

16-20 SEPTEMBER 2025  
STELLENBOSCH INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

An aerial photograph of a city at dusk. The city is densely packed with buildings, many of which are illuminated from within, creating a warm glow against the darkening sky. In the foreground, a large, dark, rectangular structure, possibly a stadium or arena, is visible. In the background, a large body of water, likely a harbor or bay, is visible. A large red and white cargo ship is docked at a pier, with its lights reflecting on the water. The overall scene is a mix of urban development and natural beauty.

urban-religious  
worldmaking  
in Africa

a POINT SUD CONFERENCE FUNDED  
by the GERMAN RESEARCH FOUNDATION (DFG)



# urban-religious worldmaking in Africa

## CALL FOR PAPERS

16-20 September 2025

Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, South Africa

Funded by the German Research Foundation's "Point Sud" programme

## CONVENERS

Asaf AUGUSTO, Human Geography / Study of Religion, Research Associate, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Bayreuth

Johara BERRIANE, Social and Cultural Anthropology / Islamic Studies, Professor of Flight, Migration and Social Mobility, Institute for Cultural Studies, University of the Bundeswehr

Benjamin KIRBY, Study of Religion / African Studies, Junior Professor for the Study of Religion, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Bayreuth

Francis SIBANDA, Urban Studies / Governance Studies, Postdoctoral Researcher, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Fort Hare

## ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary conference explores the making of urban and religious worlds in and beyond the African continent, demonstrating the importance of African cities for analysing global dynamics of urban-religious transformation.

We use Stephan Lanz's (2016) term *urban-religious* to emphasise the mutually constitutive relationship between urban and religious spheres—that is, how they are deeply intertwined with and shaped by one another. The notion of *worlds* captures the multiple ways in which urban-religious life is configured and envisioned. There is no singular model or enactment of the urban-religious; people live and move through multiple, overlapping urban-religious worlds. *Worldmaking* underscores the ongoing, unfinished character of these worlds: they are continuously made and remade—not only by planners, developers, and state actors, but also through infrastructures, ecosystems, technologies, desires, and memories. This *processual* framing foregrounds how ordinary residents actively participate in urban-religious worldmaking through everyday practices.

Rather than treating African urban-religious worlds as isolated or exceptional, we adopt a *comparative* approach to examine transregional connections and commonalities between urban-religious formations across and beyond the African continent. In doing so, we aim to develop new conceptual tools for understanding global processes of urban-religious transformation. This conference thus invites researchers to analyse urban-religious dynamics across and beyond Africa through comparative and processual lenses, thereby enriching both urban and religious studies alike.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To concretise these ideas, we outline seven broad research questions below, each paired with a specific example (*in italics*) to illustrate where such a line of inquiry could lead:

- TRANSFORMING WORLDS: How does religion instigate, obstruct, or otherwise become implicated in processes of urban (re)development? *e.g., How might construction projects funded by religious groups facilitate processes of gentrification and displacement?*
- LIVING WORLDS: How does religion participate in assembling, ordering, and sustaining particular urban atmospheres and ecologies? *e.g., How might inner-city religious cemeteries evoke contemplative and threatening ambiances, or become niches for wildlife and illicit economic activities?*
- LIVABLE WORLDS: How does religion shape urban experiences of dwelling and conditions of habitability—and for whom? *e.g., How might religious practices extend a sense of urban belonging to otherwise excluded groups?*
- PLURAL WORLDS: How do residents build urban lives and landscapes alongside people from other religious groups, and what kinds of inter-religious entanglement do such encounters produce? *e.g., How might residents navigate urban settings where competing religious organisations use electronic amplifiers to flood neighbourhoods with the sound of preaching and worship?*
- ABIDING WORLDS: How does religion relate to different notions of urban heritage and forms of urban memory? *e.g., How might historic religious buildings become sites of contestation regarding their appropriate use?*
- SECURE WORLDS: How does religion factor into the implementation or experience of security urbanisms—that is, different efforts to construct secure urban worlds? *e.g., How might religious communities facilitate (or become targets of) law enforcement strategies?*
- MOBILE WORLDS: How does religion influence the transurban movement (or immobility) of people, ideas, and things at different scales? *e.g., How might pilgrimage experiences facilitate the circulation of knowledge and styles, and the accumulation of prestige and wealth?*

These questions can be examined from various perspectives, including (but not limited to): space and materiality; urban imaginaries and affects; infrastructure and technology; identity and belonging; gender, sexuality, race, disability, and class; labour regimes and moral economies; political economy and development; public religion and secularity; citizenship and governance; bordering and migration.

We welcome proposals from researchers in any discipline whose scholarship builds on empirical research conducted in the African continent and who are interested in engaging substantively with questions of urban and religious life (broadly conceived). Contributions need not focus on so-called “world religions”; they may also encompass other kinds of religion and spirituality, as well as forms of “implicit religion” and non-religion.

## **CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES**

Building on the research agenda outlined above, this conference has three chief objectives:

- (1) **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS:** To establish a group of scholars from multiple disciplinary backgrounds, geographic locations, and career stages who are interested in advancing research on urban-religious worldmaking in and beyond Africa, and who will continue to support one another’s scholarship and professional development long after the conference concludes.
- (2) **CULTIVATING KNOWLEDGE:** To provide space for participants to share knowledge and collectively generate new conceptual and methodological tools for understanding emerging dynamics of urban-religious worldmaking in African contexts and beyond.
- (3) **DEVELOPING PUBLICATIONS:** To collaboratively develop manuscripts that push conceptual and methodological boundaries in the study of urban-religious worldmaking, with a view to future publication.

## **PROGRAMME**

The five-day conference will be hosted by the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) in Stellenbosch, South Africa. It will be structured around six panels and keynote addresses by leading scholars in the field, including Dr Obvious Katsaura, Prof. Adeline Masquelier, Prof. Birgit Meyer, Prof. Smriti Srinivas, and Prof. Asonzeh Ukah, with one additional speaker to be confirmed. It will also feature a half-day writing workshop, plenary discussions on future publication plans, a half-day excursion to nearby Cape Town, and a guided walking tour of Stellenbosch itself.

## **TERMS AND EXPECTATIONS**

- Point Sud will cover all of the costs associated with accepted participants’ travel to and accommodation in Stellenbosch.
- Participants are expected to attend a webinar that will be organised before the conference (likely to be in early July) in which we will clarify the conference concept and goals and stage an interactive exercise which will help us establish the panel themes and writing groups.

- Participants are expected to attend the entirety of the conference, arriving one day prior to the conference (15 September) and departing the day after the conference (21 September).
- Participants are expected to present a 15-minute paper on a topic related to the conference theme. Participants are expected to submit a draft copy of their full paper (1,500-1,700 words) to the chair and other members of their writing workshop group prior to the conference (1 September) so that we can offer more detailed feedback on one another's work.
- We are committed to promoting equal opportunities for participation across gender, ethnicity, religion, and other identity categories. We particularly encourage proposals from early-career researchers—including advanced doctoral and postdoctoral researchers—and from scholars based at African institutions.
- The conference's principal working language is English, therefore abstracts and papers should be in English.

## **DEADLINES**

To participate in the conference, please submit a paper title and abstract (max. 500 words) and a CV (max. 2 pages), both in PDF format, using the subject line "URWA 2025", to: [benjamin.kirby@uni-bayreuth.de](mailto:benjamin.kirby@uni-bayreuth.de)

- Deadline: 30 April 2025
- Notification of acceptance/rejection: 19 May 2025