

Lusophone evangelism

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue



Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Rio de Janeiro. Image by Wikimedia user Roberto Filipe, [some rights reserved](#).

In 1999, the former Portuguese colony of Macau reverted to Chinese sovereignty. A decade later, Macau's Catholic Bishop José Lai Hung-seng stressed the positive impact the move had had on his church. He was pleased to report on new opportunities to build bridges with other churches around the world, especially in Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere in Asia. If Macau was now definitively part of China, it was still proud to belong to a global community hundreds of millions strong, the world of Portuguese heritage—Lusophonia.

The global map of Christianity owes much to the European empires that originally spread the faith, and this remains true long after the empires themselves have crumbled. The world's churches still show the traces of the old British, French and Spanish colonial systems. Beyond spreading their languages, those empires formed patterns of mission and migration that continue to determine religious faith and practice.

Least well known to Americans is the oldest of the European empires, the Portuguese. In the 15th and 16th centuries the Portuguese built a sprawling empire in Brazil, in southern and western Africa, in Goa (India) and in the East Indies. Macau

itself became a Portuguese possession in 1557. Although Portugal faded, the empire survived, as did its language and its churches. Not until 1974 did the empire lose its hold over Angola and Mozambique.

The Portuguese-speaking (Lusophone) world is vast. Today some 250 million speak the language, 80 percent of whom live in Brazil. As Bishop Lai suggested, lands of Portuguese background maintain a lively sense of identity, partly as a protest against Anglo-Saxon cultural dominance. A dozen nations participate in the Lusophony Games.

Lusophonia is a vital component of global Christianity. Naturally enough, the Portuguese justified their expansion in missionary terms and established potent Catholic churches in all their possessions. Brazil, notionally, is the world's largest Catholic country, and 2 million Angolans turned out to greet Pope Benedict when he visited Luanda in 2009. In modern times, Protestant and charismatic insurgents have challenged that old ecclesiastical regime, most famously in Brazil itself.

Worldwide, Portuguese is the language of some 200 million Christians. That's one Christian in every 11. Although Portugal itself long ceased to send out missionaries on any scale, Brazil took up that mantle, making Portuguese one of the most important languages of missionary enterprise. Brazil leads in South-South mission—that is, evangelism from one part of the Global South to another. Brazil's evangelical churches devote fervent efforts to mission work throughout the Lusophone world, especially in Africa.

The most successful mission has been by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, or IURD), a Pentecostal body oriented to the prosperity gospel and founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1977. The church is highly controversial and has been the subject of investigations and legal cases in several nations. Its critics denounce it as a cynical money-making operation. But despite all the attacks, the IURD has flourished, and it now claims several million members.

Since the early 1990s, the IURD has made Lusophone Africa a primary target for evangelism. The strongly Marxist character of the regimes in Angola and Mozambique made this expansion slower than it would have been elsewhere in Africa, but the IURD's message won a mass audience. Brazilian-style megachurches operate in exploding cities like Maputo and Luanda, along with many smaller IURD temples (churches). The vast rallies and crusades that such churches organize

virtually never gain the attention of Western media unless they are accompanied by some calamity, like the crush that killed many in a Luanda service last year. Mere gatherings of believers running into the millions are just not newsworthy.

Wherever in the world Portuguese is spoken, you will find the fervent missionaries of the IURD. That includes migrant communities in the U.S. and Europe. Other Brazilian Pentecostal churches like God Is Love and Renascer em Cristo (Reborn in Christ) also claim a global reach, with a focus on Lusophone Africa.

After the empires ended, many former subjects migrated to the former imperial homelands in search of better lives. That is a familiar story in countries like Britain and France, but it is also true in Portugal, where migration has transformed religious life. While the country is traditionally Catholic, the population has become much more secular in recent years. Both same-sex marriage and abortion are legal. But immigrants from Africa, Asia and Brazil resist secularization. Brown and black faces outnumbered whites among the throngs who welcomed a papal visit to the country in 2010.

The loss of Macau marked the formal end of a political empire founded before Columbus sailed. But the cultural and religious influence of the Portuguese world is certainly not waning. The imperial ghosts are set to walk for many decades to come.