

Aussie Christians

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [May 16, 2012](#) issue



Crowds at the Hillsong Conference at the Acer Arena in Sydney, Australia in 2009. Attribution [Some rights reserved](#) by [Jiaren Lau](#).

For three centuries, the British Empire took the lead in the global expansion of Christianity. It seems startling, then, that in the modern world a British background appears to be closely correlated to extreme secularism.

Britain itself is one of Europe's least religious societies, and faith is just as little in evidence in the old imperial offshoots of what used to be called the White Commonwealth. When an academic report last year projected that religion might vanish altogether in nine countries by 2100, the list included three British dominions overseas—Australia, New Zealand and Canada—as well as the longtime British possession of Ireland. Globally, secularization looks like a British disease.

At first sight, Australia perfectly illustrates this secular trend. Up to the 1950s, the Australian churches were powerful and well established, with a traditional threefold division between Anglicans, Catholics and Protestant Nonconformists. From the 1960s, though, the country began a very European evolution toward secular liberalism and plummeting church attendance. Catholics in particular have been traumatized by the church's response to child-abuse allegations. Although this is not a scientific measure of decline, religious themes and characters have next to no serious presence in contemporary Australian cinema. When clergy or believers do appear on screen, they tend, as in contemporary Europe, to be mindless fanatics or comical buffoons.

The growth of secularism has spawned a predictable range of associated culture wars. At the time of writing, the country is sharply divided over the legislation of same-sex marriage and troubled over a host of seeming insults toward religion. One concerns the government's attempt to remove the terms *B.C.* and *A.D.* from school textbooks and to date chronology from a religiously neutral Common Era. Across the denominational spectrum, critics charge that Australia is desperately trying to rid itself of any remaining shreds of its once-dominant Christian heritage.

So far, the Australian story sounds very much like that of continental European nations. But the real story is rather more complex. Although the country seems to be engaged in headlong secularization, it has also produced some remarkable manifestations of evangelical revivalism, and some have gained international visibility. At least some religious believers, in the face of overwhelming odds, have made a determined decision not to go gently into anyone's good night.

In global terms, Australia's best-known religious figure is probably Peter Jensen, the Anglican archbishop of Sydney and a fervent evangelical conservative. The fact of Sydney's conservatism is nothing new. Muriel Porter has published a critical study of Jensen's deep roots in her recent book *Sydney Anglicans and the Threat to World Anglicanism*. As her title suggests, Jensen attracts criticism for some quite radical opinions, especially in matters of gender. While Anglicans elsewhere debate whether women can properly become bishops, Sydney refuses to ordain women priests, and this in a country with a strong feminist current (Australia acquired its first woman prime minister in 2010). Sydney serves as a bastion in the worldwide struggles that have rent the Anglican Communion over the past decade, and Jensen is a leading figure in the Global Anglican Futures movement, GAFCON, a traditionalist alternative to the mainstream Lambeth Conference.

Jensen has also made Sydney the flagship of a daring experiment in church growth and government. While conservative Anglicans commonly follow the church's familiar liturgy and hierarchical structure, Porter charges that most Sydney parishes have succumbed to "a radical congregationalism, coupled with a hardline conservative neo-Calvinist evangelicalism more akin to North American Protestantism." In her view, Jensen bears little relation to historic Anglicanism, and Sydney under his leadership has become an alarming source of instability in the worldwide church. Clearly, both liberals and conservatives are engaging in lively polemic, but there is no doubt that the Anglican church is experiencing a surprising revival.

Outside the Anglican heritage, Australia has also produced a very significant trans national revival movement in Hillsong, originally founded in 1983 in Sydney's suburban Hills District. Hillsong is now a flourishing megachurch that attracts 20,000 worshipers on a typical Sunday. Thousands gather at the main campus, and thousands more attend regular small "connect groups," which are the main focus of devotional life. Strongly Pentecostal in orientation, the church has a distinctive style of worship and praise music that has been one of the country's most successful exports. Hillsong has a powerful presence across Europe, and the London offshoot is one of Britain's most successful megachurches. Melbourne, meanwhile, has its own revivalist counterpart in Planetshakers. Looking at Hillsong and Planetshakers, one finds it hard to remember that this is supposedly a country in the midst of unstoppable dechristianization.

Perhaps the social scientists are right and Australia's Christianity will not outlive the present century. But the churches are fighting a fierce rearguard action.