

# FILM REVIEW

**James Ault, producer and director. *African Christianity Rising: Christianity's Explosive Growth in Africa*** (Complete Educational Edition), 2013. 2 DVDs, 77 minutes (Ghana) and 73:30 minutes (Zimbabwe); 2 extra DVDs with 23 educational extras, 3 hours. Northampton, Mass.: James Ault Productions. \$240. (Institutional Edition, 2 DVD set \$175).

Focusing on two countries—Ghana and Zimbabwe—the two-part documentary film *African Christianity Rising*, produced and directed by James Ault, documents the lives of local church communities and some of their members, exploring the ways in which the Christian faith is rooted in African social and cultural contexts. It would be impossible to cover the full range of African Christianities, yet filmmaker Ault successfully presents examples of the three main Christian categories—historic mission churches, prophet-healing churches, and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches—while also showing that the boundaries between these categories are becoming increasingly fluid.

Running throughout the documentaries are two related themes: the relationship between Christianity and traditional religion and culture, and the role of “deliverance.” Addressing the first theme, Ghanaian Catholic Archbishop Peter Sarpong exemplifies the tradition of what African theologians call “inculturation.” As a priest and bishop, Sarpong has promoted the use of traditional instruments and practices, such as drumming and dancing, in order to develop an “authentic” African Christian faith. Moreover, in the film he refers to adherents of traditional religion as people who “knew God and respect God.” At the other end of the spectrum is Pastor Mensa Otabil from the International Central Gospel Church in Accra, Ghana, who warns against traditional religion as a form of “idol worshipping.” As opposed to inculturation, Otabil’s modern-style Pentecostal megachurch represents globalization, leading to a very different style of worship from Sarpong’s Catholic Church, although both are equally enthusiastic and embodied.

The second theme, however, shows that Pentecostalism also presents a localized religious form. Otabil explains that “almost all Africans believe there is a real tangible operative spiritual world.” Through a variety of practices, generally referred to as “deliverance,” churches give people a feeling of security against “evil forces.” The personal stories of church members present examples of the personal, family, health, and economic problems

that people face, the ways these are interpreted in terms of evil spirits and demonic bondages, and how the Christian faith provides people with a solution, because it is believed that the power of Jesus is stronger than spirit possession. Ault documents these beliefs and practices without exoticizing them, rendering these realities in a very sensible way.

As much as the films give a realistic account of Christianity in Africa, in one respect I find their scope a bit limited. With its focus on selected church communities and personal stories, the documentary is less successful in depicting the public and political aspects of Christianity in Africa. True, there are a few shots from the streets in Ghana, where market stalls are decorated with slogans such as “The Lord’s Enterprise,” and we see how a Charismatic church assists its members in their entrepreneurial endeavors. We further learn that Otabil has become the chaplain of a major Ghanaian bank, and we find a pastor engaging with the local government by praying at the council meeting. All of these illustrate the fluidity between religious, public, economic, and political spheres, and at the same time the absence of a strictly secular sphere. Yet this is not explored in depth. Also, in all their diversity, the church leaders and members featured in the films represent very “friendly” versions of Christianity. We do not see any pastors preaching that AIDS is a punishment from God, that divine blessing guarantees economic success, that gay rights are from the Devil, that Islam is a demonic religion, or that President Mugabe rules by the grace of God—to mention just a few topics of public concern in Ghana and Zimbabwe. To really understand what the growth of Christianity in Africa means, a more critical awareness of the political edges of popular forms of Christianity is crucial. The omission of this dimension renders the films vulnerable to the criticism that they echo the celebratory language frequently found in certain Christian circles about the growth of Christianity in Africa and how this is positively transforming the global Church.

Regardless of these critical comments, Ault’s work is a valuable resource for classroom settings and beyond. I have not even mentioned the two extra DVDs included in the educational edition, which present additional resources about the churches featured in the two documentary films as well as substantial extra interview material. Together, these films make the dynamic nature of African Christianity visible and audible.

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