

# Practicing Borderless Christianity: Challenges and Opportunities of the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Caleb O. Oladipo*

Professor and Snellings Chair, Christian Evangelism and Missions  
at Campbell University Divinity School in North Carolina, USA

## Abstract

The challenges and opportunities that have been presented by *COVID-19* are enormous, and Christians and non-Christians could take advantage of the pandemic to craft a borderless faith tradition. The *COVID-19* pandemic has given us the opportunity to have a more comprehensive and positive image of every faith tradition, creating the best of all possible worlds for future generations. All borders are artificial, and the national borders of our world are not only geographical, but also ideological. Borders are most often erected out of fear and mistrust. But they also inform and transform human identities. Rigid national borders are monotonous, and they have diminished cooperation among faith groups and have suffocated the life of the Church. The occurrence of the *COVID-19* pandemic colonized the world in an instant, exacerbating our geographical boundaries and shedding new lights on national and international inequalities. Proposing a borderless world, this article concludes that the hope of realizing a peaceful world depends on our collective efforts to redefine what kind of world we want, which will require both determination and faith.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Borderless Christianity, national borders, pandemic, geographical boundaries

## Introduction

In his book, *One Earth Many Religions*, Paul F. Knitter wrote at the turn of the century, “as humanity steps into a new millennium, the religious traditions of the world find themselves at a turning point. Up until now...religious communities have understood themselves from within the circle of their own experiences and traditions; as this century slips into the next, they are being challenged to expand their ways of knowing who they are by allowing their circles to touch and overlap with others.”<sup>1</sup> He went on to say that “the nature of our inter-communicative world and of the crises this world faces offer and require such a dialogical, correlational manner of religious self-

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 22.

understanding.”<sup>2</sup>

The Church has entered a new era of self-awareness and introspection, and Christians now practice their faith in ways they have not done for over two thousand years. A Christian can travel to Lagos, Nigeria and attend his Sunday School class in Cary, North Carolina. A Christian in Buenos Aires, Argentina could worship in his church while on a business trip to London, England. An American Sunday School teacher could teach his or her class on Zoom while visiting relatives in Cape Town, South Africa.

The world is once again characterized by borderless-ness as it has always been naturally. Perhaps the age of technology is one of the greatest gifts to the modern church. In a way, COVID-19 has required Christians to function and become more creative due to the old tradition of “necessity being the mother of invention.” Christians in our contemporary world have become more creative in the production and dissemination of Christian knowledge. It is perhaps in this moment of vulnerability that one can say that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a valuable gift to the Church of the modern age.

However, despite our technological advances, most traditional Christians still desire the rich fellowship of being face-to-face in congregational setting. Many continue to long for a return to the traditional mode of in-person worship because human beings are social and gregarious beings.

Throughout 2020 and into 2021, human beings have been colonized by COVID-19 pandemic, presenting new challenges to national borders in every country.

### **The Challenges and Opportunities of COVID-19**

The Covid-19 pandemic had shed new lights on myriad human disparities worldwide. The Western world, for example, hoards and wastes vaccines or become stingy about making them available to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

developing and low-income nations. The vaccine sharing pledges from Western nations to the nations in the Global South have been too slow and often made available when the vaccines are close to expiration dates. Approximately 70 percent of people in the European Union were vaccinated by the end of 2021; the United States vaccinated approximately 60 per cent of its citizens by the end of the year. Fewer than two percent of the seven billion people who populate the world have been vaccinated even as scientists and healthcare providers in the Western world warn that vaccinating 80 per cent of the world is the necessary solution to slowing down the spread of the pandemic. The shortfall of assistance from Western nations is glaring, with the consequence of our nationalism continuing.

Fatima Hassan, a human rights lawyer from South Africa, and the founder and director of the Health Justice Initiative, maintains that “vaccine hesitancy hurts the global COVID-19 response.”<sup>3</sup> Nothing was as discouraging about the disparity of the world magnified by COVID-19, however, as the protectionism of the Western nations. This became very clear when the omicron variant of the virus started to surface in different parts of the world, especially in the developing countries. The omicron variant first surfaced in The Netherland two weeks before it was detected in Botswana, a country next to South Africa. When scientists in South Africa detected it among their citizens, the world took immediate and discriminatory action to lock out Southern Africa. Noubar Afeyan, the chairman and co-founder and chief executive officer of Moderna, and the founder of Flagship Pioneering, stated that vaccines are still effective against omicron and urged everyone to keep up with vaccination because “we are going to get more variants.”<sup>4</sup>

The more immediate negative impact of COVID-19, however, has been how it has affected Christians worldwide. The pandemic

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<sup>3</sup> Fatima Hassan appeared on Cable News Network, Inc. (CNN) on Sunday, December 5, 2021, at 1:00 PM East Standard Time.

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response of Christians has been impacted by the fact that churches were closed, and many clergy and church personnel were dispirited. Those who depended on the resources from parishioners and church members became anxious. Some took the drastic measures of promoting vaccine hesitancy to the extreme, preaching against mandatory and government impositions related to vaccination. In December 2021, COVID-19 claimed the life of a popular televangelist in the United States, Marcus Lamb, who saw the promotion of vaccine protection against the virus as spiritual warfare in the Church. Lamb's rejection of vaccination and his skepticism were portrayed as a good fight by many of his followers, and his death did not curb vaccine hesitancy among them, many turning deaf ears to the call from scientists to get vaccinated.

It is incontrovertibly true that the world has been misled on many fronts, with the death of such vaccine skeptics surprisingly not proving to be a wake-up call to promote vaccination. Often, vaccine-skeptics were seen as heroes, putting up a good fight against efforts to manage the disease.

As the battle to curb the COVID-19 pandemic continues, Christians often persist in making the mistake of flatly dismissing those who argue against vaccination as unwise. We fail to consider that there are those from different parts of the world who sincerely believe that their perceptions of God's revelation are more believable than scientific facts. Science, they claim, does not prove, but probes.

And now, the "omicron variant" of COVID-19 has entered as a new term in our lexicon of health consciousness and vocabulary. The omicron variant is unpredictable, a fact that should not be a shock to anyone. The greatest problem the world faces in this ongoing battle is the disparity in vaccine distribution. The co-chair of the Africa's Union Vaccine Distribution Alliance, Dr. Ayoade Alakija, pull no punches in her British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) interview with correspondent Philippa Thomas in November 2021. In her assessment,

the disparity in the world system is catastrophic and has affected Africans disproportionately. She asserted that if, in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic had first been detected in Africa, instead of Wuhan, China, the continent of Africa would have been known to the world as the “continent of COVID,” with the world locking the continent away, and throwing away the key. She believes that there would have been no resulting sense of urgency to develop vaccine or make it available to the 1.3 billion African population. Her contention is that until everyone is vaccinated, no one is safe. She also challenged African leaders to be more assertive about the needs of their people and the discriminatory practices they suffer from the hands of more powerful leaders in the western world. African political leaders need to share their own stories because until the lion learns to write, the stories of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

Today, as churches have become a bit more creative in how to worship technologically and what it means to congregate, Christians face a new world of global fluidity. We now confront a world of transnationalism with the exciting challenges to dream new dreams that take seriously the Christian faith as a borderless faith tradition.

The coronavirus pandemic has been a gift to the Church in another sense. Christians have become more aware of their vulnerability to the rigidity and monotony of their own traditions. We have realized that traditional face-to-face fellowship is not necessarily the defining mode of true worship, and that one of the characteristics of true Christian fellowship is flexibility. Traditions are, therefore, not infallible and Christians are not self-sufficient. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this vulnerability and the insufficiency of our traditionalism.<sup>5</sup>

### **Questions About Borders in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has also vividly demonstrated that no restrictive immigration policies can stop human beings in their

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<sup>5</sup> See Leander E. Keck, *The Church Confident: Christianity Can Repent, but It Must Not Whimper*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 45. In this book on the Church, the author, quoting Jaroslav Pelikan, stated, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

justifiable determination to cross geographical borders. Bill Ashcroft, an expert on nationalism and geopolitical migration at the University of New South Wales, Australia, observes that “Nationalism is always complicated by ethnocentrism, racism, and populism, and as nationalism proliferates, violence increases. But at the same time, post nationalism and No Borders politics . . . are growing apace.”<sup>6</sup> This is especially the case when one considers the borderless-ness and the nature of the history of Christian expansion through migration.

In 2021, the William B. Eerdmans company produced a book by Jehu J. Hanciles, an African scholar and the D. W. and Ruth Brooks Professor of World Christianity at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, entitled *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*. The book is not only a comprehensive chronicle of human nature as moving from one place to another throughout history, but also a detailed account of migration as being responsible for making Christianity a global faith tradition. Hanciles states, “It requires no leap of imagination to grasp that human migration played a huge role in the spread of Christianity among the tribes and peoples well beyond the Roman Empire.”<sup>7</sup> Ordinary people such as merchants, soldiers, government agents, slaves, pilgrims, tourists, entertainers, artisans, sick and healthcare providers, as well as priests and planned missionaries, were responsible for the effective spread of the Christian faith as they migrated in historical times. Hanciles leaves no stone unturned in his argument and he restated it again in chapter seven: “To restate my central thesis, human migration has played an indispensable role in the cross-cultural spread of the Christian faith principally because migrants who are Christians inevitably fulfill a missionary function in their encounters with non-Christian peoples and societies.”<sup>8</sup>

It is an incontrovertible fact that Covid-19 has proved to also be a

<sup>6</sup> Bill Ashcroft, “Borders, Bordering, and the Transnation” in *The English Academy Review: A Journal of English Studies* vol. 36 (1) May 2019 (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021) 189.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 269.

wake-up call to the nature of humanity and the Christian faith. The pandemic has shed new light on the artificiality of geographical borders. It is not only human beings who migrate, but also other creatures. Migration of birds is a common knowledge, and seasonal migration is common among other animals. Those of the Christian faith worldwide are now asking many questions they were not used to asking in the past. Foremost among these are what the world would look like without its artificial borders. Corresponding to the “borderless-ness” of the Christian trajectory from the time of Jesus, what would the Christian world look like today without the geographical borders imposed by political nationalism? The world has many kinds of borders, some more porous than others. But technologically the world has no national borders that can be enforced in the modern era.

Politically and economically, national identities are clear ideologically with rigid borders still characterizing the modern world. In economic terms, there is only one world, which is fragile and fragmented in religious and political terms. In our newly globalized world, are our attempts to enforce and protect our national borders evil? Can rigid borders endure, considering the technological advancements that promote the porosity of geographical boundaries? Can human beings truly be free when our classifications, such as rich and poor, democratic and non-democratic, Christian and non-Christian, remain?

### **Some Reasons to Consider for Physical Borders**

Geographical borders have always existed out of the desire for domination of powerful and more prosperous or high-income nations. In the past, nations have not conquered other territories without the fear of revenge from the powerless. Fear and uncertainties grasp and control people in the modern world because of bordering and nationalism.<sup>9</sup> There are at least 77 border walls or fences in the world

today and most of them were erected since 2001.<sup>10</sup> Walls are indicative of hostility and building them is predictable. The erection of borders, however, is not consistent with the nature of Christianity, a borderless missionary religion.<sup>11</sup> Other missionary religions include Islam and Buddhism, but no other religion is identified with missionary zeal and intensity more so than the Christian faith. Scholars have argued that the Bible itself is the blueprint of God's sending in mission or *Missio Dei* in the world.<sup>12</sup> Christians build bridges; they do not build walls. The Church is now trying to embrace the modern world of technological borderless-ness without becoming lost in it.<sup>13</sup> What COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated to Christians in the modern era is the increasing mobility of Christians worldwide. Building bridges is unpredictable and life-giving, evoking silent gratitude from its beneficiaries. The upshot of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has issued the call to Christians to become Christians and followers of Jesus without religion. It is to see Christianity as a tool for the transformation of a borderless world without an overriding compulsion to convert those who are not Christians to their own faith traditions. The vision of a borderless world where the Christian faith could flourish as an active movement originated with Jesus of Nazareth when he was with his disciples.

<sup>9</sup> See Bill Ashcroft, "Borders, Bordering, and the Transnation," in *The English Academy Review: A Journal of English Studies*, 36 (1) May 2019), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> See Bill Ashcroft, Borders, Bordering, and the Transnation, p.6.

<sup>11</sup> See Dyron B. Daugherty, *The Changing World of Christianity: The Global History of a Borderless Religion* (Peter Lang, New York, 2010). In the book, Daugherty argues that the Christian faith is the only faith tradition that has become truly globalized.

<sup>12</sup> See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downer Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006). In this book, the author argues that the Bible represents the activities of God in the world and chronicles God's Mission for the transformation of the world. The Bible as a phenomenon for "God's Mission. In other words, the writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God. The Bible renders to us the story of God's mission through God's people in their engagement with God's world and for the sake of the whole of God's creation. The Bible is the drama of this God of purpose engaged in the mission of achieving that purpose universally, embracing past, present, and future. Its center focus, climax and completion came through Jesus Christ.

<sup>13</sup> The statement that "Christians build bridges, not walls," has been attributed to Pope Francis. In his statement, the Papacy concluded that one of the challenges of the Church remains, "to defend and preserve the dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good." See John Carr, "The Role of Catholics in the time of Trump" in *Politics & Society* (Washington Front, December 5-12, 2016).

### **Transnationalism and the Borderless Vision of Jesus of Nazareth**

The Jesus of Nazareth which we Christians encounter in the gospels exemplified a transnational and borderless vision for the world under God. He constantly challenged religious leaders and his followers to cross social and religious borders; Jesus saw only one world and one God, whom he called his Father. Jesus of Nazareth was open to “official outsiders” such as the Gentile centurion and Samaritans,<sup>14</sup> praising them as examples of virtue.<sup>15</sup>

It is one of the most astounding claims of Jesus we see in the gospels—his transnationalism and borderless vision of God’s Kingdom. He took Gentiles seriously and was open to their unique contributions to the spiritual directions of the Kingdom of God which he inaugurated. Jesus established with his disciples a vision of the Kingdom of God as one that is borderless.

In Mark 9, John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him; for no one does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.”<sup>16</sup> In the Gospel of John (10:16), Jesus said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd” (NRSV). Thus, anyone who genuinely cares for the wellbeing of his or her fellow-human beings can also be valuable in the Kingdom of God. The contemporary world is interconnected, and every evil planted by humanity in one region contains the seed for its own destruction sooner or later in unsuspected regions. Our grueling experience with COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that we will always need each other.

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<sup>14</sup> See Luke 7: 1-10; 9:52.

<sup>15</sup> See Luke 10:10-37, 17:11-19.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 9: 38-40.

### **The Challenges of Bridging Ideological Gaps**

True Christianity in its essence is not only a borderless faith, but also a faith that bridges the gap between God and humanity. One major difference in the interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and Hellenistic philosophy, for example, is the mediating principle or the bridge between God and the world. While Greek philosophers saw the Logos or Word (sometimes interpreted as reason or principle), as the necessary bridge because God (necessary being) cannot deal directly with the world that is contingent, early Christians viewed the Logos as necessary because of human alienation. The important view to consider is how the Hellenistic philosophical tradition influenced the Christian faith and vice versa. The Greek concept of the Logos and the first chapter of the gospel of John in the Greek New Testament is clear. Although it did not do so uncritically, Christianity subsequently assumed the Hellenistic vocabulary to justify and strengthen its claims. The early Christian Church fathers, especially in the traditions of Justin Martyr, learned that, as they came to grips with the Christian faith and presented it to their pluralistic world, they also had to make it more credible by interpreting it with the patterns of thought prevalent in their societies. Their societies and the religions associated with them varied from the Gospel the early Church fathers sought to proclaim. The strength of a bridging of the gap approach was in accepting and taking seriously the differences between Hellenism and Christianity, affirming the unique contributions that each makes in ordering human lives and their spiritual destiny.<sup>17</sup> Knitter stated it this way: “Other religions are not only genuinely different, [but] they can also be genuinely valuable.”<sup>18</sup>

A careful relationship between one religion and another necessarily involves a careful inhaling and exhaling. It is perhaps perilous for Christians to cut off devotees of other religions in the age of a universal

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<sup>17</sup> For a short but comprehensive treatment of the complementarity between the Hellenistic philosophy and the Christian faith, see Caleb O. Oladipo, “Philosophy” in Jonathan J. Bonk, editor, *Encyclopedia of Mission and Missionaries* (New York, Routledge, 2007), pp. 335-7

<sup>18</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 32.

health crisis. We are living in an era of interconnectedness and interdependency, and devotees of other religions will continue to need Christians as Christians need them.

### **Conclusion**

It is not hyperbole to suggest that no other phenomenon in the modern era has demonstrated the interconnectedness of humanity more so than the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has revealed our human vulnerability and highlighted for us the fact that there is no cure for being human. It has blatantly exposed the weaknesses as well as the strengths of our humanity. Our natural rapacity and avarice, both personal and institutional, have been put under a magnifying glass. Our human nature has had no place to hide. The proposal in this article to dissolve the rigidity of our borders can be realized only when the distinctions between rich and poor, black and white, Christians and non-Christians, East and West, and other divisions are abandoned and discarded. Rigid borders are untrue and anti-thetically intermediary to the gospel of faith, hope, and love.

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