Urban Africa 2050: Imagining Theological Education/Formation for Flourishing African Cities

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Abstract

Africa's staggering rate of urbanization and the silence of religion or theology in response form the backdrop of this article. Africa's urban futures, up through 2050, are considered through the lenses of fifteen African cities and theological institutions in these cities. I employ a set of research questions, seeking to contribute theologically to a body of knowledge known as African urbanism. The article imagines theological education/formation in response to Africa's urban explosion through exploring flourishing cities as an organizing imaginary, but also through outlining concrete embodiments and prospects for reimagining theological education/formation in African cities.

Keywords: African urbanization, African urbanism, theological education and formation, flourishing African cities

In an informal conversation with Professor Jesse Mugambi, I asked him why he thinks that African theological discourse fails to engage African cities. We had a brief discussion on this topic, but one line stuck with me and became the catalyst for the project I reflect upon in this article. He said, "We should not only focus, theologically, on the past and on the present of African cities; it is really important for us to consider African cities fifty years from now."

In this article I consider the significance of Africa's urban future for theological education, based on a collaborative research project that asked questions about where African cities will be by 2050, and how we should reimagine theological education on the African continent if we are to be faithful to the future of African cities and their inhabitants. I highlight some of the themes that emerged from our research, as well as some of the prospects developed by the research team.

Significance of Africa's urban future for theological education

Three broad considerations animated the conceptualization of this project: the staggering rate of urbanization in Africa and envisaged African urban futures, the emergence of African urbanisms, and the religious/theological silence on African cities and urban challenges. These three considerations are also proposed as vitally significant for rethinking theological education on the African continent.

The staggering rate of urbanization in Africa and envisaged African urban futures

Currently the African urban population is 414 million. Estimates are that this number will grow to 742 million by 2030, and not fewer than 1.2 billion people will live in African cities by 2050, making it at that point more than half the African population.[1] After delayed urbanization, Africa is now the continent with the fastest rate of urban growth. Yet, there is a sense in which Africa has not yet come to terms with the massive challenges presented by urbanization and its envisaged urban futures.

Adding to the challenge is the informal nature of African urbanity, with 62 percent of the African urban population living in informal settlements.[2] This figure, according to projections of UN-Habitat, is not about to change, for most urban expansion is envisaged to be informal. It raises obvious challenges in every respect but particularly in terms of keeping up with demands for urban infrastructure, housing, and services, as well as responsive and appropriate urban governance and management, tailored for the unique contexts of African cities.

African urbanisms: Responding to, or subverting, an overreliance on Western-derived theoretical frameworks

In response to the magnitude of the African urban challenge, the African Centre for Cities (ACC), in Cape Town, South Africa, is deliberate about articulating African or Southern urbanisms. It recognizes urban forms and expressions unique to Africa and the Global South, engaging critically with the politics of knowledge production, including "the methods, purposes and participants in constructing knowledge in, with and for the global South."[3]

Edgar Pieterse stresses the necessity to engage the specificities of African cities in a way that pays close attention to the ordinary—the "lived vitalities"—expressed in creative strategies of livelihood and resistance, and the informal insurgencies of urban social movements or ordinary urban dwellers, while simultaneously discerning possible urban "solutions" grounded in solid theoretical work.[4] In this project we profited from the epistemological shifts signified by the ACC.

Religious/theological silence on African cities and urban challenges

Within the emergence of African urbanism, there is, however, a dearth of religious or theological scholarship engaging African cities. There are sporadic scholarly contributions but

no coherent body of knowledge being developed or shared in this regard at the present moment. Carole Rakodi highlights the scarcity of scholarly work in this area.[5]

We concerned ourselves specifically with how Christian faith, as expressed in theological education, engages the vast challenges of African urbanization. Most theological curricula in Africa fail to prioritize urban realities. This research is an attempt to foster robust and creative theological engagement with African cities and urbanization.

Our collaborative research project grew from the work being done in the Centre for Faith and Community, based in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria. The Centre has discerned the urgency of connecting people and institutions across African regions in order to stimulate an African urban theology network to share and exchange knowledge and resources, both individually and institutionally.

Our research collaboration

We titled our research "Urban Africa 2050: Imagining Theological Education/Formation for Flourishing African Cities." In this section we consider key aspects of this project.

Urban Africa as a theological challenge

The African urban challenge needs to be described as a reality that is very concrete, yet also complex and elusive. For theologians, the task is to describe this challenge *theologically*: What are the theological imperatives arising from Africa's urban explosion? How do we speak of African urbanization in relation to globalization, decolonization, and neocolonization? Will urban Africa explode in numbers and therefore deepen in misery and human and environmental suffering, or can we dare imagine city-making processes that could facilitate hopeful and flourishing African urban futures?

The most innovative and radical faith-based responses are often marginal, as they are out of sync with our dominant constructs of doing theology. We will do well to discern such religious, faith, or ecclesial practices and the promise they hold, not only for mediating flourishing urban habitats, but also for liberating theological education.

Research questions

Our collaboration was guided by a *central research question*: How can theological education or formation—curriculum, pedagogy, epistemology, and methodology—be (re)imagined to contribute to the preparation of community- and faith-based urban leaders who are enabled to accompany, facilitate, and build flourishing African cities, in the light of envisaged or imagined African urban futures?

To help unpack the central research question, we asked a number of subquestions: What are envisaged for African urban futures? How do African urbanization and its challenges feature in theological curricula of the institutions represented in the research team? How can theological education and formation draw upon African spiritualities and values to enhance human flourishing in a rapidly urbanizing continent? How can theological education and

formation both draw from and help foster sociospiritual innovation in the service of urban change-making in Africa?

Research collaborators: Institutions and individuals

The Centre for Faith and Community at the University of Pretoria, along with African Operation, a network of Francophone Christian leaders working in cities across Africa, identified possible research team members. Thirteen institutions in fifteen cities and nine countries participated and endorsed the research project. A team of sixteen researchers combined academics, postgraduate students, and practicing theologians. What they hold in common is a shared appreciation for a praxis approach to theological work and a commitment to wrestle with African urban realities.[6]

Research methodology

This was a transdisciplinary research project embodied in close collaboration between the theological researchers and the practitioner-activists in various cities, as well as rich engagements with disciplines such as urban planning, sociology, and political science.

Using a praxis approach, as developed and proposed by Holland and Henriot,[7] the research process was designed to follow the moments of the praxis cycle quite deliberately, attending intentionally to four moments: (1) deep immersion and description, (2) analysis and deconstruction, (3) imagination and reflection, and (4) co-construction and recommendations. In the process, different researchers used different research methods, tailored for their contexts, ranging from participant observation, focus groups, and documentary analyses to in-depth interviews, case studies, and world-café-style conversations. *The intention was to model the use of the praxis cycle as a research and learning methodology to be considered for urban curricula.*

Imagining theological education/formation for flourishing African cities

The purpose of this project was to imagine theological education/formation for flourishing African cities. The process was designed to facilitate a threefold process with the research team: (1) to trigger and foster a collective urban consciousness, (2) to interrogate and (re)imagine theological education and formation evoked by such an urban consciousness, and (3) to animate and implement responsive urban theological curricula.

Our starting point was with the concrete practices and alternatives already in place, even if sporadically, in our different cities. As Jean-Marc Éla said, "Our reflection must begin with the concrete practices and alternatives wherein the memory and resistance of our people have been articulated."[8] We deliberately looked for local assets that are sometimes invisible, ignored, or underappreciated. These are not only religious or faith-based assets but all those "irruptions" that emerge,[9] often against the odds, to resist and reclaim that which urban dwellers are denied. We sought to retrieve and consider African values or spiritualities, social innovations, and socio-spatial-spiritual capital—as found in local community- and faith-based expressions of urban change—as potential sources for reimagining theological education.

Emmanuel Katongole speaks of the crucial and daring task "to invent the future."[10] Not only is our theological vocation that of lamenting "the social, cultural, economic and political disintegration of Africa,"[11] but beyond that, we were asking how we—through theological education and formation—can help invent new, hopeful, and flourishing African urban futures.

In doing so, we had to take a radically self-critical position, examining the status of the church and theological education in relation to the rising African city. Against the backdrop of profoundly unflourishing urban realities and the complicity of the church and theological education in perpetuating the status quo, we need to discern a radically different imagination. "A church capable of inventing the future in Africa would not only have to draw from a different vision and story of power; its location, both imaginatively and concretely, would have to reflect this completely different account of power."[12] Dare we even speak of *flourishing* African cities, in contexts that are overwhelmingly fractured, informal, resource- and infra-structure poor? Or, differently phrased, how should we think about *flourishing* African cities in such challenging urban environments?

As we considered flourishing as an organizing imaginary, we traced the work of Miroslav Volf and Matt Croasman, Elaine Graham, Amartya Sen, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and John Friedmann.[13] Instead of viewing flourishing as a product of development or growth, we described it as *an active process* with signposts along the way, assessing the well-being of people, places, and communities and furthering a sense of communal well-being and radically reduced levels of precarity, through mediating access to multiple freedoms and sources of power, in a liberationist sense. How can theological education/formation in African cities cultivate such an imaginary, and what are the practices to mediate it?

Initial overarching themes for (re)imagined theological education and formation in African cities

Here I only introduce five of the most important themes that emerged from the research as foci for curricular consideration.[14] There was a clear sense from the researchers involved that we had to educate ourselves better, and continuously, with regard to these themes; that we needed to engage collaboratively beyond our own disciplines; and that theological curricula had to incorporate these themes very intentionally.

1. Urbanization, migration, inequality, and informality

A thread throughout our research was the failure of theological education in Africa to grapple with the magnitude of Africa's urban explosion. Research collaborator Xolani Nkosi, from Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, states that "churches and theological education seem blindfolded." In many African cities 70 to 80 percent of the entire urban population live in urban informal settlements, or slums. Africa's *informal cities*, with their *associated precarity*, raise very specific theological questions, different from urbanity in the Global North.

Inequality marks most African cities, with small wealthy elites, relatively small middle-class populations, and vast numbers of poor urban dwellers. Such inequality is most strikingly

expressed in a city like Cape Town. Its political aspiration is to be a world-class city, yet this goal stands in stark tension with the lived experiences of the urban poor, who find themselves in 437 informal settlements.[15] Deliberate practices to move the urban poor out of sight in favor of market-driven urban branding deepens the reality of a growing urban precariat across the entire continent.

Ghislain Agbede, from Cotonou, Benin, speaks of the need for a *migratory urban theology*, considering domestic, transnational, and forced migration, but also attending to the reality of Asian religions growing fast in a city like Cotonou as a result of its growing Asian workforce.

2. Knowledge infrastructure, urban planning, and urban data

Knowledge infrastructure in relation to urban issues, planning, and management was very limited in many, if not most, of the participating cities. This was particularly clear in Kampala, Uganda, but also in Libreville, Gabon; Porto-Novo, Benin; and Cotonou.

A big challenge is the absence of *(reliable) urban data* on demographics and urban trends in many of the cities. In some cities there is virtually no, or unreliable, data infrastructure, and the capacity to produce up-to-date data is very limited. The role of faith communities and theological educators in this regard should be further contemplated.

In Pretoria and Kampala, as well as in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Enugu, Nigeria, emphasis was placed on the potential collaboration between theology and urban planning. Planners in Enugu welcomed the participation of theologians in imagining urban futures, and in Kampala planners expressed a sense of being completely overwhelmed, desiring collaboration with faith-based institutions.

3. Urban governance, citizenship, and (post-/neo-)coloniality

Jude Nnorom, in the Enugu-based research, asked: "Who owns the city?" or "Who has a right to the city?"[16] These questions relate to issues of urban governance and management, urban citizenship, access and agency, and levels of ownership and participation, in building a "good city."[17]

A recurrent theme in many cities included greed and corruption among urban political leaders. In Kampala, ownership of taxis and motorbikes by politicians prevented constructive interventions to improve these sectors. In Enugu, the protests of organized civil society face forceful repression. In a number of participating cities, the (neo)-Pentecostalization of the state was identified, characterized by the proximity of proponents of prosperity theologies to positions of political power.

Contestations over urban ownership were also made visible through *(neo)colonialist forms* of city-building, depleting local civic ownership. Are projects of so-called urban development in Cotonou and elsewhere always at the expense of the poor, as is clearly evident in urban gentrification processes bulldozing certain inner city neighborhoods in Cape Town? In her quest for postcolonial African urbanisms, research associate Lerato Kobe explored how

Ubuntu discourse could serve as an antidote to dominant developmental and neocolonial models of urban governance.

4. Urban infrastructure, environmental degradation, and climate change

The intersectional challenge of transport, sanitation, and housing infrastructure is true in all African cities but was most acutely articulated in the city of Kinshasa. In Cape Town the working poor spend 43 percent of their income on commuting costs,[18] prompting creative work by social movements to advance spatial justice. Research associate Selena Headley is deliberate about her choice of interlocutors: how can progressive social movements help inform, critique, and shape our theological agendas and commitments?

Connected to urban informality is the reality of *environmental degradation and climate change*. In Enugu and Mbuji-Mbayi, Democratic Republic of Congo, the use of soil, the reality of erosion, and mineral exploitation are both urban and theological issues. Drinking water, along with access to sustainable water resources in general, surfaced as a real challenge not only in Enugu but also in Cape Town and (also in South Africa) the Gauteng City-Region. The challenge of waste management and carbon emissions and the promise held by the informal economy, in response, warrants much more deliberate theological engagement.

5. Specific urban populations

The *youthfulness of African cities* was underscored by a number of researchers but was especially highlighted in Nairobi, Kenya, and in Pietermaritzburg. Not only is the majority of African urban dwellers young, but too often the largest percentages of African urban youth belong to the precariat—unemployed, underemployed, and with bleak prospects of alternative futures.

A more surprising discovery was how *street homelessness* was not only a South African issue. Emmanuel Akatukunda in Kampala and David Kpobi in Accra, Ghana, have clearly articulated the reality of street homelessness, alongside informality, and presented this as a challenge to be reflected upon in theological classrooms. In City of Tshwane, South Africa, we consider the streets where homeless people live as classrooms for action and reflection, "shifting the geography of reason."[19]

Theological education as urban formation

Marilyn Naidoo describes how theological education globally, in many instances, is experiencing a shift toward a much more *holistic formational approach*, fusing critical thinking and the acquisition of knowledge with skills development and with personal and spiritual formation.[20]

Most educational models represented in our collaborative process described a disconnect from the city—and more particularly, from the most precarious urban environments—in presence, but also in content and in pedagogy. In our process it has become clear that theological education that is not grounded in journeys of solidarity with slum dwellers and

their leaders *as primary interlocutors* will fail to make sense of such communities. If we are to be faithful to the cry of African cities, our theological education will have to facilitate tools, languages, and networks to empower a new generation of faith-based urban leaders. *We propose theological education as urban formation, or the formation of urban vocation in a personal, pastoral, professional, and theological sense.*

Concrete embodiments and new prospects

Our joint research process delivered a number of concrete outcomes. All the participating researchers placed the urban agenda on their institution's agendas, which will be reflected in curricular and other institutional commitments. Fifteen different curricula proposals were made, ranging from urbanizing an entire school of theology in terms of location, pedagogy, and content, to programs in urban theology at diploma or postgraduate level, to introducing a singular, introductory module at certificate or undergraduate level—all aimed at stimulating urban theological discourse and action.

The African Urban Theology Network has emerged from these efforts, still in the formative stages, and a few institutions are considering positioning themselves as urban research/resource hubs for faith-based urban practitioner-activists. We are currently creating a web-based repository to serve as a resource for those doing theology in African cities. In addition, we have committed ourselves to contribute to a body of theological knowledge on African urbanization, doing so through a series of journal collections.

A cohort of postgraduate students is emerging from African institutions, focusing on themes relating to urban theology or faith-based urban transformation. Our collaborative work already has served as a catalyst for possible new research collaborations. Two concrete possibilities include a study of theology, disability, and urban policy, as well an exploration of faith-based housing interventions in African cities.

Concluding: Seeking to be faithful in the urban classroom

Our research sought to discern how to be faithful in the urban classroom. First, we agreed on the primacy that urbanization in Africa should take on the agendas of our theological schools, as well as on the role we as individual practitioner-theologians can play to facilitate such processes.

Second, the location of theological schools in relation to urban precarity, informality, and vulnerability needs to be considered and reevaluated.

Third, the question about our interlocutors in the process of discerning appropriate urban theological discourse and action is critical.

Fourth, and connected to the "right" interlocution, is the question of who our partners could be in fostering theological and pragmatic agency, with those we prepare for faith-based leadership.

Finally, we recognized that the details of our various contexts were important, but it is more important to interrogate the epistemological and methodological approaches that either hindered us from faithful urban engagement or could qualify us to embrace Africa's cities with greater humility, love, and justice.

We need to foster courage to imagine flourishing African urban futures, but even more specifically, we need to foster theological leadership to help accompany and invent such futures. If theological education does not consider Africa's urban revolution,[21] with all the accompanying challenges and promises, it might reduce itself to irrelevance.

Funding

Footnotes

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2 Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone, eds., *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media; Rondebosch, South Africa: African Centre for Cities, 2013), 19–35.

3 Stephan de Beer and Ignatius Swart, "Towards a Fusion of Horizons: Thematic Contours for an Urban Public Theological Praxis-Agenda in South Africa," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/; Edgar Pieterse, "Epistemological Practices of Southern Urbanism" (paper presented at the ACC Academic Seminar, February 21, 2014, http://www.africancentreforcities.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Epistemic-practices-of-southern-urbanism-Feb-2014.pdf).

4 Pieterse, "Epistemological Practices of Southern Urbanism."

5 Carole Rakodi, "Religion and Social Life in African Cities," in *Africa's Urban Revolution*, ed. Parnell and Pieterse, 82–109.

6 The sixteen research associates in the project are active in nine countries: **South Africa:** *Stephan de Beer* (convener), University of Pretoria; *Emmanuel Tshilenga* (co-convener), African Operation/OPERAF, Pretoria; *Mike Ribbens*, Institute for Urban Ministry, Pretoria, and Resonate Global Mission, East Africa; *Sandiswa Lerato Kobe*, University of South Africa; *Selena Headley*, Cornerstone Institute, Cape Town; *Xolani A. Nkosi*, Union Bible Institute, Pietermaritzburg; **Benin:** *Elzabad Tanko*, Faculté Théologique Inter-confessionnelle du Bénin (FATIB); *Ghislain Agbede*, Francophone University of International Development, Cotonou; **Cameroon:** Claude Kalonji, Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Sciences of Ndoungué; **Democratic Republic of Congo**: *Micheline Kamba*, School of Theology, Protestant University of the Congo, Kinshasa; **Gabon:** *Calixte Mbakere*, House of Theological Formation of Bethel, Libreville; **Ghana:** *David Kpobi*, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon; **Kenya:** *Sheth*

Otieno Oguok, Centre for Urban Mission, Nairobi, and Resonate Global Mission; **Nigeria:** *Jude Nnorom*, Spiritan International School of Theology, Enugu; **Uganda:** *Emmanuel Akatukunda* and *Philip Wandawa*, Kampala Evangelical School of Theology.

7 Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

8 Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

9 Gustavo Gutiérrez described these as the "irruption of the poor," with far-reaching historical consequences, in *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

10 Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 87.

11 Ibid., 101.

12 Ibid., 131.

13 Miroslav Volf and Matt Croasman, "Six Traits of a Pluralist Christian Vision of Human Flourishing," *Christian Century*, February 6, 2019; Elaine Graham, "On Finding Ourselves: Theology, Place, and Human Flourishing," in *Theology and Human Flourishing: Essays in Honour of Timothy J. Gorringe*, ed. Mike Higton, Jeremy Law, and Christopher Rowlands (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 271; Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Berlin: Knopf, 1999); Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxviii–xl; John Friedmann, *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

14 All the references in this section were from the reports presented by individual researchers at our Collaborative Research Meeting, November 6–9, 2019, City of Tshwane.

15 http://ismaps.org.za/desktop.html.

16 David Harvey develops Henri Lefebvre's original idea of "right to the city" in his work *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso Books, 2012).

17 Ash Amin, "The Good City," *Urban Studies* 43, nos. 5/6 (2006): 1009–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980600676717; Elaine Graham, "What Makes a Good City? Reflections on Urban Life and Faith," *International Journal of Public Theology* 2, no. 1 (2008): 7–26, https://doi.org/10.1163/156973208X256420.

18 Carin Smith, "Poor Cape Town Households Spend 43% of Income on Transport," *fin24*, August 21, 2019, https://www.fin24.com/Economy/poor-cape-town-households-spend-43-of-income-on-transport-mayco-member-20190821.

19 See Lewis R. Gordon, "Shifting the Geography of Reason in an Age of Disciplinary Decadence," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2012), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/218618vj.

20 Marilyn Naidoo, "Ministerial Formation of Theological Students through Distance Education," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 2 (2012), http://dx.doi.org./10.4102/hts.v68i2.1225.

21 See Parnell and Pieterse, *Africa's Urban Revolution*.

Biographies

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