

## LONG BOOK REVIEW

KAUNDA, Chammah J., ed. *World Christianity and Covid-19: Looking Back and Looking Forward*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. XVII, 424 pages. Paperback. ISBN 9783031125690. € 171.19 (Hardcover).

**Reviewed by: Telesia K. Musili**

The book *World Christianity and COVID-19: Looking Back and Looking Forward*, edited by Chammah J. Kaunda, examines the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global Christianity, theology, and society. It highlights the importance of theological reflection, action, and hope in a post-pandemic world, encouraging Christians to reevaluate their faith and practices based on the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. For purposes of this review, I critically engage with the futuristic, hope-based perspective articulated in the concluding section of the book, titled ‘Mobilizing subversive spiritualities’. The book is organized into an introduction and five sections, each addressing specific themes and challenges of the pandemic, as summarized in the preceding paragraphs.

The introduction, ‘See, Choose, Act’, by Kaunda provides a reflective and critical overview of the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing its multifaceted nature as a health, human, and societal crisis. It highlights the interconnectedness of the global community and the shared vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic. Kaunda’s use of the term ‘apocalyptic pandemic’ (2) is compelling, as it underscores the revelatory nature of the crisis, exposing systemic inequalities, fragilities, and injustices in global systems. He challenges readers to reconsider priorities such as compassion, justice, and sustainability, advocating for a world that values abundance over affluence and gratuity over greed. This vision is informed by a faith-based reflection that integrates theological insights to provide a spiritual lens for interpreting the pandemic. In a nutshell, the introduction critiques neoliberal capitalism and anthropocentrism, linking the pandemic to broader structural sins and systemic evils, such as racism, gender inequality, and environmental degradation.

Part One, ‘Faith Trouble’, explores the profound theological and existential crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, interrogating its impact on faith and human vulnerability. It highlights how global health emergencies exposed deep-seated inequalities, forcing a reckoning with the interplay of natural and social evil, where disease intersected with systemic injustices. Case studies of New York City churches and North American Protestantism reveal how communities used lament and hope to navigate despair. This occurred during a period of international cooperation failure, which tested the role of faith in fostering solidarity. Ultimately, the section critiques xenophobia and suffering through a theology of divine suffering (Pool 2009), thereby challenging passive theodicies.

Part two, which concerns unveiling and naming distortions, critically examines the societal and theological fractures exposed by the pandemic. Notably, white Christian nationalism intensified inequities and weaponized faith to justify exclusion. At the same time, vulnerable communities bore the brunt of the crisis, particularly Black Americans, whose resilience was sustained by liberative Black faith traditions. The section challenges hierarchical, anthropocentric theologies while advocating for relational models that center on solidarity and interdependence. The section further exposes how lockdowns exacerbated gender-based violence, revealing systemic failures to protect marginalized groups. A harrowing example of the surge in online sexual exploitation of Filipino children underscores how global injustices thrived amidst pandemic disruptions, demanding urgent ethical and theological reckoning. Parts one and two of the volume house the ‘looking back’ alluded to in the title of the book.

New Eyes for Rereading the Bible, in Part Three, reinterprets scripture through the lens of pandemic suffering. A case in point is the raw despair of Psalm 88, which mirrors global anguish. A chapter on Korean *han*, expressed through lament-filled worship and music, follows, embodying collective grief as sacred protest. In Ghana, critiques of prosperity theology find counterpoint in Job’s defiant hope, a theme echoed in Malawi’s wrestling with divine justice amid crisis. Further, a comparative analysis of biblical and African responses to epidemics reveals timeless wisdom depicted through communal resilience over individualism, sacred lament over silenced pain, and a faith that questions rather than absolves. This rereading reframes COVID-19 not as divine punishment but as a call to solidarity and theological renewal. The section frames God in the midst of the pandemic, God’s simultaneous transcendence (existing beyond the crisis) and radical immanence (active presence within it). Far from being caught off guard, the Divine operates through what theologian Jurgen Moltmann (1993) called ‘the crucible of suffering’.

As if responding to the call for theological reflection and hope, Part Four, (Un)Rethinking Traditions, examines how the pandemic has forced radical reinterpretations of diverse religious practices. The opening chapter presents how Zambian Pentecostals, traditionally wary of ancestral spirituality, began integrating traditional healing into their theology as biomedical systems faltered. Meanwhile, Kerala’s Pentecostals faced unprecedented mental health crises as communal worship vanished, exposing the limits of faith-as-prescription theology. In the Philippines, some Catholic communities reimaged Marian devotion through environmental activism, linking ecological care to divine protection. In Kenya, people grappled with disrupted death rituals, where burials became solitary, hurried affairs, which sparked profound theological questions about mourning, dignity, and the body’s sacredness. These case studies reveal how the crisis became a catalyst for both rupture and creative re-engagement with tradition, finding hope in the new (ab)normal times.

Part five of the volume, titled ‘Mobilizing Subversive Spiritualities,’ emerges as the most compelling and forward-looking section of the volume, encapsulating the volume’s central thesis about faith’s radical potential in post-pandemic reconstruction. Here, the contributors move beyond critique to articulate transformative visions of spirituality that challenge dominant theological paradigms while offering concrete pathways for renewal. The section begins by confronting the often-overlooked ethical dimensions of the crisis, particularly animal suffering during lockdowns, a provocative lens that expands Christian ethical responsibility beyond anthropocentrism (305). This disruption of human exceptionalism sets the stage for the section’s broader project: reimaging Christian thought and practice through subversive, life-affirming frameworks.

The exploration of resurrection as both metaphor and lived reality (331) becomes a throughline, reframing the pandemic not as an apocalyptic end but as a generative rupture that invites active reimagination and subsequent innovation. Unlike superficial ‘return to normal’

narratives, this perspective insists on resurrection as a collective praxis. A case in point is exemplified in Filipino families, who reinvented Eucharistic rituals as domestic acts of resistance when church doors closed (359). These adaptations, far from being stopgap measures, revealed the subversive potential of decentralizing sacramental authority and reclaiming lay theological agency (Mpfung 2021). Such practices align with the section's radical reworking of *Imago Dei* ecclesiology (345), which redefines the church not as an institution but as a dispersed, embodied community of care that mirrors God's presence in marginalized spaces. The posture of generative rupture acknowledges the destructive nature of upheaval. However, it creates a space for radical reimagining, a framework that aligns with postcolonial and liberation theologies that interpret suffering as a site of potential transformation (Katongole 2017).

Whilst the volume is logically organized (looking back to the systemic injustices and looking forward towards the reconstruction of redeeming pathways), the contributors refuse to spiritualize suffering. Instead, they frame the pandemic's spiritual challenges as catalysts for material transformation, a discussion that ensues in the fifth essay of the section (373), situating a futuristic posture with its insistence on spirituality as action. Discussions of mutual aid networks that emerged globally are presented in the last essay in this section, where faith communities organized food distribution and mental health support and advocated for vaccine equity-actions that are upheld as practices that model a theology of 'flesh-and-blood resurrection'. The essays in this section explicitly connect these movements to broader decolonial and ecological futures, arguing that post-pandemic Christianity must either embrace such justice and value-oriented subversive spiritualities or risk irrelevance.

The reader cannot fail to appreciate the strength of this volume as smartly presented in section five. Its significance lies in its refusal of despair. While earlier parts deconstruct (Parts I-II) and reinterpret (Parts III-IV), Part V reconstructs, offering what Kaunda's introduction pinpoints as positive hope guided by a value-based framework (15). Its futurity component is not utopian but insurgent, rooted in present-day acts of reimagination that prefigure alternative Christianities. Section five elevates the entire volume from diagnostic to prophetic, particularly through African and Asian perspectives that privilege communal resilience over Western individualism. However, a critical engagement might question whether these subversive practices can sustain structural change without confronting institutional power or if their radical edges risk being co-opted by neoliberal 'resilience' narratives—a critique I will return to later. Regardless, Part V's vision of faith as embodied, adaptive, and justice-oriented makes it indispensable for scholars rethinking the post-pandemic trajectory of world Christianity.

By centering this section, I underscore the book's most significant contribution: documenting how the pandemic's disruptions became openings for spiritual revolutions that may yet redefine the future of world Christianity. Subversive spirituality pertains to religious practices that oppose dominant power structures, whether colonial, patriarchal, or neoliberal, while nurturing alternative ways of expressing faith. African scholars such as Musa Dube (2012), Mercy Oduyoye (2001), Tinyiko Maluleke (2022), and Solomon Kgatle (2023) maintain that African Christianity has historically engaged in subversive spirituality by blending indigenous beliefs with Christian teachings, resisting Eurocentric theological impositions, and advocating for social justice. In the post-pandemic era, subversive spiritualities take on new urgency. The pandemic exposed the fragility of institutionalized religion, as churches closed and digital worship became the norm. African theologians, such as Nimi Wariboko (2012), had earlier posited that disruption creates space for alternative spiritualities that prioritize communal resilience, ecological justice, and decolonial worship practices. Unlike mainstream Christianity, which often aligns with political and economic power, subversive spiritualities embrace a hope-based posture that envisions a future where

faith is liberated from oppressive structures. These subversive Christian spiritualities flourish in marginalized yet vibrant spaces such as the mystical circles, liberationist base communities, and digital dissent hubs, where they reinterpret faith through justice, contemplation, and defiance of oppressive norms. In these spaces, they endure through decentralized networks, grassroots activism, and alternative liturgies, often sustained by lay-led movements, underground publishing, and progressive patronage. While institutional pressures attempt to suppress them, their resilience comes from oral traditions, artistic resistance, and scholar-activist alliances that keep these counter-narratives alive. Whether in monastic hermitages, protest camps, or online forums, they persist by weaving faith into struggles for liberation, ensuring their survival beyond the margins.

For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled African Christians to confront the limitations of institutionalized religion. Churches that had long relied on physical gatherings faced existential crises, while Pentecostal prosperity gospels were exposed as inadequate in the face of widespread suffering (Asamoah-Gyadu et al. 2024; Kgatle 2021). In response, subversive spiritualities arose through digital and home-based worship. The shift to online services disrupted clerical authority, allowing laypeople to reinterpret scripture and liturgy independently. Furthermore, reclamation of Indigenous rituals, where a majority of African Christians turned to traditional healing practices and ancestor veneration, blending them with Christian prayer to address pandemic anxieties, indicates another form of subversive spirituality (Sibanda et al. 2022). These practices signify a subversive turn because they challenge the dominance of Westernized Christianity, which has historically dismissed African spiritualities as ‘pagan’ or ‘backwards’. In the post-pandemic context, African Christianity is increasingly adopting hybrid spiritualities that challenge binary distinctions between sacred and secular, as well as modern and traditional.

African scholars argue that subversive spiritualities are not merely reactive but forward-looking; they envision a Christianity that is decolonized, egalitarian, and life-affirming. This aligns with Afrofuturist theology, as articulated by Kaunda (2023), which envisions faith as a site of radical hope and liberation. Vhumani Magezi (2022) posits that African Christians are constructing a ‘theology of reconstruction’ post-COVID-19, a theology that moves beyond mere survival to reimagining societal structures. As such, subversive spiritualities reject apocalyptic fatalism, which dominated much literature during the pandemic, instead fostering a hope that actively works towards justice.

This value- and hope-based posture critiques two dominant trends in world Christianity: one, neoliberal Pentecostalism, which often reduces faith to personal prosperity while ignoring systemic inequalities; and two, Eurocentric liberalism, which imposes Western secular frameworks on African religious experiences. Instead, African subversive spiritualities propose a third way that draws from indigenous wisdom while engaging critically with global Christian traditions. Thus, mobilization of subversive spiritualities in Africa has significant implications for world Christianity. Historically, African Christianity has been marginalized in global theological discourse, framed either as a passive recipient of Western missions or as an exoticized ‘other’. However, post-pandemic African theologies are challenging this narrative by redefining ecclesiology, with African churches modelling decentralized, community-based structures that contrast with hierarchical Western models. Furthermore, African Christianity ought to reject spiritual colonialism by integrating indigenous spiritualities into its practice as a way of asserting theological autonomy. This shift compels world Christianity to confront its colonial legacies and acknowledge that Africa is not merely a ‘mission field’ but a fertile ground for theological innovation, serving as the seed for the rebirth of African world Christianity.

Cognizant of its transformative potential, the mobilization of subversive spiritualities is not without challenges. For instance, I question the claim that subversive spiritualities provide a transformative framework for world Christianity in the post-pandemic era, particularly when grounded primarily in African theological and sociological perspectives. Kyrichal structures continue to take root in global communities, which may risk co-optation by power structures where neoliberal and political forces commodify subversive spiritualities, diluting their radical edge. For example, gender inequalities persist within patriarchal church structures, often marginalizing women's contributions, as seen in the limited number of women ordained to higher pastoral leadership positions, such as bishops. I critically question the generalized transformational approach to subversive spirituality that the authors advocate in Section Five, although Kaunda's 'paradox of becoming' (241) offers some concreteness. The paradox of becoming highlights transformation and growth through challenges, particularly within the context of faith and spirituality. Although it is not a new concept, especially concerning suffering, one wonders whether it will outlive the pandemic or was merely a momentary phenomenon. This then raises another question: how do we sustain subversive spirituality that resists returning to 'normal' yet creates new worlds of life? It is therefore crucial for African scholars to emphasize that subversive spiritualities must remain critically engaged, resisting both religious fundamentalism and uncritical traditionalism, in order to maintain relevance in global contexts. These seditious spiritualities critically engage with traditions by rejecting life-denying elements while embracing life-affirming ones.

The argument that subversive spiritualities offer a transformative, value-based hope is compelling. However, like any radical discourse, it is vulnerable to co-optation, patriarchy, and fragmentation, and its proponents must be wary of these threats to sustain its liberative potential globally. As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, African subversive spiritualities present not just an alternative but a necessary reimagining of faith that centers on justice, hope, and decolonial futures. World Christianity must engage these insights seriously or risk perpetuating the very hegemonies that the pandemic has exposed as unsustainable.

The volume's call to look forward through mobilizing subversive spiritualities, whether through redefined sacraments, interspecies ethics, or grassroots ecclesiology, emerges not as one option among many, but as the essential path forward for a faith seeking relevance in a wounded world. Nonetheless, the volume is a worthwhile resource for ministers, scholars, and postgraduate students in postcolonial studies, African studies, ethics, ecclesiology, gender studies, religion online and online religion, and world Christianity studies. The volume serves as a testament to the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches in responding to global catastrophes that challenge both humanity and the entire ecosystem, while envisioning a future world grounded in justice.

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**Telesia K. Musili** is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi and a research fellow at the University of South Africa. Her research examines the intersection of religion, indigenous knowledge, and social ethics with a focus on contemporary issues affecting women. E-mail: [telesia.musili@uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:telesia.musili@uonbi.ac.ke), ORCID: 0000-0002-9448-7571.

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