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God Loves Uganda

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God Loves Uganda

Abstract

This is a film review of *God Loves Uganda* (2013) directed by Roger Ross Williams.

Keywords

Uganda, Homophobia, Homosexuality, Colonialism, Evangelical Christianity, Episcopal Church

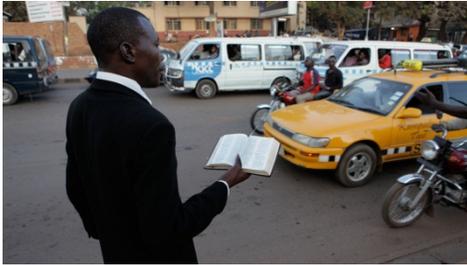
Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009). He is currently editing (along with Eric Mazur) the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.

God Loves Uganda

directed by Roger Ross Williams

(US Documentary Competition)



Many people in the US know that extensive violence has been directed against homosexuals in Uganda, and they may also know that a bill was introduced in the

Parliament there to criminalize homosexual acts, recommending life imprisonment, and the death penalty for repeat offenders. This has created an international backlash and has been a source of horror to those who work for gay rights. What is not well known, and what this film makes clear, is that much of the homophobia there is a direct result of conservative American Christian missionaries and their work in the country.

Conservative Christian groups such as the International House of Prayer have been training and sending missionaries to Uganda for many years, viewing it as a place full of possible converts to be won for Christ. Their efforts have been rewarded by the conversion of many Ugandans. But these groups also have made sexual ethics their primary focus for conversion; they have opposed the use of condoms, supporting abstinence-only sexual education, and they view homosexuality as a force that is destroying human civilization. During the years

of the presidency of George W. Bush, it was made clear that US aid was contingent on Uganda's support of abstinence-only education as a method for preventing the spread of HIV; Uganda accepted this, with the result that rates of HIV infection have increased. With regard to homosexuality, conservative missionaries have followed the philosophy of the American Evangelical Scott Lively, who teaches that homosexuality was responsible for the rise of Nazism in Germany, that it has taken over the United Nations and the United States, and that it has as its goal the destruction of human society. He also argues that there is an active "recruitment" campaign by homosexuals; all of this, of course, has been seen before, but these ideas have proven highly influential in Uganda due to the impressionable nature of the missionized.

The film does a fine job of showing the views of some Ugandan Christians who argue that the ideas of American Evangelicals are having an undue influence on their country, in particular in the campaign against homosexuality. Retired Ugandan Episcopal Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, who accepts GLBT people without condemnation, believes that his people have been led to hatred and fear by the ideas of outsiders. The Rev. Kapyia Kaoma, also a Ugandan Episcopal priest, now lives in the United States and cannot return to his country for fear of his life after speaking out there against homophobia and hate. Both of these Ugandan Christian leaders have evolved a position more like that of the

mainstream Christian US denominations (such as the Episcopal Church USA) that no longer condemn homosexuality as sinful. They and others like them are especially concerned that their own people support the death penalty for gays and lesbians, and that hate crimes have increased against GLBT people, such as the murder of gay rights advocate David Kato in 2011. But mainstream Christian groups do not have the influence that more conservative Christian groups have had there, as the latter have argued for government policies supporting a condemnation of homosexuality.

For their part, the American Christian missionaries express ignorance of the bill introduced in Parliament, or speak generally in their interviews for the film about the wrongness of homosexuality from a Biblical point of view. But at least some of them seem to like the idea that the Ugandan Parliament has tried to “take a stand” against “sexual insanity and lawlessness.” The Ugandan ministers who have supported the bill most strongly are also some of the wealthiest in the country due to their support from American missionaries, and they spend much of their time in the US raising funds. This film makes it clear that colonialism is not yet dead in Africa, as many are seduced by the profit and privileges that still come from America. It will raise important questions for those who are concerned about the legacy of colonialism in Africa, and the international pursuit of gay rights.

— John Lyden