

PAPER TITLE: RELIGION AND ECONOMY IN THE AGE OF NEO-LIBERALISM

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I use my own doctoral ethnographic research in Southwestern Ghana as an example of contemporary interface between religion and economy. Ghana has been one of the first African countries that underwent the IMF and World Bank sponsored Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1983. Gradually during the 1980's and the beginning of 1990's, almost all African Sub-Saharan countries were forced to implement the program in order to pay out their huge debts. Structural Adjustment Program was a vast financial and political operation on the part of IMF and the World Bank in clearly Neo-liberal lines: huge public investment cuts, huge civil service and public enterprises' redundancy, incentives and tax, legal, and social reforms for the development of a "free market" economy.

At the same time new religious movements especially local Christian and international Evangelical and Pentecostal sects and churches began to thrive in Sub-Saharan Africa. This phenomenon bears some similarities to the United States Christian conservatives' explosion, and the Islamist radical conservatism in Middle East and South Asia, but it displays some significant differences with those phenomena, as well. The paper will address the issue of the relationship between neo-liberal policies and new religious movements. I will investigate the directions towards which, religious movements are heading to against the neoliberal politico-economic context. Do they comply and adapt to individualism and private entrepreneurship? Or do they resist and constitute a spontaneous response of societal resistance against the invisible and uncontrollable forces of the free market? And if the latter is a valid assumption why does this phenomenon occur and thrive in Asia, Africa and the United States but not in Europe and South America? In examining this question the presuppositions of a renewed theoretical debate on the ethnographically informed political economy of religion will be discussed as well.