

A Front-Row Seat to African Faith

James Ault's magnificent new documentary gives a firsthand account of global Christianity. By Philip Jenkins

There are plenty of books describing the rapid growth of African churches. Those who can't travel to witness this growth firsthand, though, can find it difficult to grasp. But now we have a set of impressive films: James Ault's new series, **African Christianity Rising**. It is a superb resource for anyone who wants a front-row seat to the explosion of this part of global Christianity.

Ault, whose acclaimed 1987 PBS documentary, *Born Again*, set a new standard for covering American fundamentalism, began filming in African churches in the late 1990s. Funding hurdles made the process agonizingly slow, although the opportunity to revisit his subjects over several years gives us interesting insights into how their stories have developed.

In its final form, *African Christianity Rising* comprises two DVDs, one each on churches in Ghana and Zimbabwe. (An educational edition includes a treasure trove of additional materials.) The films cover a wide spectrum of churches, each with its distinctive historical background and worship style. We see independent evangelical congregations, a classic African initiated church (Zimbabwe's Zion Apostolic Church), and a surging Pentecostal megachurch, Ghana's International Central Gospel Church, founded by Mensa Otabil. We also learn about Ghana's Roman Catholic Church and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Zimbabwe.

Much of the material, though, concerns what North Americans would regard as mainline Protestant congregations—Grace Presbyterian in Akropong, Ghana, and St. James United Methodist in Mutare,

Zimbabwe. So initially familiar to North Americans, the “mainline” setting makes the differences all the more startling when they emerge.

What makes the series so powerful is the believers we meet. Yes, Ault does present learned experts, including the late and much-lamented theologian Kwame Bediako and Ghana's former Catholic archbishop Peter Sarpong. Both discourse eloquently on “inculturation,” the process of taking faith out of the European envelope in which it was brought to Africa. But most of the people we hear are quite ordinary, and that is their glory.

Ethnographic films run the risk of making their subjects appear so alien that they seem to belong on another planet. Ault's work, in contrast, introduces people we come to care about and would love to have as our neighbors. We see the Zimbabwean Methodist congregation through the eyes of Dorcas Bwawa, a widowed schoolteacher facing difficult family circumstances, but who is nevertheless a towering figure in her church's lay leadership. We also come to know and like the church's female pastor, Tsitsi Moyo, who at first sight seems conventional enough as a thoughtful and dedicated leader.

Further conversations, though, supply a backstory startlingly different from anything Americans might expect. Moyo turns out to be prophetic royalty, the daughter of a charismatic healer from the profoundly African

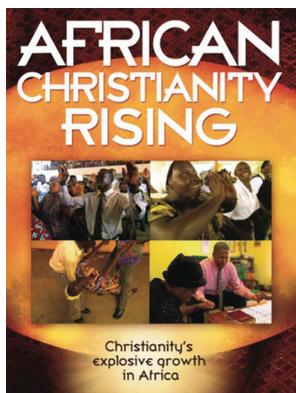
Zion Apostolic Church.

A VERY DIFFERENT MAINLINE

For me, the best single feature of the series is its seamless integration of the thoroughly familiar with quite different African contexts and assumptions. Just when we become comfortable with these pleasant Methodists or Presbyterians, we start to count the ways in which their world is not that of most American congregations.

For one thing, we are struck by the sheer size of the African churches, not to mention their numerical expansion. We might expect mushrooming growth in a Pentecostal megachurch, but the mainliners are just as successful. We first see Grace Presbyterian as a church plant, and return to it several years later when it is becoming what we might consider a megachurch, but which in Africa is a normal congregation. If the concept of women's lay leadership is quite familiar, we are still taken aback by the near-military organization (complete with uniforms) that women's groups have developed in the Zimbabwean Methodist church.

We also learn the very different boundaries that divide denominations in African contexts. Decades ago, scholars coined the term “African Independent Church” to characterize new prophetic groups grounded in local traditions. Today, though, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Catholics are all completely independent, and their worship and church music proclaim them unquestionably African. If viewers should take away one point from the series, says Ault, it is that “Christianity's explosive growth in Africa depends upon the powerful and inexorable process of



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Labor of Love: Ault and his crew filmed over 350 hours for this two-part series.

believers' rooting their faith more authentically in their own cultures."

Let me stress a point about music, one that Ault brings out expertly. I wonder whether any era of church history—even the Protestant Reformation, with its profusion of hymns and psalm settings—has been so immersed in music and song as contemporary Africa. Groups both formal and informal break into hymns and spiritual songs with little prompting. Believers' daily lives are saturated with songs of God and faith.

Across the denominational frontiers, too, we see consistent fascination with ministries of deliverance and spiritual warfare, whether "mainline" or Pentecostal. Repeatedly, believers turn to their churches for help with problems that we might frame in social or family, rather than explicitly spiritual, terms—unemployment, substance abuse, and family stresses. While churches supply the material help they can—often with startling generosity—at least part of their response involves spiritual relief, with deliverance and exorcism. Believers understand curses to be routine and frequent obstacles to health and harmony.

Exorcism episodes appear so regularly in the films that we begin to take them for granted. For many American viewers, the shock is not seeing an exorcism in its own right, but realizing that the participants are pleasant, smart, and quite ordinary church

members whose company we had been enjoying just minutes before. And they're... Presbyterians? As Ault says, starkly, "You can't be a minister and not heal."

BEYOND POLITICS AND PROSPERITY

Ault makes no claim to be offering a comprehensive account of Christianity in the specific countries he visits, and certainly not in Africa as a whole. He does not address some topics in church life that concern many American Christians, such as attitudes toward homosexuality. Nor does he touch on relations with Islam, a matter of lively concern to Ghanaian Christians.

I asked Ault about a couple of issues that the films treat lightly. One involves politics in Zimbabwe, which for 30 years has been in the hands of a ruthless despotism that has devastated civil society and extinguished any semblance of a functioning economy.

Obviously, Ault did not want his subjects discussing political topics that could get them into trouble with the regime's thugs. But he also reminded me that in the context of the revolutionary growth of Christianity in black Africa, our justified worries about political repression can easily become "the tail that wagged the dog." Certainly even well-informed Westerners who turn to mainstream media to learn about Zimbabwe are likely to know far more about the Mugabe regime than about the extraordinary growth

of the church that has occurred through it all.

Ault has a similar attitude to another area of relative silence in the films, the so-called prosperity gospel. At least some of the appeal of Africa's booming Pentecostal churches lies in teachings that faith reliably produces wealth and health. That teaching is proclaimed in the mass meetings and crusades that are now such a staple of African urban life. One of the best studies of modern African religion, Paul Gifford's *Ghana's New Christianity*, focuses heavily on prosperity teachers, including Otabil himself.

Ault pays little attention to these themes, chiefly because he is anxious not to let them distract from the main argument. "Doesn't Africa get enough bad press?" All eras of

Christian history have thrown up sharks and showmen, "self-aggrandizing abusers," so should we really concentrate so mercifully on isolated African examples?

Ault also observes that prosperity preachers cover a wide spectrum. Some really try to improve the well-being of their congregations, and at the same time build their communities and nations. In one independent group that the film depicts at length, members learn that God gives prosperity, but in nuanced and practical terms. They "are also coached in good business practices and offered microfinancing for their enterprises." Other observers might treat these matters differently, of course, and their concerns should be addressed in discussions arising from the films.

In any event, no criticism that I could raise detracts in the slightest from the magnificent achievement that these films represent. They are informative, inspiring, and a delight to watch. There really is nothing like them. Now that we have them, there is truly no reason not to experience the astonishing phenomenon that is African Christianity, especially with such a generous and sensitive observer behind the camera. ✦

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