

INTRODUCTION

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This issue offers multiple and diverse theological responses to and reflections on the COVID-19 outbreak and pandemic. All are by African scholars and authors; some are academic, some experiential, and others creative or impressionistic in tone. Reflecting the ethos and commitment of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (commonly referred to as “The Circle”) to nurture and promote the publications by and about African women and men, this issue contains the writings of some established but, predominantly, of emerging theologians. For some contributors, this is their first publication in an international series.

The Circle, moreover, is committed to social justice and positive change. COVID-19 has, like other crises, thrown into relief social injustices and gendered inequalities. While the pandemic has, indeed, been global, taking a toll on all parts of the inhabited world, striking both rich and poor, the burdens in its wake have not been borne equally. While the countries of Africa have not (praise be to God) seen a death toll comparable with such countries as Brazil or India, lockdowns and economic downturns have hit those already afflicted by poverty hardest – and here the nations of Africa are disproportionately represented. Many African citizens have lost their livelihoods and access to education. Where women and girls are concerned, the bulk of caregiving and home-schooling has fallen to women; most of the children no longer receiving an education and forced into marriages are girl-children. With domestic abuse accelerating, the majority of victims are female. Hence, COVID-19 is a worldwide pandemic, but it is also a pandemic with particularly severe consequences for the economically vulnerable and for women and girls.

The continent of Africa has endured many atrocities. Its people have been enslaved, brutalized, forcibly moved, scattered, impoverished, colonized, conscripted against their will into sexual slavery and armed conflicts, driven out by war, famine, climate catastrophe, dictators, and economic hardship. Multiple other diseases have blighted Africa’s shores. Sub-Saharan Africa has borne the brunt of the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic,

and malaria, tuberculosis, cholera, and Ebola, among others, have exacted their harsh toll. But, as this volume testifies, Africa is also a continent of dynamism, collaboration, resilience, solutions, and ideas. With its young, talented populations, the nations of Africa can and do speak and act back to this pandemic.

The pandemic started in late 2019 and quickly spread across the inhabited world. At the time of writing, it is still very much with us. Since its first emergence, the virus has developed variants and has ebbed and surged. Its transmission is beginning to be better understood. Ways to minimize transmission and to treat those afflicted are being monitored and honed. Several African nations have stood out for their highly organized and effective large-scale public health campaigns. The virus's longer-term effects continue to be investigated, and, remarkably rapidly, effective vaccines have been developed and are being rolled out. The dissemination of the vaccines, however, has led to yet more clarity on the worldwide discrepancies and injustices regarding power and access. Hence, while some wealthier countries are surging ahead with vaccinating their populations, poorer countries, including those on the continent of Africa, are left behind. Work has been done; progress has been made – but there is still so much to do!

Religion and theology are part of the fabric of African life and, therefore, are a crucial part of understanding, responding to, confronting, and overcoming COVID-19. This volume amply demonstrates this, offering multiple perspectives and ideas. Given that the pandemic is in progress – which means that there have been many demands on people's time and energies, with no time for reflection – the contributions to this volume are very much a 'snapshot', the *beginning* of a conversation, rather than a considered response, let alone a source for solutions. Some papers in this volume may reflect a time *before* all the ever-updating facts of today were available: hence, some, for instance, reflect a time before vaccines were in circulation. Far from being irrelevant, these contributions give insight into the rapidly evolving momentum of the COVID-19 pandemic and, therefore, of the historic nature of this global event, the likes of which has not been seen in our lifetimes.

More specifically, this volume not only centres the perspectives of persons who are mostly based on the continent of Africa, whose voices are too often marginalized in international forums, it also centres religion and theology. Again, in the crisis-mode precipitated by COVID-19, emphasis has,

understandably and rightly, focused most on the medical sciences and on technology. But science and technology cannot address *all* the great questions and needs of our time and, as the initial shocks subside, there have arisen other pressing human needs and questions and desires. Again, this volume goes a step towards expressing and addressing these.

This volume is the result of many acting together. The initial call and instigation were led by Dr. Mark Aidoo and Ms Joyce Boham. Alongside the contributors, thanks go to the four first-level editors: Professor Helen A. Labeodan, Dr. Mark S. Aidoo, and Professors Rosemary Amenga-Etego and Johanna Stiebert. The work of editing and compiling the volume was then taken forward by the BIBLE IN AFRICA STUDIES series. Facilitated by Professor Joachim Kügler, this was carried out by Dr Kudzai Biri, Lic. Bib. Tinos Matanga and Professor Johanna Stiebert. We hope this volume will spark ideas, reflection, collaborations, conversations, more research, and solutions.

We invite you to read this volume in a spirit of joining in the Circle, because together we are strong.