

RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA
Stanford University Center for African Studies
March 6-7, 2020



Conveners: Felicitas Becker, Ghent University, and Joel Cabrita, Stanford University

Call for Papers:

Christian and Muslim institutions, as well as those associated with traditional religions, have long played a role in the provision of public goods and services in Africa, such as education, healthcare provision and support for the needy. In this sense, they have long been concerned with what we now call development. Nevertheless, mid-twentieth-century developmentalism initially positioned development as an a-religious, secular and technocratic alternative to religious charity. Yet this apparent contrast has softened considerably since. For the last couple of decades, development experts have endorsed so-called ‘faith-based organisations’ as a means for the delivery of development interventions. Muslim and Christian organisations, as well as some practitioners of traditional religion, have in their turn positioned their activities as developmental. This includes not only medical or educational services, but also claims to creating ‘developmental’ mentalities centred on self-improvement. Technocratic developmentalism, in its turn, has become vulnerable to dismissal as a naïve substitute for religion as its initial optimism faltered.

Moreover, there are unstable differences between different religious congregations. For example, Christian missionary organisations are easily positioned as the ‘charitable arm’ of colonialism, whereas Muslim networks are often seen as having kept an uneasy distance from it. But missionaries, too, were conflicted about the pursuit of ‘this-worldly’ progress, while Muslim congregations elaborated their own visions of material and cultural advancement. Meanwhile, development experts’ assumptions about the social role of religious congregations can be more prescriptive than descriptive, obscuring the social processes and motivations involved. Ultimately, the promises of religious proselytisers were never only about the next world, nor those of development experts entirely about the present one. The dynamics and implications of interaction between religious congregations and development intervention, then, are far from clear. The proposed workshop aims to examine them. The questions to be asked include, but are not limited to:

- How did missionary, Muslim and indigenous religious institutions actually position themselves towards the rhetoric and practice of development in its heyday?
- If religious practitioners ‘ceded territory’ to development experts, how have their recent successors claimed it back in the course of the turn towards ‘faith-based organisations’?
- Given that the growth of the book religions in Africa continued unabated in the presence of the a-religious promises of development, how did believers square their developmental and their religious hopes?

- Why was the mid-twentieth century, in hindsight, such a high-water mark of secularism, and how was developmentalism implicated in enabling it?
- How secular or crypto-religious was and is developmentalism in its concrete manifestations?

To apply, please send a title and abstract of no more than 300 words, CV and institutional affiliation to reldevt@gmail.com by **September 15, 2019**. Application from early-career scholars are particularly encouraged. Limited funds are available to reimburse costs.