

FILM REVIEW

AULT, James (Director and Producer), *African Christianity Rising: Christianity's Explosive Growth in Africa*. North Hampton, MA: James Ault Productions, 2011. 2-disc DVD edition: Part One, 77:00 minutes; Part Two, 73:30 minutes. (Also available as 4-disc DVD educational edition.)

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These two films, the first on the Ghanaian churches and the second on the Zimbabwean, are sure to make their Christian subjects happy. Their churches wax, but none are shown to wane, over the decade of the filmmaking. Resilience appears to prevail, motivating the Christian boom, somehow without church-state conflict, inter-generation and leadership struggles or bitter tensions over who is a true Christian. Schismatics hardly surface in the representations of “Christianity’s explosive growth in Africa”. Instead, insofar as the films have a political or critical message, it is a version of the one in “The Empire Strikes Back” – that now is the time for reverse colonialism in Christianity, for the West to learn true spirituality from Africa, for the recovery of lost religion. It is beyond the scope of this review to do more than hint at the place of the films in the context of a vast literature. But it is worth saying that along with the “explosive growth” of churches, has come a recent boom in very different studies of Christianity in Africa, such as Frederick Klait’s *Death in a Church of Life* (2010), Richard Werbner’s *Holy Hustlers, Schism and Prophecy* (2011), Girish Daswani’s *Looking Backward, Moving Forward* (2015), and Ilana Van Wyck’s *The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God: A Church of Strangers* (2015).

In creating many and diverse churches, African Christians are seen through the films to call upon powerful faith in Jesus, sustaining mutual support and care among the faithful, trust and joy with each other. Their reach towards healing – so strikingly important for fluctuations in the appeal of churches, appears heroic, in some churches solely through prayer and hearing the Word of God, but in others, also through holy things, demonic exorcism and the blessed laying on of hands. In the person of the distinguished Ghanaian Bishop Sampson, soon to become Archbishop, the first film presents an outstanding spokesman, among several others, for the creation or renewal of a spirituality that is authentic, because it is expressed in symbolic forms that are not alien but are culturally apt and persuasively familiar to Africans. An embrace, rather than a break with the past, is the ideal. No sense is given, however, that ironically such African advocacy, by the Bishop and other Catholics, has in good measure been carried forward under the urgency of enculturation as a global policy fostered by

the Pope for the whole Catholic church, not merely for Africa. Nor do we see that Bishop Sampong himself became an important advocate not only for the Charismatic tendency in the Catholic Church, but also for ecumenical fellowship with Pentecostals.

In the face of suffering and despair, even in the worst times that try everyone's souls, as in crisis-driven Zimbabwe, hope wins, at least for the last moments of the film – the good life for the devoted church followers and the true to their Christian convictions. It is shown, in this positive vein, that certain pastors invest their own social capital and material resources in personal help for the poor and the needy, and not merely in building the church visible. Even further, lay members serve as mentors, carers and spiritual advisers, who surpass kin in being reliable and trustworthy. The idea conveyed through scenes of pastoral and lay care is that “Christianity's explosive growth” or “the mushrooming” of churches owes much to the devoted provision of welfare goods and services, perceived as given freely and a grace from God.

Even beyond the focus on the positive, likely to please the subjects themselves, there is much in the films that is illuminating for wider audiences. At a swift pace (though never breathless), the breadth of coverage in Ghana and in Zimbabwe, including Catholic, Pentecostal and African Initiated Churches, is impressive. It is not all a tale of one church or personal quest after another; resonances and interrelations are sensitively revealed. There are even strong scenes highlighting the ecumenical movement at work among Zimbabwean Pentecostals. Where the films triumph most, in my own view, is in so foregrounding compassion and caring between the Christians themselves that the viewer is moved to feel closeness in sharing their sympathy and empathy with each other.