

**Hugh Chilton, *Evangelicals and the End of Christendom: Religion, Australia, and the Crises of the 1960s*. Routledge Studies in Evangelicalism (London and New York: Routledge, 2020). 268 pp. RRP \$81.80 Hardcover.**

Because the progress of research is normally incremental, it is unusual for an academic book to transform the subject it treats. Yet this is the achievement of Hugh Chilton's *Evangelicals and the End of Christendom: Religion, Australia, and the Crises of the 1960s*. Religious historians recognised the importance of 'the long 1960s' at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they looked back on the previous 100 years and there followed a succession of important books on the subject. In Australia the matter was taken up principally by David Hilliard whose numerous articles retain their authority as the starting point for all subsequent research on the era. However, originating as a University of Sydney PhD thesis which resulted in a well-earned doctorate, Chilton's is the first book length treatment of the experience of Australian evangelical Christians in the 1960s and 1970s. Its impact is such that this subject must now be viewed differently.

Following a 'Prologue' which frames the subject chronologically by comparing the Billy Graham Crusades of 1959 and 1979, the book moves through a sequence of six chapters, each of which traces a theme through the period and identifies the person or persons who bring the theme into focus. The themes are citizenship, relevance, America, empire, renewal, and the world. The people are Fred Nile, Hans Mol, Billy Graham, Marcus Loane, the Jesus People, and Jack Dain and Athol Gill. Other themes and people might have been chosen, but this selection is judicious, illuminating and sufficient for sustaining the argument of the book. Readers will have their own preferences from within Chilton's selection. For this reviewer, the favourite is Hans Mol, the Dutch immigrant who created the religious sociology of Australia. There will also be surprises. Again, for this reviewer, it was the Jesus People, who prove to be far more coherent as a group and far less intellectually vapid than the 'hippy' image of the time suggested. However readers respond, the underlying reality is that a large quantum of new information has been unearthed and injected into the discussion. At the same time, new actors have been brought onto the stage of Australian religious history alongside the more familiar figures of the long 1960s. An abundance of new data is the first reason for the transforming effect of Chilton's book.

A second reason is the benefit of engaging with one of the major issues in the interpretation of the modern Australian experience. Whether Australia was ever a Christian nation is disputed. It has not been uncommon to see our country, settled by Europeans from 1788 in the wake of the Enlightenment, as the first post-Christian nation. This perspective ignores the fact that the religion the settlers brought with them was Christianity and that its influence was important in shaping the society they built. The very premise of Chilton's book is that there *was* a 'Christian Australia' which lasted until the 1960s and 1970s when 'the end of Christendom' occurred. He understands the place of Christianity in modern Australia in the Durkheimian sense of the religion

of the churches functioning as the broadly shared moral basis of community life and source of transcendence. This order is what began to dissipate in the 1960s under the impact of the secularising forces and rising nationalism that gave rise to pressure for Australian society to take a new direction. The de-centring of Christianity and its social application emerges as the 'crisis' faced by mid-twentieth century evangelicals. By situating the consideration of these evangelicals in the larger setting of Australian history and historiography, Chilton has brought their historical challenge into much sharper focus.

Understanding that this was the challenge clarifies his achievement. Chilton is the first historian to ask about the response of evangelicals to Australian culture during the pivotal period from 1959 to 1979 that saw the end of 'Christian Australia'. The question is important because it directs attention to the relationship between evangelical Christianity and national public culture in Australia at a time when both entities were seriously contested, and the relationship between them correspondingly complicated. As Chilton shows, far from being immune from, or indifferent to, wider social currents, evangelicals were vitally involved and produced their own (varied) versions of 'the new nationalism'. The themes he traces provide the contours of the evangelical response to a social change of profound significance for their identities and ministries. Again, this is transformative. The variety of the response points to the vitality and complexity of contemporary evangelicalism in a way that breaks fresh ground in our understanding of the movement.

If the direction of public debate was set by developments and people outside the evangelical movement, Chilton shows what evangelicals contributed to the national conversation. The tendency in Australian historiography is to overlook or minimise the place of religion in the national experience. However, ignoring the impacts of social change and demography on religiously minded Australians can hardly be satisfactory when such a large proportion of the population at the time professed to believe in God and so many still attended church regularly. From Chilton's discussion it is clear that at least not all evangelicals were swept along by these cultural behemoths. Indeed, the evangelicals he analyses evinced both resilience and creativity in responding to their changing environment. Furthermore, they defy characterisation as either stereotypically fundamentalist simpletons or obscurantist reactionaries. Instead, they emerge as considered and intentional citizens who, not without faults and limitations, faced up to the times in a distinctive way and sought to mediate the social forces at work around them. As a sizable and interesting group worthy of inclusion in the analysis of a major social change, the parallels with and divergences from other Australians which Chilton lays bare enrich the larger story of the rise of a new Australia in the second half of the twentieth century. So this is a book for students of Australian society at large as well as those interested primarily in religion. It is transforming, fourthly, because it shows what happens when religion is taken seriously as an

analytical category and religious people are included in the consideration of Australian society and culture.

Of course, Australian evangelicals were not alone in their struggles. Their counterparts in other countries were also obliged to confront similar socio-cultural changes. This points to a fifth reason for the transformative impact of Chilton's work. Without being intrusive, the ever-present background to his analysis of the Australian situation is what was happening in Britain, the United States and Canada. Despite the burgeoning of transnational perspectives in religious historiography, such comparative work has been unusual in writing on Australian Christianity. The result generally has been a loss of understanding of the commonalities in the experience of evangelicals in (mostly) Anglophone societies and what is distinctive of each. Chilton's work is a partial corrective. In providing a suitable international context, he shows how the larger currents of international Christianity – secularisation, ecumenism, the end of the British Empire, Americanisation, globalisation – have flowed through the life of Australian evangelicalism where they have taken local twists and turns. He strikingly illustrates a better way in writing Australian religious history.

Like all good works of history, the book is agenda setting in its power of suggesting what might now be done. It is no criticism of Chilton to observe that other significant groups have not been included in the study. Readers of this journal will wonder where Pentecostals and charismatic Christians fit into his story. After all, they emerge as a significant component of Australian Christianity during the two decades under examination. It is also the era of the formation of the Uniting Church, an indication of the impact of the ecumenical movement on Australian Christianity and a sign of the weakening of the historic denominations transplanted to Australia in the nineteenth century. What, it might also be asked, was the place of the Catholic Church, now well on the way to becoming the largest organised Christian group in the country because of the effects of post-war immigration but also wrestling with the issue of its Australian identity as the era of Irish domination came to an end and negotiating the liberating impacts of Vatican II? Chilton has opened fresh lines of inquiry for historians to follow in the time to come. Once more the effect is transforming.

The issues Chilton identifies are existential as well as historical. As the 'end of Christendom' in Australia is an ongoing process, the questions his book raises have still to be faced. What is the status of religion in contemporary Australia? Does the weakening of its social influence and the emergence of other sources of identity mean that religion no longer has any social function? How are Christians now placed in relation to mainstream culture? What role should they play in a post-Christian country? Is their identity as pilgrims in a foreign land coming into sharper focus? In addition to providing their context, Chilton's discussion makes such questions harder to ignore.

His book is clearly an important work which all who are interested in Australian society in the 1960s and 1970s should read. Those who lived through the period will have their eyes opened to what was happening around them. Numerous 'ah huh' moments are guaranteed. Those who were children at the time and those who came subsequently will be given a better understanding of how their world came into being. For scholars and the informed Christian public alike, Hugh Chilton's *Evangelicals and the End of Christendom* is highly recommended. Fortunately, its availability as a paperback at a third of the price of the original hardcover edition will help to make this valuable work more readily accessible.

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