency,” in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, William Schweker and Charles Mathewes, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William P. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 162–168. Hinze is concerned with the reality of human desire and its effects on how one lives one’s life.

⁶⁸ Charles Wilber, “The Ethics of Consumption: A Roman Catholic View,” in David A. Crocker and Toby Linden, eds., *Ethics of Consumption* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 403–415. Wilber claims that consumption has become a primary goal within society, to the detriment of people’s wellbeing, both individually and collectively.

⁶⁹ Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁷⁰ Mark Slatter, “The Secret Life of Greed.” Soon to be published in the *Anglican Theological Review*. His final draft is 14 pages in length.

hidden and unconscious factors that drive human aspirations toward wealth, continual striving, and consumption. For the purpose of this thesis, I found the work of Goodchild, Blomberg, Niebuhr, Himes' account of Catholic social teaching, some papal encyclicals, Mark Slatter, and Douglas John Hall to be most promising in being able to translate their insights to the success industry as possible theological responses.

I will touch upon a range of these theological responses in the third chapter of this thesis. Overall, however, it has to be observed that there is a clear dearth of theological material that deals directly with the values challenge presented so overtly by the success industry and the influence of many of its key practitioners. There is a need for the discipline of theology—liberal, conservative, and in-between—to take on this issue as worthy of commentary.

It is my hope that this thesis may in some modest way contribute to the discourse of success in western culture, at the very least to encourage some critical thinking among those who may be attracted to the success industry about what it is they are often unconsciously getting themselves into.

Chapter Two

Origins of Religious Memes in the Success Industry

In this chapter I will first briefly illustrate how success events work, based on observations made as a “participant observer” at events featuring Jack Canfield in one instance and Tony Robbins in another. At the time I attended the events, I was not writing this thesis; however, as a reporter sent to cover the events, as such I made copious notes, suspecting that they would provide good content for the future research I intended. It may be useful now to include some of this more “experiential” material in the thesis, so that readers might form a picture of how success industry events look and feel. Second, I will discuss the concept of the meme—what memes are and how they operate as a means of cultural transmission. Third, I will take up the themes referred to in Chapter One, namely Puritan spiritual anxiety and its roots in Protestant history, and the theme of revivalism in American religious history. I will suggest that these two memes (and how they came into being) are the reason why so much of Puritan and revivalist hidden theology has found its way into the success industry.

2.1 At Two Success Events

Jack Canfield—silver-haired, handsome, and impeccably dressed in a suit and an open-necked shirt (a business-casual look)—stands on the stage.⁷¹ He is every bit the successful business person, a role model for what many in his audience strive to be. He is attractive and reassuring, projecting an air of authority and competence. Flashing a captivating smile, he tells the audience to write down a formula he says they will need for the rest of their lives— $E + R = O$ (“Event plus Response equals Outcome.”) The idea is that people’s responses to events in

⁷¹ Jack Canfield’s “Success Principles” day-long event, London, Ontario, April 2007.

their lives will determine the outcomes they will achieve. By “response,” Canfield means changing one’s thinking, making decisions in a different way. These decisions will help people shift their direction toward achieving better results for their goals and dreams. He lays out his detailed process of how to set goals, particularly the formation of what he calls “a breakthrough goal,” the goal that will stretch one’s comfort zones. One is to carry one’s written-out goals in one’s pocket and to reread the goals three times a day, and indeed to create a goals book because “one goal is not enough.”⁷² It all sounds reasonable, rational, and not a bit religious.

At another event, Tony Robbins—six foot seven, his voice gruff, and his wide smile revealing perfect glistening white teeth—takes the stage like a whirlwind.⁷³ He is all energy, intense, and wound up. Gazing down at the thousands of people seated in an auditorium where special effects such as pounding music and flashing lights pump up the audience’s energy, he begins talking about making better decisions. He uses a phrase—“changing state”—to mean getting oneself out of a bad mood into a more productive positive feeling. He tells his audience that each of them has unique talents that can manifest if people would only get out of their own way. As with Canfield, it sounds reasonable enough and not particularly religious.

Most people who attend these kinds of success events do not think of them as having any association with religion (with the exception of the perceptive gentleman I met at Jack Canfield’s event), even when motivational speakers appear blatantly to have borrowed the techniques of religious revivals (I will say more about this later in this chapter). Audience members may have no awareness that certain types of theological memes may be working beneath the surface.

These are secular events aimed at very secular pursuits—becoming more wealthy, being more

⁷² Jack Canfield, *The Success Principles: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 56.

⁷³ Tony Robbins’ “Power Within” event, London, Ontario, Fall 2008.

fit, setting goals, improving relationships, having it all. These events, even when presented in many different countries, have a decidedly American flavour. In the motivational speaking and success seminar industry, Americans dominate. Getting actual percentages is difficult as there appears to be no reliable research that breaks down numbers of motivational speakers by country. However, there is much indirect evidence to support this observation, such as lists of the top ten motivational speakers and polls that ask people to identify and rate their favourite speakers. One such poll for 2013 lists 75 motivational speakers, of which at least 60 are American (and possibly higher—it was not possible to verify the citizenship of some of the speakers).⁷⁴

2.2 Have Religious Memes found their Way into the Success Industry?

The lens of the meme offers an intriguing way of hypothesizing how certain religious ideas gain staying power in the secular. Richard Dawkins is widely credited with postulating the idea of memes. In *The Selfish Gene*, he compares cultural transmission with genetic transmission—the idea that certain themes and ideas within societies are forms of cultural evolution. Similar to how genes evolve and mutate in the biological evolutionary chain, so too memes evolve by ways of cultural mutation.⁷⁵ According to Dawkins, “memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”⁷⁶ To Dawkins, the idea of God is a meme that then adapts, evolves, and shows itself in “an organized church, with its architecture, rituals, laws, music, art,

⁷⁴ <http://www.businessforhome.org/2013/06/top-motivational-speakers-in-the-world-poll-2013/>

⁷⁵ Dawkins first called these phenomena “mememes,” meaning units of imitation, and later shortened the word to “meme.”

⁷⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 192.

and written tradition, as a co-adapted stable set of mutually-assisting memes.”⁷⁷ Memes may live on long after many generations’ genes “have dissolved in the common pool.”⁷⁸ Dawkins admits that the existence of memes may at this point remain speculative, but that when we look at certain cultural traits, we can note the survival value of some cultural ideas. Thus a cultural trait can, similar to genes, be “advantageous to itself.”⁷⁹

Susan Blackmore describes religions as “memeplexes,” and poses the question as to why some religious faiths have had tremendous staying power while others have faded away.⁸⁰ The most adaptable religions with the strongest symbol systems have remained persistent as memes.

When we look at religions from a meme’s eye view we can understand why they have been so successful. These religious memes did not set out with an intention to succeed. They were just behaviours, ideas and stories that were copied from one person to another in the long history of human attempts to understand the world. . . They evoked strong emotions and strange experiences.⁸¹

We could argue that the development of the “Puritan Myth,” identified by McAdams (mentioned in Chapter One of this paper), is an obvious example of a successful meme, as it has played such an enormous role in forming the historical consciousness of America, particularly the sense of America’s spiritual mission to the world (the “city on a hill”). So effective was the constellation of Puritan religious memes that, as America secularized and enterprise became capitalistic, these religious memes evolved into ideas permeating the secular realm. In Section 2.3 of this paper, we will explore the characteristics of these meme themes that today are found, in a new form, in many secular success events. Similarly, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century religious revivals

⁷⁷ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 200.

⁸⁰ Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, 187.

⁸¹ Ibid., 192.

in the U.S.A. left an indelible mark on the pattern of American evangelicalism, so much so that there is almost a template-like formula into which most revival efforts fit. In Section 2.4, we will examine the formation of the characteristic structure of revivalism and how that structure has migrated or evolved into the success industry. If both Puritan spirituality and the structure of revivalism are understood as memes, this may explain in part why so many people who attend success events fail to recognize the religious undercurrent in much of what takes place at success events, as it is the nature of a meme to be so embedded in a culture that it becomes unconsciously taken for granted, and so bypasses critical filters.

The next two sections of this chapter will briefly explore how the constellations of certain ideas within Puritanism came into being, and how revivalism changed the American religious and secular landscapes.

2.3 The Role of Puritan Spiritual Anxiety

Is it reasonable to propose that the message of a large number of the speakers and success teachers with whom we have been concerned is rooted in America's values, values that in turn are rooted in America's history, with religious history playing perhaps the most influential role? What can be said is that every nation bears the marks of its religious history and that popular culture reflects this fact. What is of interest, however, is to consider how these values, beliefs, and practices influence specific industries and realms of endeavour and their effects on individuals who get involved with them. Because the success industry purports to advise people on how to live their lives, it is important to decipher the undertones of the advice, particularly any theological currents that most often go undetected by success event participants. It is these

undertones that, unmoored from the traditions from whence they come, become amenable to distortion and to being used in a way that is often the opposite of their original purpose.

In the success industry, most of the dominant success teachers emphasize continual striving to achieve goals that will lead to a stellar life, rich in both material goods and a sense of meaning and fulfillment. These individuals frequently portray a sense of personal entitlement arising from their own hard work in getting to the top of their field, thus presenting themselves as an example to everyone else. Ideas of destiny and worthiness also figure large in their messages. By achieving material success, one proves that one is worthy. But worthy of what? Recognition and accolades? Celebrity? Being rich? Or could the message be the idea of being worthy of God (nowadays often languaged as “collaborating with the universe” or “being one with one’s higher self”)? Could the Puritan spirituality that arrived in America in the mid-1600s be showing up in the success industry in a veiled and distorted form? To attempt to answer this, we need to examine the possibility that, despite its outward hedonistic affirmation of self-gratification, many success events are in some sense “Puritan” enterprises.

Many scholars (among them McAdams, Starker, Thuesen, Zaviroski, and Noll) identify America’s entrepreneurial spirit, its commitment to hard work, ambition, and “getting ahead,” as being seeded by the religious beliefs and practices of early Protestant New England. Fleeing English religious persecution in the mid-seventeenth century, Puritan settlers arrived in the new world at what would come to be known as Massachusetts Bay. Under the leadership of John Winthrop, these early immigrant Puritans had identified themselves as a chosen people, comparing their journey to the new world to the Exodus recounted in the Hebrew scriptures. They saw America as a promised land and were inspired by Winthrop’s vision of a new Jerusalem, a “city on a hill” that would become a beacon of virtue, religious freedom, and

accomplishment for the entire world. So strong was this sense of being a chosen people that it later evolved in American culture into what McAdams calls “the Puritan Myth.” McAdams writes: “A model for both collective and individual identity for the Massachusetts Bay settlers, the Puritan Myth blended sacred narratives from Jewish and Christian traditions.”⁸² This worldview has come to be known as American exceptionalism (on Dawkins’ account, we might well identify this as the central American meme). This sense of being chosen, the mandate to be a shining light to the world, became part of a “new world” theology.

The theology the Puritans brought with them was largely Calvinist—but Calvinist in the way Calvinism had developed in England, not in Geneva. English Calvinism by the early seventeenth century was characterized by a covenant theology, involving reference to both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. The interpretive tensions of the two covenants led to long and complex debates over “competing spiritual and material values.”⁸³ “In the former [Works], good works would be rewarded both on earth and in the afterlife, but in the latter [Grace] only divine intervention in the form of grace could save a man [sic] from eternal damnation.”⁸⁴

At the centre of the debate was the doctrine of predestination, which Peter Thuesen summarizes as: “the eternal decree of God appointing humans to their ultimate ends, with the elect (the saved) manifesting divine mercy and the reprobate (the damned) manifesting divine justice. Though predestination (the divine foreordination of each person’s eternal destiny) is to be distinguished from providence (God’s more general ordering of all things), the distinction has

⁸² Daniel McAdams, *The Redemptive Self*, 103.

⁸³ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, 27.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

often been blurred in popular understanding.”⁸⁵ Unconditional predestination held that this doctrine was absolute and that there was no way a person could know for certain whether he or she was one of the elect. However, a competing version of predestination, conditional predestination (known as Arminianism after the sixteenth-century Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius), asserts that God grants prevenient grace to all, thus allowing individuals to choose or reject Christ so that their salvation would be granted upon accepting Christ as saviour. The English Arminians were for the most part Anglicans who found Puritan unconditional predestination to be morally and religiously repulsive. The difference between unconditional predestination and conditional predestination set up a fateful conflict between the Puritans and the English Arminians (especially as represented by the established Church of England), a conflict that became so adversarial that King James I actually banned all clergy below the rank of bishop from preaching about predestination.⁸⁶ When later, under Charles I, the Arminian bishop William Laud became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, he proceeded to suppress Puritan organizations and to harass Puritan clergy, actions that eventually fanned the flames of civil war (1642–1646)—and that drove some Puritans, particularly in the 1630s, to leave for the shores of the new world. There, however, the same debates would soon erupt again, because Arminianism arrived in America with the first wave of Dutch settlers, and among Anglicans who arrived in America. As well, there would be other theological challenges to predestination arising from the

⁸⁵ Peter Thuesen, *Predestination*, 224. It is important to note that the idea of predestination did not originate with Calvin. It was present in many previous centuries within church history, most notably in the view of Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE). Augustine believed that God foreordained whether one would be saved or not. This came from his belief that “all humans are born terminally ill with sin and thus deserve damnation” (Thuesen, 20). Augustine’s insistence on predestination later was mitigated by the sacramental emphasis of the Roman Catholic church (the idea of salvation being universally available through the sacraments, particularly Eucharist). Thus predestination did not ultimately fare well within Catholicism. However, when among Protestants sacraments were no longer felt to mediate between God and humans, predestination gained in importance particularly in the Calvinist traditions.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

subsequent immigration of Catholics, Lutherans, Quakers, Methodists, and other religious denominations to America's shores. It was the Puritan ethos, however, that held most sway in the early colonies. As the Puritans felt that they were on a holy mission ordained by God to turn America into the New Jerusalem, it is not surprising that a feeling arose among them that they were God's elect. In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor writes:

They could as a people feel constituted by God's law, exactly like the people portrayed in the Old Testament, just because they felt so strongly the imperative to rectify the disorder of the world. Their theology of predestination told them that the elect were a few rescued from the mass of the ungodly. Thus they could feel like a people beleaguered and embattled, just as ancient Israel had been. They could find inspiration, hope, and promise of ultimate triumph in the Old Testament.⁸⁷

Into the mix we must also place Calvin's view of the created order. Calvin held a positive view of the natural order, believing that nature is the handiwork of God and therefore good. He also believed that hard work is part of humanity's stewardship of the natural order. Work within the created order could be seen "as a means of demonstrating and celebrating the individual's divine calling."⁸⁸

Being a chosen people, together with predestination, and the stewardship of work—these three strands combined to create a powerful work ethic among the Puritans, an ethic that has resonated ever since Winthrop's ship landed at Massachusetts Bay in 1630. How were people supposed to combine the Calvinist work ethic and its sense of calling (work is good and through work you bear witness to your divine calling) with the seemingly fatalistic doctrine of predestination in which human efforts are regarded as vain and deceitful? The great early-twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber hypothesized that the ethic of hard work born in Protestantism, particularly in its Calvinistic varieties, paved the way for the development and

⁸⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 230.

⁸⁸ Alister McGrath, "John Calvin" in *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 64.

advancement of capitalism. The Weber thesis has been hugely influential, and so much discussed, that there can obviously be no full treatment of the claim within present constraints. From the time he first developed his theory, Weber has been hotly debated, and over the more than one hundred years since the publication of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, critics have pointed out that his hypothesis cannot be uniformly applied and that capitalism arose as a result of more than simply religious influences. However, Lutz Kaelber in *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100* observes that Weber paid more attention to economic capitalism than to political capitalism “perhaps because he tended to focus more on the motives of individual capitalists rather than states as economic agents.”⁸⁹ Acknowledging that Weber’s context was the early twentieth century, that it first looked at Europe, not the U.S.A., and that it thus could not take into account the complex permutations of the capitalism that followed, including the current context of the loosening of religious ties in favour of the secular, Kaelber nevertheless suggests that we “should not place Weber’s thesis in the dustbin of history quite yet.”⁹⁰

No one disputes that American Puritan Calvinism had a strong (some would say relentless) work ethic. Scholars of Calvinism, particularly in its American iteration, recognize the inevitable tension between the command to follow one’s calling in work for the glory of God and the doctrine of predestination. Peter Thuesen credits Weber with seeing how such a doctrinal paradox could give rise to a profound anxiety among devout Puritans. Thuesen, using Weber’s initial observations about spiritual anxiety, suggests that Puritans were prone to seek relief from the inner torment of not knowing whether one is “elect or reprobate” through tireless

⁸⁹ Lutz Kaelber, “Rational Capitalism, Traditionalism, and Adventure Capitalism” in *The Protestant Ethic Turns 100*, 162.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

labour, agonizing self-examination, and looking for possible signs of election. “Productivity became the sure sign—an indirect but reliable proof—of election. Conversely, unwillingness to work was a symptom of a person who was not in a state of grace.”⁹¹ If hard work that resulted in material success was viewed by many as a sign of election, of being chosen or special, or of playing out a personally redemptive story, we can see the possible link between that kind of spirituality and the American emphasis on ambition and hard work—the desire for the American dream—and that it might be a powerful undercurrent in the success industry, albeit hiding in a hedonistic and consumerist form.

The doctrine of predestination that implied that one could never know for sure whether one is elect, on a human level gave rise not only to spiritual anxiety but also to confusion. The desire to keep their congregations on the straight and narrow led Puritan leaders to develop numerous prescriptive texts that would guide the faithful in how to live a devout life. These texts and pamphlets were read both in homes and in churches and became a central literary genre in Puritan culture. Puritan preachers preached about them from their pulpits. Personal satisfaction in one’s work and one’s dedicated commitment to work thus became integral to religious observances. Puritan leaders were looked up to as advice givers, such as Cotton Mather who in 1710 penned *Bonifacius: Essays to do Good*. “Its intent was to teach readers how to do God’s will on earth, and in this regard it emphasized the need to do ‘Good Works.’”⁹² As well, people were urged to testify in church to encourage their neighbours, but demonstrating in so doing that they too were living an upright life and were among the elect. Where there was moral failure, public confessions of sin and wrong-doing were also common. Often the pamphlets produced by Puritan writers contained questions for contemplation, resulting in a structured culturally-

⁹¹ Peter Thuesen, *Predestination*, 58.

⁹² Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket*, 14.

obligatory process of taking a constant measure of where one was in one's religious life. Of course, one could never achieve perfection, in the sense that one could never be upright enough or holy enough to merit salvation apart from grace. Nevertheless, the motif of continual striving permeated Puritan literature, corporate and private worship, and ordinary life.

Intriguingly, Steven Starker suggests that Puritan advice tracts were the precursor to today's self-help book genre. Self-help books are highly prescriptive texts that lay out the tenets of success teachers' formulas for success—whether it is success with money, relationships, health, or career. It might be Jack Canfield's *The Success Principles*, Tony Robbins' *Unleash the Power Within*,⁹³ the late Steven Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*,⁹⁴ Deepak Chopra's *Spiritual Solutions*,⁹⁵ Byron Katie's process of inquiry called "The Work,"⁹⁶ or any of hundreds of other similar books, but in them success teachers subject their readers (like those who attend their events) to a rigorous evaluative process aimed at uncovering those imperfections that are keeping them from success. The first chapter of Canfield's *The Success Principles*, seeks to drive home the idea that everything going on in one's life is due to one's own behaviour. He writes:

You are the one who ate the junk food.
You are the one who didn't say no! . . .
You are the one who ignored your intuition.
You are the one who abandoned your dream.
You are the one who bought it.

⁹³ Tony Robbins, *Unleash the Power Within: Personal Coaching to Transform Your Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, audio recording by Nightingale Conant, unabridged edition, 2012).

⁹⁴ Steven Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Free Press, 2004). Covey was frequently critiqued for promoting Mormon values in his "secular" writings. The American critic, Harold Bloom, in *The American Religion* (New York: Chu Hartley Publishers, 2006) claims that the Mormon vision carried much of Calvinism in it, particularly the idea of the elect.

⁹⁵ Deepak Chopra, *Spiritual Solutions: Answers to Life's Greatest Challenges* (New York: Harmony, 2012). Although Chopra is from an Asian tradition, he has thoroughly westernized his message to match the American ethos of capitalism and achievement.

⁹⁶ Byron Katie, www.thework.com

You are the one who didn't take care of it. . .in short, you thought the thoughts, you created the feelings, you made the choice, you said the words, and that's why you are where you are now.⁹⁷

Success teacher John Assaraf, born in Canada but resident for decades in the U.S.A., posted a series of questions to persuade people to buy his latest program called, revealingly, "Having It All." Examples of his questions are: Did you make more money? Did your net worth grow or shrink? Did your lifestyle expand or shrink? What about spiritual growth and contribution? Are you living your life with purpose, passion and fulfillment?⁹⁸

Wealth teacher and business coach Suzanne Evans, one of the most popular coaches and speakers targeting aspiring female entrepreneurs, recently posted an article on her website authored by her director of coaching, Cathy Harley, about leadership in today's market. She notes the following principles: Establish a vision. Get your ego in check. Serve others. Lead by example. Don't quit. Harley goes on to write:

The most important ingredient in leadership is self-leadership. Ask yourself these questions "Can you lead yourself? Do you have the discipline to create the habits that will allow you to improve upon and build something based on consistency and sustainability? Can you do it over and over? Can you do it well? Can you do enough to make an impact?"⁹⁹

Keeping in mind that for Evans and her coaches, leadership is a key tool for achieving wealth, her clients continually filter this kind of questioning through the lens of their own striving and their own desire to prove they can "make it."

In their advertising, success teachers like to convey the idea that following their systems is easy—just follow these principles and take these actions, and one will achieve success in every

⁹⁷ Jack Canfield, *The Success Principles*, 10.

⁹⁸ John Assaraf, Having It All program, <http://www.praxisnow.com/hia-sale>, accessed July 11, 2013.

⁹⁹ Cathy Harley, "Movements, Tribes, and Leadership in Today's Markets." <http://suzanneevans.org/2013/05/movements-tribes-and-leadership-in-todays-market>, accessed June 4, 2013.

area of one's life. In reality, however, these systems entail continual striving and hard work, in many cases an overwhelming flood of information and action steps wherein people become convinced they need more support to realize their dreams, and thus keep coming back to success industry events. All the while, success teachers invoke ideas like "purpose," "meaning," and "destiny" to give people the impression that if they sign up for this or that expensive program, they are placing themselves in alignment with a higher power, so that wealth and happiness will simply flow to them. The now infamous James Arthur Ray would openly tell his audiences, "If you have arrived here at this event, this means that you are predestined for success. If you were not, then you wouldn't be here."¹⁰⁰ However, like many of the beleaguered Puritans of centuries past, uncertain of their salvation status, the followers of success teachers will never reach perfection, never master it all, never achieve the certainty they are seeking. "Having it all" is in fact not within anyone's grasp.

An important point to bear in mind, however, is that in the original Puritan context, one's hard work and following one's calling were not meant to be an act of ego or individual pride. The Puritan ideal was that all work was done for the glory of God and to uphold the community. The work ethic was, as Weber noted, a type of asceticism. One was not to display joy or pleasure over one's accomplishments. One was not to be ostentatious. When European Enlightenment ideals of rationality, progress, and science began to infiltrate the worldview of the American colonies, however, there was a turn away from working for God and community toward working for one's own ends. There was also a turn toward enjoying material prosperity for its own sake, rather than in celebration of the stewardship of God's creation.

¹⁰⁰ Personal interview with a past attendee of one of James Ray's events, interview May 2011.

Benjamin Franklin, who authored *The Way to Wealth* in 1757, is often credited with being America's first secular self-help author. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber quoted Franklin:

Remember that money is of the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money and its offspring can beget more, and so on. . . .The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker.¹⁰¹

Franklin, of course, did not strictly invent the self-help book, since he drew upon a fund of already-established books available in early American culture that encouraged analogous forms of improvement of one's lot. The difference is that Franklin's approach was so thoroughly Enlightened rather than Calvinist in character. "Although he [Franklin] espoused many of the same core Protestant values as Cotton Mather whose work he had read and admired, these were transformed and secularized for his eighteenth-century audience," writes Steven Starker.¹⁰²

Starker also observes that Franklin's popular work in this vein was just the beginning, and that it was soon to be followed by a plethora of other books by numerous authors, for example, Mason Lock Weems' book entitled *The Immortal Mentor, or, Man's Unerring Guide to a Healthy, Wealthy, and Happy Life* (Weems was also a biographer of George Washington). Starker observes that this trend soon became a recognized genre that has only grown in importance as self-help has been co-opted by capitalism. He writes:

The self-help book, already recognized as a source of moral guidance, became increasingly established in the eighteenth century as a repository of useful and practical knowledge. It offered readers advancement in skill, wealth, and social status under the tutelage of successful and respected figures, while remaining within the framework of the Protestant ethic.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Benjamin Franklin, quoted in Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 14.

¹⁰² Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket*, 15.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 15.

The resulting turn toward pragmatism, individualism, and self-gratification was by no means universal, especially in continuing Calvinist communities, and this is an important point to make. James D. Bratt in “Calvinism in North America” points out the importance of widely held Calvinist values of education, freedom and justice. The Puritans envisioned a “Bible commonwealth” that was “founded upon a social compact between people who were at once fellow citizens and fellow church members.”¹⁰⁴ This included “literacy, piety, and social duty,” including the care of the sick and poor. However, it was the spinoff effect of the hard work/predestination conundrum paired with the Enlightenment turn toward secularism, that paved the way to the expression of the contemporary theme of secular self-help and personal improvement.

Charles Taylor speaks in this context of the creation of the “buffered self.” On the website, “The Immanent Frame,” Taylor writes frequently about the implications of this: “One of the big differences between us and them [our ancestors of 500 years ago] is that we live with a much firmer sense of the boundary between self and other. We are ‘buffered selves’”¹⁰⁵—a people of individualistic boundaries. No longer is life about community, and gone is the sense that “we are all in this together.” Instead, a slow breaking down of the communal dimension can be observed, to be replaced by notions of autonomous selfhood. Taylor observes:

I have been speaking of the modern self as “buffered” and the earlier mode of existence as that of a “porous self.” But the use of the substantive here may mislead. Someone can live the modern sense of self as buffered, while being very conscious of himself [sic] as an individual. Indeed, this understanding lends itself to individuality, even atomism; sometimes we may wonder if it can be made hospitable to a sense of community. The buffered self is essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement.

¹⁰⁴ James D. Bratt, “Calvinism in North America,” in *John Calvin’s Impact on Church and Society*, 51.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Taylor, “Buffered and Porous Selves” (<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/>, accessed July 18, 2013).

And disengagement is frequently carried out in relation to one's whole surroundings, natural and social.¹⁰⁶

In today's society with its rampant consumerist ethos and its honouring of personal ambition and achievement, Puritan values have been stood on their head, particularly in the success industry which nevertheless uses the Puritan methodology of continual self-questioning and draws upon the same unconscious anxiety about whether one is among "the chosen few" or not (which may be expressed today less as election and more as "Does my life count for something? Can I stand out from the crowd?" or "Am I worth it?"). Instead of following one's calling for the sake of living an upright life, giving homage to God, and doing one's part in a community, it is now acceptable to want things and experiences totally for oneself. Breaking the fetters of frugality, we arrive not simply at the permissibility of ostentatious living, but at its promotion as the goal of life. One can have all one wants, say success teachers, and even more importantly, it is even "spiritual" to want these things.

Of all the success teachers, it is perhaps Oprah Winfrey who exemplifies the new ideal most clearly. In her book, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, Kathryn Lofton uses Oprah Winfrey as a symbol of what she has come to represent—achievement, mindboggling riches, self-fulfillment, and gratification. Lofton points out that Winfrey, fully in accord with the idea that one must work extremely hard in life to overcome obstacles and to realize one's dreams, nevertheless asserts the importance of wanting to have it all—from the delicious taste of a gourmet coffee, to the purchase of multi-million dollar houses, to becoming the head of one's own business. "If Weber's version of capitalist practices required faithful capitalist labor by ascetic Protestants with limited possessions, Winfrey's revision reclaims those abandoned

¹⁰⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 41–42.

possessions from the condemnation of Protestant reformers,” writes Lofton insightfully. She continues, “In Winfrey’s capitalist modernity, this materiality is a spiritual practice.”¹⁰⁷

The turn to materiality raises important moral and religious questions. Greed, for example, was not the chief aim of most Puritan reformers (though no doubt greed was manifest in the colonies and later in statehood as has been the case for almost every civilization). But for chasers of the “American dream,” greed is the goal. Sociologists soften it by calling it consumerism. Consumerism, however, is greed commodified and packaged. It is, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, “an economics of deception”¹⁰⁸ built on “mountains of dashed expectations.”¹⁰⁹

It is one thing to want to measure up to God’s expectations in Puritan fashion (which one knows is always impossible, therefore the need for faith and the hope of grace), and quite another to be led to believe that vast affluence is there for the taking if only one will work hard enough, commit oneself to its relentless pursuit, and never give up on self-improvement. It is one thing to believe that one needs God’s grace to achieve salvation; it is another thing to believe that one’s failure to achieve worldly success is always entirely one’s own fault. The message of self-help success teachers that everyone can become hugely wealthy flies in the face of much of economic theory. For capitalism to work, after all, it requires that a small minority will have more than all others. It requires that the labour of the many will line the pockets of the few. Yet what better way of social control exists than to convince people they really can have it all and to persuade them to spend money trying to find the formula for success, all the while drawing upon hidden (and now distorted) Calvinist principles of vocation, duty, and election?

¹⁰⁷ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: Gospel of an Icon*, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 47.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

As has already been noted, the sociologist Micki McGee calls this “belaboring the self”—a phrase that refers to the way in which “the promise of self-help can lead workers into a new sort of enslavement, into a cycle where the self is not improved but endlessly belabored.”¹¹⁰ McGee maintains that the quest for constant self-improvement, including a gnawing desire to have more monetary success, does not uplift or encourage people, but instead merely burdens them. She writes: “The literature of self-improvement [and by extension all the expensive programs offered by success teachers] defines its readers as insufficient, as lacking some essential feature of adequacy—be it beauty, health, wealth, employment options, sexual partners, marital happiness or specialized technical knowledge, and then offers itself as the solution.”¹¹¹

Where Calvinist Puritanism played upon spiritual anxiety regarding election, the success industry plays upon people’s personal economic and social anxieties about whether they can “amount to something” in the new materialistic paradise. With the dismantling of social welfare programs, record high unemployment figures, and the concentration of real wealth in the hands of a few, one way that people seek to assuage this anxiety is “not only to work longer and harder, but also to invest in themselves, manage themselves, and continuously improve themselves.”¹¹² And the success teachers are more than willing to be the recipients of such investment. However, the culture of self-help (and by extension the success industry) places the burden of improvement solely upon the individual, ignoring structural issues such as access to basic necessities of life—“food and shelter, healthcare and retirement benefits, access to education, and an environment protected from wanton pollution.”¹¹³ Thus is it any surprise that consumers

¹¹⁰ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, 12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

of success programs commonly ask themselves the question, “Why can’t I be like Jack Canfield?”—or Suzanne Evans, or whichever teacher they are following. “Why can’t I be such a ‘success’?” To be a “success” in this sense would be, I suggest, the consumerist equivalent of the meme of being among the elect, the favoured or chosen, to whom the universe wishes to bestow its bounties. Inevitably, such people are caught in what Zygmunt Bauman calls “the yawning gap between promise and delivery.”¹¹⁴ Success events have become part and parcel of a current consumerist society that, as Bauman observes, is in fact predicated not on the satisfaction of needs, but on their *non*-satisfaction—“Consumer society thrives as long as it manages to render the non-satisfaction of its members (and so, on its own terms, their unhappiness) perpetual.”¹¹⁵ Thus the success industry generates the conditions of its own existence.

Whereas Puritan theology was ultimately focused on the possibility of grace and the hope of salvation, the success industry offers no such transcendent ideal. It has twisted Puritan ideas of work and has unconsciously hi-jacked the Puritan anxiety regarding election, using this to put people in the position of constantly “belabouring the self,” as McGee puts it. In this way, the meme of the Puritan Myth can be said to have evolved from its original context into the success industry, where, because of the unconscious manner in which memes work, it is able to bypass the critical filter of many of those who are success industry customers.

2.4 The Revivalist Meme in the Success Industry

Tony Robbins, his arms spread wide, exclaims, “Everyone stand up now! Put your arms up over your head. Come on, jump up and down. Get that energy going! Change your state...we

¹¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 47.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

don't want any sad sacks here. Then hug your neighbour next to you.” Loud music blares, the crowd rises to its feet with a roar, hands in the air. A woman begins humming, “The more we get together, the happier we'll be.”¹¹⁶ Later on, people from the audience will be called up on stage where, often in tears, they will share their story about how they overcame a life challenge and how finally connecting with their purpose has turned their life around. So loud is Robbins' voice, one can hear the strain in his throat. Sweat pours off his brow.

This is normal behaviour at a Tony Robbins event. Robbins seeks to create an upbeat, positive mood, and uses emotional intensity to trigger what he promises to be a spiritual and material breakthrough. He is very aware of what he is doing, though perhaps not so aware of its cultural presuppositions:

If you walked in the door at the right moment, you would come upon perhaps three hundred people [today more like thousands] jumping up and down, screeching and hollering, roaring like lions, waving their arms, shaking their fists like Rocky, clapping their hands, puffing up their chests, strutting like peacocks, giving the thumbs-up sign, and otherwise acting as if they had so much personal power they would light up a city if they wanted to.¹¹⁷

Even just watching footage of a Robbins event can convey the kind of fervid, evangelical-style energy this man stirs up.¹¹⁸

The revivalist overtones are obvious, and they are not restricted to Robbins' events, or to American attendees. In several Canadian cities in early 2013, audiences were treated to “unfiltered, full-blast Oprah” according to journalists Josh Wingrove, Marsha Lederman, and Dawn Walton.¹¹⁹ More than 43,000 people, most of them women, had bought tickets that cost

¹¹⁶ Tony Robbins, “The Power Within” event, London Ontario, Fall 2008.

¹¹⁷ Tony Robbins, quoted in Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.*, 169.

¹¹⁸ To see some typical live footage of Tony Robbins, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaAhvErCfDY>.

¹¹⁹ Josh Wingrove, Marsha Lederman, and Dawn Walton, “Welcome to the fast-paced church of Oprah.” *The Globe and Mail*, January 26, 2013.

several hundred dollars each to listen to Oprah for several hours. With no commercial breaks to interrupt her, Oprah went into preaching mode. “I am a whisper on the breath of God. I am a human living within and through divine intelligence,” she claimed. She was there, according to Wingrove, Lederman, and Walton, to promote her popular brand of “autobiography, Christianity, new-age divinity, and pop science.” While Jack Canfield disavows any religiosity in his events (though the look of some of the footage from his events appear to indicate otherwise),¹²⁰ and Tony Robbins speaks in terms of higher purpose, higher destiny, and master plans for one’s life, Oprah is more overtly “Christian” in the sense that she pulls in redemptive stories from her own life and the lives of many of her guests and brings in themes about forgiveness and faith. According to reporters Wingrove, Lederman, and Walton, “Amid the anecdotes, theories, self-deprecation and OWN pitches, Ms. Winfrey went heavy on the inspiration, flashing the smile and star-power that made her an icon.”¹²¹

Oprah’s liberal use of Christian and biblical themes to illustrate her points (with a liberal smattering of eastern philosophy courtesy of Deepak Chopra, or new-age mysticism courtesy of Eckhart Tolle) is aimed at bringing about a type of conversion in her listeners through their appropriation of practical tools for living. Lofton quotes researcher Amy Johnson Frykholm who studies evangelical readers’ utilitarian use of scripture and inspirational stories. The result is what she calls “the life application method.”¹²² According to Lofton, “The goal of this sort of scriptural study is a ‘take-home message,’ not theological development or historical debate. Like pulling out postcards from the magazine or *O*-marked key chains, the right scriptural

¹²⁰To see footage of one of Jack Canfield’s typical events, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTbtdKZW0xo&feature=youtu.be>

¹²¹ Josh Wingrove, et al. “Welcome to the fast-paced church of Oprah,” January 26, 2103.

¹²² Amy Frykholm, quoted in Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: Gospel of an Icon*, 178–179.

interpretations can travel with the reader-believer wherever he or she may need instantaneous spiritual affirmation for continuance in the hard big world.”¹²³

Today’s success industry has absorbed much from American religious revivalism, which in turn is rooted in the “Great Awakenings” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These revival movements were, as has already been observed, characterized by an intense increase in religious fervor, and stressed personal conversion. The First Great Awakening had its roots in the covenant renewals of the 1670s. Advanced by Puritan preachers such as Increase Mather, covenant renewal normally required pastors to remind their congregations of their promises to God and to the community. By the mid-1700s, with Puritan fervor beginning to languish under the influence of growing economic prosperity, a number of preachers (among them Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield), seemingly almost spontaneously began to arouse a renewed religious enthusiasm. Thomas Kidd, in his book *The Great Awakening*, opens one of his chapters with a quote from Jonathan Edwards, one of the most esteemed theologians in America’s history:

And then a concern about the great things of religion began, about the latter end of December and the beginning of January, to prevail abundantly in the town, till in a very little time it became universal throughout the town, among old and young, and from the highest to the lowest. All seemed to be seized with a deep concern about their eternal salvation.¹²⁴

Kidd writes that “Edwards saw conversion as the experience of waking out of spiritual deadness and embracing the joy of being chosen by God for salvation. Obviously, this was not something that all could do, for not all were chosen.”¹²⁵ On the horns of the predestination dilemma, Edwards nevertheless asserted that a breakthrough conversion could occur but that it

¹²³ Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: Gospel of an Icon*, 178–179.

¹²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, quoted in Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 13.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

would not answer the ultimate question of election. However, Edwards also reasoned that if God was sovereign over all, this meant that God controlled the eternal destiny of humanity. The response called for from humans was “not an assent to dry doctrine, but an emotional repudiation of sin and embracing God’s ultimate power.”¹²⁶ Without the emotional response, interestingly, one’s status as one of the elect could not be assured.

George Whitefield, another giant of the First Great Awakening, was an Anglican with Methodist sympathies (in fact he was converted by the Wesleys and ordained in 1736). He disagreed with the Wesleys, however, about the Arminian doctrine of conditional salvation and, like Edwards, continued to preach a Calvinistic doctrine predicated on unconditional predestination. Though acknowledging the sovereignty of God in all things, Whitefield nevertheless offered the gospel to everyone and would invite people to accept Jesus as saviour. The most distinctive feature of his career was his charismatic preaching style that commanded large audiences wherever he went. He has often been credited as a major force behind later forms of evangelicalism. He made, for instance, liberal use of the media, advertising his revival meetings in newspapers, employed powerful language in his preaching to arouse emotion, and reached out to whoever was within earshot whether or not they were of his own denomination.¹²⁷

As important as the First Great Awakening was, it was the Second Great Awakening between 1790 and 1840 that left an even more indelible mark on revivalism—and provided a template strong enough to function even in a secular context such as a modern success event. Marshall Fishwick contends that the Second Great Awakening was fueled, in part, by urbanization and the consequent movement of preaching into the cities. In 1858, Fishwick suggests, a period of economic downturn led to “urban business and civic leaders seeking God’s

¹²⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 54.

help in troubled times. If there are no atheists in foxholes, there aren't many in panics either.”¹²⁸

However, the gospel renewal of the Second Great Awakening was not confined to the cities. In both rural and urban areas, prayer meetings sprang up, often held outdoors or in community halls or tents. As well, other new religious movements such as Methodism had joined the revival efforts, bringing with them the Arminian idea that all who accepted Christ were saved.

The emphasis in American Protestantism in consequence shifted to a far more emotional and personal relationship with Jesus Christ than had been characteristic of previous Protestant piety, even in Puritan circles. Revival meetings featured singing, dancing, emotional testimonials, and the experience of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” in what Fishwick describes as an “intense democratic faith.”¹²⁹ It is interesting, for instance, that anyone could preach the gospel in American revivalism, not just ministers. At age 29, a man already encountered in this thesis, Charles Grandison Finney, had his own baptism of the Holy Spirit. “Within days,” writes Fishwick, “he had converted almost every sinner in his village.”¹³⁰ He would go on to become a massively important figure in the distinctive history of American religion. Of particular interest here is the fact that the model Finney used to organize his meetings and convey his message became the template for later revival ministers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including Billy Graham, Aimee Semple MacPherson, Billy Sunday, Oral Roberts, Richard and Lindsey Roberts, Benny Hinn, and even reaching as far as the prosperity gospel’s Joel Osteen. Consciously or unconsciously, many current success teachers appear to have taken lessons from Finney’s legacy. Following are the ingredients of Finney’s revival recipe (with commentary

¹²⁸ Marshall Fishwick, *Great Awakenings*, 27.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

from me in parentheses), which can be construed as a meme, as its use in the success industry is so directly drawn from revivalism:¹³¹

- a) Direct, exciting colloquial preaching. (Today's success teachers work hard to master the skill of using exciting rhetoric, combined with easy-to-understand everyday language.)
- b) Protracted meetings given over to preaching, prayer, and counsel from sunrise to midnight. (While "sunrise to midnight" may not be the norm for success teachers, many of them put on events that last many hours, from early morning until well into the evening, or host multi-day events with an intense focus on "breakthrough," such as Jack Canfield's annual *Breakthrough to Success* five-day event.)
- c) Anxious seats at public meetings for the convicted sinners who could be singled out for special attention. (An "anxious seat" was a chair at the front of the room where people would give public confession of their spiritual shortcomings. At many success events, the motivational speaker will have a part of the stage designated for people to come up and disclose the parts of their lives that they feel are not optimal.)
- d) Public prayer for the conversion of individuals by name. (It is not uncommon for a motivational speaker at a highly charged success event to point to someone in the audience, ask his or her name, then ask why he or she came, followed by a declaration that the rest of the audience should give that person their support.)
- e) Demand for immediate decision. (For the revival meetings, the decision was to accept Christ. In success events, particularly the ones offered "free" as a preamble to future events, people are often pressured to sign up for later events, with the admonition not to leave the room until they have committed themselves to doing so.)

¹³¹ Ibid., 29.

- f) Special meetings for the anxious. (In the success industry this often takes the form of extra group coaching or extra mentoring one-on-one, available for a hefty extra price.)
- g) Extensive publicity. (Success industry speakers tend to spend large amounts of money on marketing, including posters, billboards, radio and TV interviews, websites with elaborate videos, and massive use of social media.)
- h) Bands of trained personnel workers. (Success industry practitioners almost always have adjunct staff around them whose role is to interact with the attendees or customer base. James Arthur Ray, for example, called these individuals his “dream team.”)
- i) Emotional music. (In revival meetings, this would be hymns, often set to popular tunes; in success events there is frequent use of upbeat pop music with positive lyrics, often playing throughout the entire event.)
- j) The support of resident clergy. (In success events, the speaker will frequently get in touch with business coaches or other speakers in the geographical area of his or her meeting and encourage them to network with others to get them to attend the event. They will also court business owners, asking them to buy corporate tables or to buy a block of tickets.)

It is not just motivational success seminars, of course, that use revivalist memes. In a fascinating little article by Dorothy Peven of Roosevelt University, writing in the late 1960s when “home parties” held with the intent of selling Avon products or Tupperware really took off, Peven noted how many home party companies used ritualistic and motivational means to foster retention. In order to keep the sales force (in the case of home parties, mainly women)

motivated, companies used assemblies, rallies, and big meetings at headquarters, often called “pilgrimages” or “jubilees.” Peven wrote: “The tone of the meeting is similar to that developed by evangelistic religions, and the emotions of the audiences are deliberately invoked and manipulated by techniques such as mass singing to create a collective consciousness.”¹³² The dealers of the product were exhorted to believe in the product and to imagine what it could do for their lives. Peven continued, “Sociologists and psychologists agree that human sentiments are intensified when affirmed collectively.”¹³³ Indeed they are, and it may not have been lost on success speakers that what works for Tupperware home parties could also work for them.

The Durkheimian notion of “collective effervescence” may also be salient here. Emile Durkheim held that ritual combined with collective effervescence could “transform individual psyches.”¹³⁴ Durkheim defined collective effervescence as involving two factors: a high degree of emotion (effervescence) and a sense of sharing the emotion (collectivity).¹³⁵ Writing in the same vein, Steven Carlton-Ford studied 667 adults in 60 communal groups to evaluate the possible connection between collective effervescence and self-esteem. One of his findings is intriguing. Groups with lower levels of rituals, consisting of small group memberships, and that also had a charismatic leader, had higher self-esteem. At higher levels (i.e., more rituals, higher numbers), groups with charismatic leaders had lower self-esteem than those who were in the smaller groups. Carlton-Ford saw this as suggesting that Durkheim’s idea that charismatic leaders have consistently positive effects on people could be inaccurate. This raises the question

¹³² Dorothy Peven, “The Use of Religious Revival Techniques to Indoctrinate Personnel: The Home-Party Sales Organizations.” *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 1968), 98.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹³⁴ Steven L. Carlton-Ford, “Charisma, Ritual, Collective Effervescence, and Self-Esteem.” *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Autumn 1992), 365.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 368.

of whether the success industry's propensity for large and intense events can really succeed in changing people's behaviour for the better. Collective effervescence will fuel enthusiasm for a time, when involving a large crowd, but may not have lasting effects. I have noted earlier in this chapter that the ritualistic template developed by Charles Grandison Finney was used to inspire revivalist efforts both sacred and secular. If neither religious crusades nor secular success events are likely to hold their charge in their aftermath, might this explain in part why so many people keep on "belabouring the self" by going back for more? Is this a deliberate success industry strategy or an uninvestigated negative side effect that works against the long-term success of the success industry? This would certainly be an interesting question to develop in future research, though there is not scope to pursue it presently.

Many motivational success teachers are able to stir up a strong revivalist-style fervor, particularly those who have been doing it for a long time, like Canfield and Robbins. These speakers want people to have an intensely personal experience with something bigger than themselves. For the revivalist Christians of the two "Great Awakenings," and for modern-day Christian revivalists, the personal experience is said to be of Jesus Christ, resulting in the conviction of being saved. Many success teachers, however, have a different type of divinity in mind, as we shall see shortly. It is not just a question of using Christian revivalist methodology; it is also the case that many of these speakers are teaching another kind of theology, revving it up with revivalist energy. This "other theology" is not new, but dates from the early nineteenth century and largely gained influence as a reaction to Puritan severity.

2.4.1 New Thought

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Steven Starker suggests, America needed a more positive philosophy to help cope with rapid changes in society. “This philosophy appeared as a popular religious movement that transcended the traditional denominations. . . ,”¹³⁶ and was called by many names—for example, New Thought, Unity, Divine Science, Christian Science, and others, and was eventually categorized under the rubric of New Thought. The underlying message of New Thought was that one could use the mind to create one’s total reality. “All one needed to do to achieve their heart’s desire was learn to use the mind properly to communicate one’s wishes to God.”¹³⁷ New Thought writers appealed not to traditional Christian ideas of God, but rather to a force they called “Divine Intelligence,” “Oversoul,” or the “Spirit of Infinite Life.” All one had to do was, in a sense, place an order to the Divine Intelligence and this would then act like a magnet to attract everything one wants.

New Thought drew heavily on the nineteenth-century American Transcendentalists, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson, considered by many to be the quintessential philosophical American. Emerson’s thought, like that of the Romantics of his time, was driven by his reaction to materialism. He believed that it was not the forces of historical circumstances that created one’s reality, but rather the power of inspiration, the right way of using one’s will, and a realization of one’s inner divinity that would lead a person to success. Emerson’s idea of the Oversoul, and his teaching that true self-reliance comes about through a person uniting his or her

¹³⁶ Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket*, 20.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

will with powerful universally accessible forces, did much to advance the idea of both connection to the universe (a term now replacing God) and to the divine within.¹³⁸

New Thought developed a theology that asserted that every person is a direct manifestation of the divine. The provenance of the 2006 book, *The Secret*, comes from New Thought, but it is by no means the only literary representation of the tradition in recent times (even looking up the phrase “law of attraction” on a search engine such as Google will yield a plethora of books, CDs, and videos on the theme). The first five decades of the twentieth century produced a proliferation of a group of writers often classed as “the Positive Thinkers.” Fusing their New Thought-style of “Christianity” (Jesus is God but so is everyone else) with practical everyday advice, many of these writers became household names, such as Norman Vincent Peale. Peale’s classic book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*,¹³⁹ is still in print today, as is Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.¹⁴⁰ In 1937, Napoleon Hill’s book, *Think and Grow Rich*, achieved bestseller status and has remained influential down to the present day. All of these writers came solidly out of Protestantism,¹⁴¹ as did Harry Emerson Fosdick, a more obvious Christian author, whose writings and views held huge sway in the 1930s and 1940s. Fosdick’s bestseller, *On Being a Real Person*,¹⁴² sold over 200,000 copies in one year (an incredible accomplishment for the time), and by 1977 had gone through multiple printings (and continues in print today). Fosdick de-emphasized, to a degree, the ideas of New Thought,

¹³⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹³⁹ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952). [most recent edition, 2012]

¹⁴⁰ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936).

¹⁴¹ There was one notable exception in the later 1940s and 1950s. Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen’s regular broadcasts both on radio and TV were highly influential. Sheen did not embrace New Thought, but certainly sought to reduce Catholicism to a set of workable practical principles.

¹⁴² Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person* (New York: Harper, 1943).

preferring instead a more nuanced psychological approach. Fosdick wanted people to develop a strong inner life in which they could integrate all parts of themselves. He also thought that many of the moral standards associated with religion were far too rigid, and he promoted the idea of moral decision-making being solely a personal phenomenon. “Fosdick valued ‘self-acceptance’ over the sting of conscience, and positive, rather than negative guides to ethical conduct.”¹⁴³

Looking back into the tradition of New Thought and into the later “positive thinking” literature, we can readily see the lineage of the success industry’s ideas or assertions concerning creating one’s own reality. The latter is paradoxically accompanied by the idea of releasing one’s deepest wishes to the “universe” which will then fulfill one’s wishes, because after all, we are all an embodiment of the divine. Not all success speakers use this language, but surprisingly many of the most influential among them do.¹⁴⁴ Further, and as we have seen, some employ esoteric practices such as “energy work” or “vibrational resonance,” borrowing liberally from new age ideas—ideas that are not really new at all but also date from the nineteenth century.

2.5 Weaving the Threads

The revivalist-style methods of many motivational success teachers, combined with undercurrents of the Calvinist work ethic and the spiritual anxiety from which it arose, and with New Thought countervailing ideas (sometimes even in the same program!), create an unmoored, free-floating mix of religious memes that are not often subjected to critical thinking. The theological connotations go unnoticed, it would seem, because the customers of these programs think that the success industry is “secular,” even in the face of hearing Tony Robbins talk about

¹⁴³ Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket*, 55.

¹⁴⁴ It is important to mention that some success teachers do not pursue “spiritual” ideas at all but remain strictly business-oriented. However, it can be argued that what they lack in New Thought spirituality, they make up for with a “belabouring the self” quasi-Puritan-based work ethic.

“destiny” or Jack Canfield talk about the “law of attraction.” The confusing theological mixture that results, combined with the economic aspirations of people being pumped up by believing they can have the “American dream,” needs to be looked at more closely from a theological point of view. It has thoroughly embedded itself into the American culture of the pursuit of success—a pursuit that in the case of the success industry costs people thousands of dollars out of their personal incomes, thus ensuring the monetary success of the success teachers themselves—and it has come to have a distorting influence even within the Christian churches themselves.

There is perhaps no better example of how the meme threads I have been discussing fit together than in the life and work of Oprah Winfrey. Kathryn Lofton’s excellent study of Oprah opens an important door on the success industry as a whole, and Lofton, interestingly, is not afraid to identify the religious undercurrents beneath so much of the western fascination not only with Oprah, but also with other success gurus. Lofton shows how Oprah herself embodies several of the main threads I have been exploring in this thesis. Oprah has had a life of hard work, vigilant effort, and a long spiritual journey to confront the difficulties of her childhood and her sense of herself as being in a state of grace (fitting the prototype of McAdam’s redemptive story theme, with strong echoes of the Puritan/Protestant work ethic and its underlying uncertainties). Through her TV shows and “life classes,” as well as her worldwide tours and public appearances, Oprah spreads her message and seeks to arouse her audiences to the same degree of enthusiasm and inspiration in their own lives so that they too will experience heightened self-esteem and achieve material and spiritual success (evoking the revivalist meme). She makes liberal use of the concept of the “divine” as being inside of her, and the power of her mind and heart to attract the outcomes she wishes to achieve in her life (New Thought). Finally, she is not averse to using esoteric techniques such as “energy medicine,” or discussions about the

path of the soul and the unseen bond between the invisible world of spirit and this one (new age romanticism). Motivational speakers in the success industry use some or all of these in various combinations, but perhaps none do so as eclectically or as thoroughly as Oprah.

As Jeremy Carrette and Richard King astutely observe, Oprah's empire also reveals the phenomenon of the "silent takeover of religion" by neo-liberal corporatism. As mentioned previously, Carrette and King write at length about the corporatization of spirituality which they see as a process of ripping away aspects of established traditions, disguising them, and then bringing them into the secular marketplace:

Taking a religious tradition and using it for the benefit of business enterprise is perhaps, at the very least, an extremely limited use of a rich heritage. A tradition established for dealing with ethical issues of life and death is put to the narrow services of Capital. However, using religions is...a valuable way to sell a product. It also becomes a valuable way to make a product for business practice. Take an ancient religious idea and mythologise it (make a new tradition out of its raw material). In this way religious language, concepts, and ideas can all be made in turn (with enough imagination and business flair) into a money-making enterprise.¹⁴⁵

If we allow that there is some truth in what Carrette and King are saying, then it is perhaps time to consider a response emerging from theology itself. In the context of the American success industry, what response could come from the great Judaeo-Christian traditions? I will take up this theme in the next chapter.

¹⁴⁵ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality*, 141.

Chapter Three

Four Possible Theological Responses

If religious elements have migrated in a disguised form into the success industry, there is a need, then, for a theological response. Despite the media critiques of the self-help industry, including the recent public outcry in Canada when the federal Conservative party attempted to hire motivational speakers to re-energize the demoralized Canadian Senate (which had been rocked by a series of financial scandals), and the critiques offered by the social sciences, there has not been much *theological* critique of the success industry. We cannot speak of theology as a monolithic discipline, of course, but rather of theologies, in the plural. Both because theology has played such a major role in the formation of western society, to the extent of providing certain of the formative principles by which the success industry operates, and because the latter poses a considerable threat to the church and society alike, theology cannot avoid the challenge of taking up the task of responding critically to its claims and influences. The success industry has broken off bits and pieces of the great Judaeo-Christian heritage and has also rushed headlong into readily accepting the esoteric distortions of systems like New Thought, all for its own profit. Making such an inquiry is crucial in light of the continual and prolific growth of the success industry. Philip Goodchild sees the role of theology as a fundamentally radical enquiry at the centre of life, including questions of the pursuit of wealth. He writes:

Theology, concerned with the ultimate criteria of life, is the most fundamental and radical inquiry. It attempts to discern how truth, goodness, and life come to be constituted. It offers to the world a vision of life interpreted according to the richest categories of meaning. It has the duty to invest life with the deepest layers of spiritual wealth—that is, it has to determine what is the nature of true wealth. This is the vocation for theology, whether Christian or not, and it is the most fundamental inquiry, whether pursued by believers, non-believers, or no one at all. Worldly wealth, which can only measure

exchange value in terms of money, is to be judged against a new revelation of divine power.¹⁴⁶

This chapter will suggest four possible theological approaches that, I wish to suggest, provide promising ways of critically addressing the assumptions and practices of the success industry. First, I will consider whether there is an actual theology of money that exists parallel to, or in part arising out of, the Judaeo-Christian traditions, and how awareness of this problematic factor might spur critical thinking in relation to the implicitly religious claims of so much of the success industry. The argument of Philip Goodchild in his book *Theology of Money*, and the views of Craig Blomberg in *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, will be briefly explored for possible resources. Second, I will consider the possible prophetic realist viewpoint that theology could offer, utilizing the work of the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as an initial guidepost. Third, I will consider whether the Catholic tradition, particularly Catholic social teaching, could assist in creating a counter-narrative to the values of the success industry. This is an important matter, both because of the depth of modern Catholic social teaching, and because of the ecumenical context within which all Christian theology now tends to be done. The question of what a Catholic response to the overwhelmingly Protestant underpinnings of the success industry would be is an interesting one. And fourth, largely from the standpoint of modern Protestant theology, I will enquire whether a focus on a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) in contrast with a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*) might offer a profound response to the way in which religious memes have in recent times been made to serve consumerism, of which the success industry is but one mirror. Here I will appeal particularly to the insights of Douglas John Hall, one of Canada's greatest living theologians. Each of these theological

¹⁴⁶ Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money*, 4.

approaches offers fertile ground for developing viable theological responses to an industry that has not yet directly attracted much by way of theological commentary and critique.

3.1 Is there a Theology of Money?

Since the primary aim of many of the success industry teachers is to promote ever-rising levels of material wealth, one theological starting point could well be to consider the need for a viable theology of money. Even when some success teachers emphasize health or relationships or emotional balance and do not appear to mention money *per se*, nevertheless their conception of what a good life should be almost always has an underlying assumption that affluence is absolutely key to a good life. This is a current capitalistic value, but is it a theological one?

Philip Goodchild begins his study, *Theology of Money*, by substituting the word “money” for “tempter” in Matthew 4:1-11:

And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. . . He fasted forty days and forty nights. **Money** came and said to him: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread”. . . but he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”¹⁴⁷

Goodchild observes, interestingly, that the teachings of Jesus about money are distinct from those of many other religions. While the idea of asceticism occurs in many religions, Jesus by contrast gave warnings about wealth while still enjoying the pleasures of feasting and drinking. In short, Jesus was no ascetic, and his cautionary sayings about money appeared to have another aim altogether. According to Goodchild, the regulative ethical idea concerning money in the teaching of Jesus concerns a “corruption of the soul through avarice” that results in “the debasement of the lives of others. This economic meaning of Jesus’s sayings may be evaded

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.

if they are interpreted individually; when surveyed together, however, the meaning is both radical and transparent.”¹⁴⁸

Goodchild challenges the reader to consider the import of Jesus’s statement that, “You cannot serve both God and Mammon” (Matthew 6:24). God and wealth are in competition. Goodchild reasons that if there is a fundamental opposition between God and money, money must therefore have its own power, so much so that it can become a possible substitute for God, or at least a “god” that can be chosen over God. In our world, suggests Goodchild, money is the *de facto* master of human lives, no matter how spiritually enlightened we think we are. However, Goodchild’s argument is neither simply a reflection on the contrast between Jesus’ views and modern capitalistic ones, nor an intention to produce simplistic and ultimately unworkable answers. Instead, Goodchild looks at the meaning of money in modern society and examines its ethical and religious consequences for social and political life. The point is more basic. Since we have given money the power to be the arbiter of our lives, Goodchild simply wants us to recognize that our approach to money, in and of itself, is not a neutral subject but raises major theological questions.

Goodchild goes on to describe the qualities of credit and debt that inform monetary theology. He speaks of the necessity of rethinking the world from a critical theological perspective. He does not believe that the solution to problems in the monetary system can be achieved by some kind of overthrow of the system, but prefers to speak of the transformation of social and economic institutions into a more equitable form. This cannot happen unless and until we recognize that we have a dysfunctional theology of money that we take for granted. He points out the shift that modernism made when it encouraged people to question, “How can

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 2.

nature and society serve me?”¹⁴⁹ “It is a matter of assessing, recognizing and acknowledging the value of potential wherever it may be found. . .the intrinsic value of all things.”¹⁵⁰

Goodchild asks, “Is money the supreme value against which all other values may be measured?”¹⁵¹ If we do not understand the spiritual force we have ascribed to money, we will be caught up in discourses of “opposition, resistance, exclusion, and conquering that prevent effective cooperation and coordination. What one takes to be God is Mammon in disguise.”¹⁵²

While I am not in total agreement with Goodchild’s sometimes quirky economic statements, especially about banking and credit, nevertheless his book is useful in providing a provocative way of talking about money. Money is not a religiously neutral subject; our tendency, indeed, is to treat it as a god. Applying this problematic insight to the success industry would involve the realization that many success teachers in promoting affluence as a key aim of life are articulating not a theology of self-fulfillment and personal growth, but in fact a theology of money. We must, in short, ask the question, “What kind of theology is implicit in it?” Instead of dressing up success teachings as abundance, realizing life’s purpose, happiness, achievement of one’s dreams, and so forth, Goodchild’s analysis suggests that we need to address the success industry by calling affluence exactly what it is—a competing value system purporting to identify the Value of values by which our lives are made meaningful—and then to question precisely that set of assumptions. There is no place for naïve or specious answers.

A more traditional attempt at a theology of money comes from the biblical scholar Craig Blomberg who seeks to elucidate the biblical vision of riches, community, poverty, and the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 258.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 259.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 259.

¹⁵² Ibid., 261.

sharing of surpluses—in other words “neither poverty nor riches”—in contrast to the wealth-seeking value system many modern Christians have adopted (and indeed wealth-seeking Christians throughout history). In the introduction to his book, Blomberg states his hope:

I hope that all readers, and particularly those who share my Christian commitment, may realize the substantial disparity between the biblical mandates and contemporary Christian practice. I hope, too, that all may be challenged to address the issues of stewardship of material possessions in their own lives joyfully, not out of a gloomy sense of externally imposed guilt, but in recognition that a large part of our world today, not least within the church, may well be called to repent of past apathy and self-centred indulgence.¹⁵³

This is, of course, a traditional type of critique of excess wealth, which is perhaps unlikely to gain much traction in the success industry. For one thing, the success industry itself often appears to encourage good stewardship and acts of giving. As has been mentioned in Chapter One, the desire to appear generous is used to persuade people that one ought to become rich, since one can become more generous by getting rich. Blomberg does, however, draw attention to the ubiquitous presence of envy and covetousness, both in biblical times and in the present. This is a salient point, rooted in one the abiding strands of classical religious thought, which raises critical questions for the success industry as the success industry is extraordinarily skilled at arousing envy and covetousness. Envy is promoted, so that it becomes a tool that draws in customers. At Jack Canfield’s London Ontario event, referred to in Chapter One, much attention was devoted to talking about his multi-million dollar house and the glamorous vacations he experiences several times a year. He showed pictures of exotic locales such as Hawaii and Paris as part of the core presentation. Similar tactics are widely employed in the success industry. The unfortunate thing about a book like Blomberg’s, however, is that it will likely never be read by success industry leaders. Indeed, many theologians seem oblivious to the ubiquitous problem that money presents. Among theologians, then, more work needs to be done

¹⁵³ Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 32.

on creating a viable theology of money, one with sufficient depth to sustain a thought-provoking discourse in a society and an industry that constantly screams, “Me, me, more, more.”

3.2 The Prophetic Realist

The true role of a prophet, it might be said, is not to “predict” the future, but to point out how things are now, so that a different future might come to be. The true prophet speaks, accordingly, of the corrosive effect certain situations or human propensities have on communities and individuals, and on their relationship with God. The great biblical prophetic writings illustrate the ongoing struggling and questioning nature of true prophecy—the continual use of contrast, metaphor, lamentation, poetic lyricism, and always a deep, burning sense of justice. In their time, biblical prophets spoke of what *was* and what needed to *be*. They believed they were speaking for God. Whether or not one chooses to believe that God speaks through prophets need not deter us from evaluating prophetic voices. We must be aware, however, that there are plenty of false prophets—people who twist the spiritual wisdom and heritage of a people for their own ends.

At the Tony Robbins event that I attended in London Ontario in 2008, I overheard a woman in the lobby describing Robbins as “a prophet.” Curious, I asked her what she meant. “Oh, he is just so good at telling people what they can be, how they can find their purpose,” she replied. The question that arose in my mind was, “Yes, but does he tell people what *is*?” The woman seemed to think that Robbins’ promises of total fulfillment in all areas of life were “prophetic,” not stopping to consider the elusiveness of actually gaining “total fulfillment” in the sense that the success industry uses such phrases. To many success teachers, fulfillment apparently means living the American dream and never having to worry about anything, never

having to feel insecure. For those who adapt New Thought-styles of thinking, it means never having to acknowledge that along with the humane and moral parts of ourselves there are also disorder and darkness.

The biblical prophets were not pie in the sky idealists. They were tough-minded realists who had no illusions about the many contradictions in human life; indeed, the biblical prophets typically dwelt upon them. Accordingly, another possible theological response to the success industry might come from modern theologians whose writings have a similarly prophetically “realist” turn. Due to the constraints of this thesis, I can only cite one major example, but there would undoubtedly be other theologians whose work could be also used in this way.

The major source I have chosen to examine is a theologian who has been called a theological realist—the great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr (1892-1971) did not live to see the burgeoning of what I am calling the success industry. But he had plenty to say about society’s greed and moral deceptions, and he was not afraid to use the word “idolatry” in relation to them. Niebuhr’s realism had an Augustinian flavour. Like Augustine, Niebuhr held that humans are fundamentally flawed, that parts of our nature (which he understood in broad psychological terms) conflict with other parts, and that we consequently have an enormous propensity for self-delusion. We have in particular a continual tendency to corrupt what is good (an implication of what Augustine called “original sin”). Imperfection is the hallmark of humanity, and if we do not realize this, says Niebuhr, we risk falling into a vacuous moralism incapable of addressing either greed or power. He writes:

Nothing is cheaper and more futile than the preaching of a simple moralism which is based upon the assumption that the world need only to be told that selfishness is sin and that love is the law of life to beguile it from the anarchy of sin in which it is presently

engulfed. Such a moralism, to which the modern church is particularly prone, is blind to the real tragedy and persistence of sin in the world.¹⁵⁴

Niebuhr's theology is generally spoken of as a form of "neo-orthodoxy," a theological designation he shared in common with the great German theologian Karl Barth, among others. Neo-orthodoxy emphasizes the idea of revelation by God and therefore involves a close tie to the Bible. It also stresses the transcendence of God, that there is "an infinite and qualitative difference" between the human and the divine, and it issues a cautionary warning regarding humans' propensities to want to have god-like status. To Niebuhr, sin was not merely a state of ignorance or error, and it could not be overcome by reason or intellect, but solely by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. However, Larry Rasmussen in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*, asserts that Niebuhr was actually more liberal than neo-orthodox, quoting Niebuhr himself as saying:

I have never thought of myself in their category [neo-orthodoxy]. I think when it comes to the crux, I belong to the liberal tradition more than to theirs. Whenever I read them or argue with them, Brunner for instance, I always feel that they are trying to fit life into a dogmatic mold and that they have hard and fast Biblical presuppositions which I do not share.¹⁵⁵

Niebuhr is perhaps better understood as an "applied" theologian who did not want to engage doctrine so much as to emphasize the relationship between a biblical faith and the personal and social principles by which we live. The human self was a union of nature and spirit, standing within the world but also able to transcend it. Being able to transcend ourselves is, for Niebuhr, paradoxically a confirmation of our limitations—"Confusion follows upon man's [sic] effort to complete his life by his own power and solve its enigma by his own wisdom.

¹⁵⁴ Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 91 (from Niebuhr's essay, "The Christian Church in a Secular Age", 79–2).

¹⁵⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr quoted in Larry Rasmussen, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (New York: Collins, 1988), 22.

Perplexities, too simply solved, produce despair.”¹⁵⁶ Writing about Niebuhr’s idea of the self, James Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza comment that “the human self is that ambiguous creature who finds itself at the juncture of nature and spirit and whose predicament lies in the fact that self-transcendence reveals our finitude encompassed by natural limitations but with infinite expectations and pretensions.”¹⁵⁷ Such an insight could serve as a cautionary restraint on an industry that seems actively to want to deny finitude, to circumvent it, and to convince people that life can be lived with “infinite expectations.”

Niebuhr defined greed, interestingly, as a lust for power (whether personal or political) and as an attempt to escape humanity’s sense of insecurity within nature. As finite beings, we neither have unlimited resources, nor are we immortal. He writes:

Greed as a form of the will-to-power has been a particularly flagrant sin in the modern era because modern technology has tempted contemporary man [sic] to overestimate the possibility and the value of eliminating his insecurity in nature. Greed has thus become the besetting sin of a bourgeois culture. This culture is continually tempted to regard physical comfort and security as life’s final good and to hope for its attainment to a degree which is beyond human possibilities. ‘Modern man,’ said a cynical doctor, ‘has forgotten that nature intends to kill man and will succeed in the end.’¹⁵⁸

To an industry that talks about “no limits,” Niebuhr’s prophetic words about human nature are a powerful antidote, bringing us down to earth. Perhaps, then, current theologians who might seek to address the success industry head-on could well take inspiration from Niebuhr in reinforcing the insight that we are finite and not-God. In other words, a Niebuhr-inspired message to the success industry would be to “get real.”

¹⁵⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr in Larry Rasmussen, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 229.

¹⁵⁷ James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 178.

¹⁵⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr in Larry Rasmussen, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*, 143.

3.3 Roman Catholic Perspectives

Another possible theological response to the success industry comes from Catholic social teaching. As a practicing Roman Catholic, I have learned over the years that Catholic theology has a depth of social teaching, one that in the past has addressed issues such as workers' rights and the conflict between democracy and communism. In recent years, Catholic social teaching has begun looking more closely at the effects of consumerism and greed on individuals and human societies, and it is likely that this trajectory will continue under the current Pope, Francis I. To respond to an industry so permeated with Protestant roots with the perspective of Roman Catholicism is perhaps to appear to be setting up a dichotomy of Catholic versus Protestant. However, the truth is that most theology today is ecumenical in scope, and that we need not worry about this in the context of this thesis, as the success industry has embedded itself in such a way into society as to attract Catholics as well as Protestants (and a huge proportion of people who identify as "spiritual but not religious"). The success industry has gone beyond just being "Protestant." It has woven itself into the fabric of modern global capitalism (or as Carrette and King would say, it is part and parcel of neo-liberal ideology), and is to that extent a problem as much for Roman Catholicism as for Protestantism.

One particularly articulate, and very recent, article on greed and consumerism comes from the Catholic theologian Mark Slatter of St. Paul's University in Ottawa. Slatter seeks to engage the issues of consumerism and affluence head-on in a way that directly reflects upon the western society in which we live. Slatter originally presented his paper, "The Secret Life of Greed" at a conference at Huron University College in London, Ontario in 2012, entitled *God and the Economic Crisis* (dealing with the aftermath of the 2008 world financial crisis). The

paper is soon to be published by the *Anglican Theological Review*. I chose to use Slatter's paper in this thesis because his insights are so deeply penetrating.

Slatter defines greed as the impulse "to crave after something that is in no way necessary for life sustenance."¹⁵⁹ It need not be only money or things. What is craved can be psychological as well—such as the desire to feel recognized for one's accomplishments, the desire to score enough goals at a hockey game, the desire to avoid being passed over for a promotion. In short, much of what greed amounts to is hidden from us by being psychologized or spoken of in euphemisms, which are particularly convenient because they allow us to convince ourselves that we are really not all that greedy. Slatter suggests that greed "now bears the crown of entitlement."¹⁶⁰ Greed amid so much affluence is not some overwhelming feeling of avarice, the hoarding of wealth (though this can be part of it). For most people it is the niggling desire to have more, brought on by a feeling that there is never enough or by an awareness of the tremendous disparity between haves and have-nots—and the desire to avoid being one of the latter.

According to Slatter, we are continually nagged

"by what we do *not* have and who we are *not*. . .The consumer images marched into our lives are designed to induce in us a perpetual feeling of incompleteness. . .The irony, of course, is that despite all we are and have, we never are nor have enough. . .The propaganda of the market is clear and veiled: we never have enough, we never know enough, we are never in good enough shape. . .Each of these is identified and creatively exploited as a marketing niche."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Mark Slatter, "The Secret Life of Greed," first presented at Huron University College, October 13, 2012, and soon to be published in the *Anglican Theological Review*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

Slatter also observes that we are trapped into believing we can have a “mastery mindset” [the belief that we should have mastery over everything in our lives] without engaging the deepest parts of ourselves. He writes that this mastery mindset

cannot be transferred to the environment of interiority as if it were as easy to understand and apply as the information gleaned from a technical manual. . . This is why personal failures, mistakes and pain accomplish more for personal maturation in one year than all the ego-driven strategies over ten.”¹⁶²

In other words, it is not merely learning how great we can be (as the success industry postulates) that leads us to profound transformation. It is also the endurance of setbacks and suffering.

Slatter asks, “What does greed *do to individuals?*”¹⁶³ His first response is that our post-modern culture “has come to be equated with our desires: accordingly what is designated as ‘bad’ or ‘evil’, though never categorized as such but operating still at the level of valuing and affectivity, could be anything that is an obstacle to attaining what is desired.”¹⁶⁴

Second, greed leads to what Slatter calls “the Sisyphus ritual of unrequited satisfaction.”¹⁶⁵ When we see something we really desire, it quickly comes to be associated with overall happiness, and may then become a preoccupation. This could be a factor in why people who attend success events, in search of methods to gain more fulfillment in their lives, often have a tendency to attend more than one of such events, or to subscribe to a success teacher’s newsletters or sign up for online coaching.

¹⁶² Ibid., 8.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 11.

Third, greed “collapses the distinction between one’s deepest personal identity and what one owns or wants.”¹⁶⁶ If money and material acquisition (including the acquisition of relationships, health practices, job promotions, vacations, and so forth) are the supreme good in people’s lives, then they are tempted to exchange their inner life for an external focus. To apply this to the success industry, we can see a conundrum. Success industry teachers tell people to focus on their inner resources, such as imagination, intuition, and gut feelings, in order to manifest outer rewards of affluence. Thus people think they are exploring their inner life while all the time actually giving up a genuine inner life in favour of internalizing external things as inner things. How convoluted is that?

Slatter also points to a major problem in even allowing theology to address issues of greed and consumerism. In an uncertain financial environment and in an economy where material security is under threat for millions of people, despite western nations’ overall collective wealth, “the critique on spending routines and overstretched lifestyles, a message coming from governments as well as the churches, has become too foolish a message for consumer ears... The ‘anti-greed’ warning seems to have as much impact as the annual advent sermon lamenting the commercialization of Christmas.”¹⁶⁷ Thus we can extrapolate that simply confronting the success industry with its excesses and with the way it has twisted certain theological ideas is not necessarily going to stop people from attending these events. But the discourse is timely, and long overdue.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 13.

Slatter suggests that in tending to the external, we fail to attend to “the dwelling that is ourselves.”¹⁶⁸ There we will find resources of conscience and reflection. The key to bringing the contemplation of greed (and indeed of other human flaws) into awareness lies not in pious platitudes of critique that many people agree with, but that few ever act upon, but rather in having the courage to ask ourselves individually and as a culture what is truly a good life and what is the ultimate aim of life. Is the primary aim of life to make as much money as possible, to have a plethora of things? “The error of judgment,” writes Slatter, “is hyper-identified with financial security.”¹⁶⁹ To which he adds the penetrating words of Jesus in Luke 12:20—“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”¹⁷⁰ That is indeed a thought-provoking question when pondering involvement with the success industry. “The things you have prepared, whose will they be” is not asking us about our ownership of “stuff,” but rather about identifying the deepest values in human life.

Slatter’s astute and penetrating insights grow out of the larger context of Catholic social thought that in recent years has begun to engage with the issue of consumerism (and in the sense that the success industry encourages people to consume, it is a significant symptom of the ubiquitousness of the consumerist orientation to life.) The Franciscan theologian Kenneth Himes, who is a professor of religion and public policy at Boston University, distinguishes three aspects of consumerism: it can be understood as a social movement in the sense of appearing to empower people to uphold their rights; as an ideology in terms of talking about a marketplace that upholds freedom of choice and entrepreneurial activity, but which is critical of economic

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 14.

alternatives such as socialism; and as a way of life focusing on the “benefits and pleasures of material affluence.”¹⁷¹

Himes observes that for theological and ethical writings on consumerism to be useful, they must be careful to avoid two extremes—“One is a world-hating, anti-materialism of some jeremiads; the other is a gospel of wealth found in some evangelical Protestant approaches.”¹⁷² He goes on to say, however, that, “Overall, the tone of much of the theological literature is more negative than positive in the assessment of consumerism.”¹⁷³ Himes surveys several writers on consumerism, including Thomas Beaudoin (on branding), David Matzko McCarthy (on the marketplace), and Vincent Miller (whom he regards as offering one of the most useful theological critiques of consumerism). In particular, he notes that Miller focuses on the impact of consumerism on religion itself. Miller’s claim is that most churches are steeped in consumerism and thus are far from immune to it—which may explain, in part, why churches have to this point been so ineffective in addressing the “teachings” of the success industry, and have even managed to avoid having the success industry somewhere on their radar screen. Miller writes, “Consumer culture is best diagnosed not as a deformation of belief but as a particular way of engaging religious beliefs that divorces them from practice.”¹⁷⁴

Himes’ thorough article is particularly useful in providing an overview of papal encyclical teachings that in various ways address consumerism. There is in fact a considerable body of such material. In the encyclical *Populorum progressio*, for example, Pope Paul VI expressed a vision of authentic human development that included not only addressing poverty,

¹⁷¹ Kenneth Himes, “Consumerism and Christian Ethics,” 133.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷⁴ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.

but also addressing the dangers of too much material wealth. Paul VI used the words “greed” and “avarice” in connection with over-consumption. John Paul II, however, expressed the issue differently when in *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, he spoke of “super-development,” which he described as “an excessive availability of every kind of material good for the benefit of certain social groups.”¹⁷⁵

Some years later, John Paul II in *Centesimus annus* warned that “consumer attitudes and lifestyles can be created which are objectively improper and often damaging to physical and spiritual health.”¹⁷⁶ It would be interesting for a statement like this to serve as a dialogue point to engage Micki McGee’s concept of belabouring the self, which, as we have considered earlier, has become symptomatic of the success industry. John Paul II calls for “the education of consumers in the responsible use of their power of choice.”¹⁷⁷ He goes on to make an important distinction, lest anyone think he is being naively anti-materialistic: “It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards ‘having’ rather than ‘being’, and which wants to *have* more, not in order to *be* more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself.”¹⁷⁸

More recently, in *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict XVI takes a macro view of social and economic equality, in which he attacks an over-focus on profit. Where profit and self-advancement is the exclusive goal of human economic endeavour, “without the common good as

¹⁷⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, from web text: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html (accessed July 2, 2013).

¹⁷⁶ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, from web text: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html (accessed July 2, 2013).

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., from web text.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., from web text.

its ultimate end, [it] risks destroying wealth and creating poverty.”¹⁷⁹ He goes on to identify some specific distortions of contemporary economic development: financial dealing that is “largely speculative,” migration of peoples “often provoked” and then insufficiently attended to, and “the unregulated exploitation of the earth's resources.”¹⁸⁰ In the face of such interconnected problems, Benedict calls for “a new humanistic synthesis.”¹⁸¹ The crisis “obliges us to re-plan our journey.”¹⁸²

The current Pope, Francis I, places even more emphasis on ever-increasing economic inequalities. Standing in solidarity with the poor has been his life’s work, and recent comments he has made to the media indicate that he links poverty to the embeddedness of greed in western societies. “Unbridled capitalism has taught the logic of profit at any cost, of giving in order to receive, of exploitation without looking at the person,” he told journalists in May 2013, adding that such an approach to life is manifest “in the crisis we are now living through.”¹⁸³ In his first encyclical *Lumen fidei* (a document started by Benedict XVI and completed by Francis I), Francis makes direct reference to idolatry in this context:

Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the center of reality and worshipping the work of our own hands. Once man [sic] has lost the fundamental orientation which unifies his existence, he breaks down into the multiplicity of his desires ...Idolatry, then, is always polytheism, an aimless passing from one lord to another.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas et veritate*, web text: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html (accessed July 3, 2013).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., from web text.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., from web text.

¹⁸² Ibid., from web text.

¹⁸³ <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2013/05/22/pope-francis-warns-of-the-dangers-of-unbridled-capitalism/> (accessed June 15, 2013).

¹⁸⁴ Francis I, *Lumen fidei*, web text: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei_en.html (accessed July 17, 2013).

To what extent does the success industry place people at the centre of their own reality and urge them to worship their own work rather than consider whether their work contributes to creating a better world? To what extent does the multiplicity of materialist self-fulfillment goals result in humans “passing from one lord to another?” Hopefully we can anticipate a fuller treatment of greed and consumerism from Francis I in the near future.

3.4 Theology of the Cross (*theologia crucis*)

For purposes of this thesis, a final possible theological response to the ethos of success is to explore whether the classic Protestant contrast between “*theologia gloriae*” and “*theologia crucis*” can offer resources for a viable critique of the success industry from a Christian theological point of view. Here the work of United Church of Canada theologian Douglas John Hall, particularly his book *The Cross in our Context* and his extensive article, “The Theology of the Cross: A Usable Past,”¹⁸⁵ can be drawn upon. What, after all, is Christianity without a cross? Yet, as Hall (with other theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar) points out, many within Christianity have lost sight of the significance of the cross (not only now, but also through many centuries of history).

It was Martin Luther who articulately framed the dichotomy between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. The theology of glory was based on the accomplishments of culture, reason, and power, and on a triumphalism that Hall observes has influenced most of Christian history. “Triumphalism” is the word Hall feels most closely defines a theology of glory.

Triumphalism refers to the tendency in all strongly held world-views, whether religious or secular, to present themselves as a full and complete account of reality, leaving little or

¹⁸⁵ Douglas John Hall, “The Theology of the Cross: A Usable Past”, www.elca.org/~media/Files/.../TheTheologyoftheCross_pdf.ashx (accessed July 10, 2013).

any room for debate or difference of opinion. . . . This temptation infects every genre of human thinking, not only religious thought.¹⁸⁶

Theologia gloriae therefore carries a strong connotation with being right, involving identification with the accepted way of doing things, an embeddedness of the “way things are,” particularly for the advantaged. It celebrates power, the overcoming of obstacles and challenges, and the luminosity and creativity of the human mind. Overcoming obstacles, the use of illuminating reason and the accomplishments of human creativity are positive parts of life, and it is understandable that throughout its history the Christian church has been a player on the stages of power. (Theologian Michael Horton coined the phrase “the glory story”¹⁸⁷ to describe America’s own absorption in the theology of glory almost to the point where Christ no longer has a cross.) According to Luther, however, and to Hall, a *theologia gloriae* is not sufficient to define the essence of Christianity. If Christianity is to call itself Christian, its emphasis must be on the one by whose name it calls itself. The Christian church needs to embrace its origins in the crucified one, by continually developing and nurturing a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). Considering his modern appeal to the theology of the cross, Hall comments that, “I have never been able to improve on Moltmann’s metaphor when he says that the theology of the cross is ‘not a simple chapter in theology, but the key signature for all Christian theology.’”¹⁸⁸ Hall argues that the only theological antidote to the *theologia gloriae* of the western world is in the theology of the cross—“this radical identification of God with the crucified Christ.”¹⁸⁹ Thus God is in solidarity with the suffering, the wounded, the weak, and the vulnerable. The cross of

¹⁸⁶ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 17.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 69. Horton claims that we become overly invested in the theology of glory when we start asking questions such as “How can I climb the ladder and obtain the glory here and now that God has actually promised for us? . . .”, 68.

¹⁸⁸ Douglas John Hall, “The Theology of the Cross A Usable Past,” 2.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Christ, says Hall, is first of all “a statement about the nature of the Deity,”¹⁹⁰ and therefore also “a statement about the world and God’s abiding love for the world and all its creatures.”¹⁹¹ The cross for Hall is the ultimate statement of humanity’s flight from God, which was answered by a God entirely willing to move toward fallen humankind. The theology of the cross is an incarnational theology that affirms that in Christ God took on a fully human nature, entering fully into our estranged state. The theology of the cross follows from the path of *kenosis*, which involved an emptying out, a radical outpouring of God toward all of creation (Philippians 2: 6–8). The way of the cross is a path of humility, compassion, and prophetic justice. The cross of Christ stands with those who are oppressed. The *kenosis* of God is the exact opposite of the continual desire of humanity to fill itself up. The theology of the cross is a giving, not a getting.

However, Hall does not imply that we should romanticize the cross or extol suffering. “We are not called to laud and embrace this symbol of violence and torture and death as though it were something splendid. What is good lies hidden underneath or behind this dreadful reality; namely, God’s concealed presence and determination to mend the creation from within.”¹⁹²

It is interesting also to note that Hall sees the theology of the cross as contextual. A theology of compassion and concern would be meaningless, suggests Hall, if it did not address itself to particularity, within specific moments in our day-to-day lives. The theology of the cross is profoundly relational, ever present in the suffering of the world. It has a praxis orientation. It is a way of orienting oneself toward life—to ourselves, to our neighbours, to the world, to God.

Adam Setmeyer, in “Consumerism, Catholicism, and Hall’s Theology of the Cross,” applies Hall’s *theologia crucis* to the American dream. Setmeyer speculates that the gradual

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹² Ibid., 5.

failure of the American dream to improve the lives of millions of its citizens may “provide room for a renewed profession of faith.”¹⁹³ The problem is, however, that it is difficult to look to the churches to do this as they have themselves become immersed in the theology of glory. American Christianity in fact lives within another form of religion—a *theologia gloriae* involving both overtly and covertly the religion of the “nation,” the triumphal “city set on a hill” that presents itself as a “light to the nations,” when in truth its foundations lie radically elsewhere.

In 1967, the great American sociologist Robert Bellah wrote a groundbreaking essay, “Civil Religion in America.”¹⁹⁴ Bellah put forth the thesis that “Americanism” was increasingly the operative faith in the U.S.A. This Americanism was based on the sacralization of the dominant values of the nation, and played an important role in maintaining a cohesive national identity. This civil religion, Bellah claimed, arose out of Judaeo-Christian values but is not synonymous with Christianity. Ideas from the European Enlightenment, particularly the emphasis on reason, science, and progress arrived with the settlers, not just Puritan religiosity. Perhaps in reaction to Puritan severity, several of the men who in the aftermath of the American Revolution created the American Constitution had turned toward a Deism that insisted on the idea that God had very little, or even nothing, to do with the day-to-day running of human affairs. Anthony Pagden in his recent book, *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters*, observes that many of the crafters of the American constitution such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, “did not believe that they required any such limits [control by religion] to their own actions. They were unwilling to accept any kind of religion in which the

¹⁹³ Adam Setmeyer, “Consumerism, Catholicism, and Hall’s Theology of the Cross.” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Winter 2010, 313.

¹⁹⁴ Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 21–44.

deity played any direct role in human affairs, still less one that maintained that the only possible knowledge of humanity was to be found in a scripture and regulated by a clergy.”¹⁹⁵ This thinking led to the constitutional separation of church and state, in which all were free to practice their religion, indeed, but in which religion would function only in the private sphere.

Jefferson and his colleagues admittedly did not give up entirely on the Christian religion. They retained the idea of America being under the providence of God, and paradoxically this served to prolong the power of the original Puritan religious ethos of the U.S.A. The idea of a nation under providence led to the development of the non-denominational and somewhat amorphous religious construct in American civil life—in short, what Bellah called the civil religion. Bellah’s work has been used to provide a framework for the inclusion of patriotism, presidential elections, sports teams, parades, holidays, and other quasi-ritualistic events that create an ongoing civil religion in the secular realm—paradoxically in a constitutional democracy in which religion and public life are formally distinct. The “God” that American politicians and pundits refer to in phrases such as “God bless America” or “one nation under God” may not be the God specific to Christian traditions, but this God definitely originates there. In an overwhelmingly Christian nation in terms of religious demographics (although there has been significant growth in religious plurality), most Americans’ concept of God harks back to the churches in which they were raised. Bellah identified civil religion as a parallel religion; however, in the light of what we have seen of the success industry, I would suggest that the civil religion represents not so much the creation of a simple “parallel” religion, but rather that it results from an unmooring of certain beliefs and perspectives from their original traditions, through the process by which cultural memes come to be adapted—and indeed corrupted—by new social conditions and structures.

¹⁹⁵ Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013), 133.

Some of these perspectives, particularly the lasting Puritan vision of America as a beacon to the world, have offered a doorway for the existence of the success industry. I suggest that we can look at the American civil religion as a type of *theologia gloriae* stressing the might and accomplishments of America. In this civic context, it is difficult to allow for the disturbing counter-narrative of the theology of the cross. Thus we might say that, in civil religion, the cross is supposed to stay in the churches, within people's private belief systems. However, as Hall points out, the *theologia crucis* is the distinctively Christian way to insist upon a contextual counter-narrative to empty triumphalism.

By virtue of its cloaking of itself in the *theologia gloriae* of civil religion, the success industry and its proponents can only have difficulty in hearing and perceiving the radical message of the *theologia crucis*. Suffering, they say? Sacrifice? Emptying myself for a cause higher than me? Such ideas are almost completely foreign to the success industry. Thus churches that wish to remain faithful to the original intent of the gospel—the story of an incarnational God who walks with the humble, a kenotic self-sacrificing God—need to present this counter-narrative into the heart of society. It must confront the excesses of civil religion not so much with doctrine, dogma, or emphasis on individual Christian conversion, but instead with a more compelling, alternate vision of what a human society can be when not based on ego, envy, and desperately belaboured selves hoping “to make it” one day. If the Christian church cannot rise to this challenge, then it is all but dead.

Thankfully, however, it is not always church leaders or the great theologians who are called to express the counter-narrative. Sometimes the best theologizing can come from those who are not the leaders or the world-renowned scholars, but rather from the trenches of society. One example of this is a recent newspaper column written by an ordinary lay Catholic spiritual

director in London Ontario. Reflecting on the meaning of Good Friday and Easter, Bruce

Tallman wrote very perceptively, as follows:

If you think metaphorically, there are many more meanings and spiritual lessons to be learned, whether you are Christian or humanist, and at any time of the year not just Easter. The crucifixion could remind you not to put too much stock in your reputation, since public opinion can be very fickle. . . This central symbol can teach anyone, Christian or humanist, that we are all called to sacrifice our life for others. That we are to take on the faults, follies, and misjudgments of others without retaliating. . . That good people can do very bad things. That injustice kills what is best in life. That any of us, if we opposed the unjust powers that be, could be persecuted, arrested, tortured or executed. . . That God is a loving God who wants to take on all your suffering rather than have us suffer. . . that Jesus chose to go to the cross. . . That love overcomes hatred.¹⁹⁶

This, surely, is *theologia crucis* gently repudiating *theologia gloriae*. Compare this now to motivational speakers who will tell people that they can have anything they want, that the world is their oyster, that continual striving for more is the key to a fulfilled life, that the richer you are the more self-worth you have as a person. The former is difficult, but fraught with profound meaning, speaking to us at our depths. The latter is cavalier, glamorous, evasive. The former calls us to get outside of ourselves and our agendas. The latter tells us that our personal agendas are all that matter. The former empties us of illusion and pride. The latter fills us up with greed, envy, and hubris.

Perhaps the most definitive question, however, that a theological perspective could present to the American success industry is the question referred to by Mark Slatter, the simple question on the lips of Jesus: “And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Will these be the “things” we attempt to acquire in a never-ending pursuit of “success”? Or will they be the qualities of God’s kingdom characterized by justice, mercy, community, service to others, and sharing whatever we have?

¹⁹⁶ Bruce Tallman, “Cross, empty tomb potent symbols, even if you’re not Christian,” London Free Press, April 27, 2013.

Conclusion

Possible Directions for Future Research

Within the confines of a Master's thesis in theology, I have attempted to engage in a consideration of the effects of the American success industry in light of certain major religious memes that, I suggest, have come to permeate that industry which thrives in the context of a society almost completely wrapped up in consumerism. Perhaps my central contention is that this is something that Christian theologians, particularly those operating in the North American context, need to take more seriously.

In June 2013, I presented my research on the success industry to the Canadian Theological Society at Congress 2013 in Victoria, BC. The presentation aroused a good deal of curiosity with several of the theologians present saying that they had not, to this point, even had the success industry on their radar. They had no idea how extensive and lucrative this industry is, and little sense of how far-reaching is its cultural appeal. They agreed that this is a topic that indeed merits a response from theology and that more work needs to be done in this area. I would like to conclude by offering some further questions that could be explored to obtain a fuller picture of the success industry and to promote a much needed further critique. Where could we go from here? Let me conclude by enumerating ten basic areas for future enquiry.

- 1) If my contention is correct that many people are not conscious of the underlying religious currents in success seminars (because of the possibility that these are memes that bypass many people's critical filters), and that as a result these unconscious ideas may be part of what attracts people to the industry's offerings because they somehow feel familiar, I think there is a need for research on the actual religious backgrounds

- of success industry adherents. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most success industry attendees have a Protestant background (even if not currently religious), but I would suggest that there is a need to see real measurable evidence of this.
- 2) There needs to be more theological writing on the success industries themselves. Social science disciplines have helped to break new ground—for example Kathryn Lofton’s excellent book on Oprah has been cited in this thesis. But it is difficult to find much theological writing specifically about the ethos of success as it applies to individuals and their behaviours. Mark Slatter’s article, “The Secret Face of Greed,” shows the potential of an approach that could contribute further to a body of knowledge about this topic.
 - 3) Another fruitful area of research might be to investigate whether younger generations (the millennials and post-millennials) are as susceptible to success industry pitches as the baby boomer generation is. Baby boomers are a prime audience of the success industry—not surprising, because they were at the forefront of the countercultural 1960s and 1970s that celebrated self-gratification, subjective experience, and a focus on self. Will the younger generations retain this kind of orientation? Even more to the point, will the younger generations have the money to even invest in these kinds of programs? With levels of affluence decreasing for wide swaths of western populations, will the success industry begin declining?
 - 4) Does the success industry represent simply the folly of indulgence by relieving people of their hard-earned money, or does it actually harm people? In its focus on individual self-fulfillment, does it work against community? In other words, what effect does this industry have on people’s sense of belonging to place and their

- connections within communities? The methodologies of the success industries suggest that they could be a prescription for isolation and alienation. If everyone is to “do his or her own thing,” and knowing that the quest for material affluence is competitive, is there a sense that the continual striving for material accomplishments will result in an increasing moral vacuum in our lives?
- 5) In theological courses in universities, should courses on theology and consumerism be developed and offered so that future clergy, laypersons, and scholars can get a clearer picture of the implications of living in a consumerist society, and thus form an effective counter-narrative that can nourish not just church members but the population as a whole? If, as Douglas Hall argues, theology ought to be contextual, then surely this is a context that theology needs to learn to speak about much more effectively than it typically does.
- 6) What effect will growing multi-cultural populations have on the success industry? Will immigrants from third world countries or non-Christian countries be attracted to it? Would adherents of other religions, particularly non-Western religions, be drawn in any way to the success industry? What might be the perspective of religions outside Christianity? What could the values and teachings of many of the world’s great spiritual traditions teach us about the meaning of success? What, for example, would be the Muslim perspective or the Buddhist perspective, or the perspective of those who follow indigenous practices?
- 7) A consideration of gender issues in the success industry could also be highly useful. Many success event audiences appear to be predominantly female while the most prominent success teachers tend to be “alpha” males who project an air of authority.

- Does this industry play a role in perpetuating male/female stereotypes and the erroneous idea that women always need the guidance of men to achieve material success? In addition, do female leaders in the success industry accept at face value predominantly “male” ideas regarding success?
- 8) What is the religious background of the motivational speakers themselves? What is their level of education? Also, is there any way of verifying the “rags to riches” stories many speakers include in their biographies? Are many success teachers, other than the top ten, really as rich as they seem?
- 9) Would it be possible to conduct research on the return on investment of attending expensive success events? How many people actually significantly increase their income as a result of being influenced by a success event? Do they make back their investment within a reasonable period of time? Or are they merely left being out of pocket and in debt, buying services that will not help them in any constructive way, all the while believing the hype?
- 10) What kind of recruitment methods does the success industry use to attract people? Can attending success events become an addiction? Can research from the field of addictions and from methods of recruitment used in New Religious Movements (NRMs) shed light on why so many people keep going back for more? Are success events a type of fix, a false high?

These are only a selection of the further possible research directions on this topic. Many would involve an engagement between theology and the social sciences. If a greater body of knowledge could develop from the interaction of theology with the social sciences, this could not only greatly enhance discourse about the general role of religion

in popular culture, but also provide resources for theology in challenging the status quo of our economic systems and in addressing commonplace assumptions about money and well-being. It is my hope that this thesis, in a modest way, can make a contribution to such discourse aimed as it is at fostering critical theological thinking about an industry that too often either engenders polemical and reactive ideology when challenged, or that alternatively flies below the radar of critique altogether.

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Curriculum Vitae

Name: Sharon Lindenburger

Education

- 2013 – PhD candidate, Theory and Criticism, Western University
- 2011–2013 Master of Arts (Theology), Western University
- 2009–2010 1st year MTS, Huron University College
- 2007–2009 Post-degree courses, Religion and Culture, Wilfrid Laurier University
- 1976–1977 Bachelor of Education, University of Toronto
- 1965–1969 Honours Bachelor of Arts, University of Toronto

Work

- 2013 – 2014 Research Assistant, Centre for Theory and Criticism
- 2011–2013 Teaching Assistant, World Religions, Huron University College, Western University
- 2012–2013 Tutor for a special needs student (Religious Studies, Social Work—Western University)
- 1970–2011 Book Editor, Investigative Journalist, Writer (journalism and TV documentaries)