Faith and Charity

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Religion and Humanitarian Assistance in West Africa

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Introduction

Faith, Charity and the Ethics of Volunteerism in West Africa

Marie Nathalie LeBlanc and Louis Audet Gosselin

While conducting research in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire at the turn of the twenty-first century, we both noticed that something was changing in the religious field and that religious activities alone were no longer always considered enough to sustain the life of faith-based associations. In the 1990s, both countries had experienced a growing interest in voluntary associations that was largely driven by a desire to affirm religious identities in the public sphere. A decade later, the discourses and practices of religious actors seemed to be shifting to other fields of activity. For instance, a 30-year-old Burkinabe woman described her waning interest in Islamic activism. Although she had long been involved in Muslim associations, having participated in religious activities since her teens, she stated that, 'Up to now, I feel like I have done nothing for Islam. What I would like to do is work for a Muslim NGO [non-governmental organisation] or, I don't know, maybe start my own business.'[1] Her previous achievements of organising conferences, educational activities and religious training for young girls, were now deemed 'not enough'. A similar shift was observed among young Muslims in Côte d'Ivoire. They were turning away from the Islamic activism of the previous generation towards ideas of religious entrepreneurship, which often involved humanitarian activities (LeBlanc 2012; Soares and LeBlanc 2015). Likewise, we encountered several Pentecostal leaders who identified socioeconomic development as the main objective of their organisations. For example, the president of the youth association of the Église protestante évangélique (EPE) in Ouagadougou mentioned that preparing young graduates for work in the private sector was one of their primary goals. He was especially concerned

with providing alternatives to working in an already-saturated civil service, and with contributing to the country's economic development.[2] Finally, the youth association at a Catholic parish in the same city partnered with the government to host an 'entrepreneurship training session'. The aim was to help develop an entrepreneurial spirit, considered crucial to the economic development of Burkina Faso, among the country's youth.[3]

These examples point to an apparent convergence of religious activities, development projects and private initiatives. This phenomenon lies at the heart of this book, which explores how, since the 1980s, neoliberalism has shaped relationships between faith-based activism, humanitarian aid and social change in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. On the one hand, neoliberalism is expressed through policies of economic liberalisation, which encompass reductions in government spending, an expanded economic role for the private sector and a focus on entrepreneurship as a motor of economic growth (Ferguson 2006a). On the other hand, neoliberalism is expressed as a moral and political ideology that aims to transform individual attitudes towards the economy by emphasising individual achievement over collective well-being (Hilgers 2010). In this book, we understand logics of neoliberalism in terms of a combination between economic policies and political ideologies that emphasise entrepreneurial ethics and practices.

This book offers a fresh perspective on the relationship between religion, civil society and development through the prism of faith-based NGOs (fbNGOs)[4] in West Africa, with a focus on Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. Building on a series of ethnographic case studies, the book analyses the social, political, cultural and religious roles of fbNGOs, as well as their ambiguous relationship to humanitarian aid institutions and the empowerment of civil society. In doing so, the authors show how fbNGOs are, on the one hand, products of a process of neoliberal globalisation that encourages the NGO-isation of societies, including the religious sphere. On the other hand, fbNGOs also reflect how religion has gained significant influence on both the political sphere and the logics of development. Furthermore, using an actor-oriented[5] ethnographic analysis, the authors show how the activities of fbNGOs reflect a shift from political activism to development projects, a change that has a direct impact on religious institutions.

In the remainder of the introduction, we first describe the economic context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a period that

saw the emergence of 'neoliberalism'. Second, we discuss how religion has entered socioeconomic development, while proposing different analytical frameworks that can help in understanding the importance of religion for development. Third, we explain how the book explores this phenomenon, by highlighting how religious actors maintain complex relationships with the neoliberal economy, state policies, and broader ideological trends present in African societies. Next, we sketch the state of religious diversity in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, the development challenges faced by the two countries, and the role played by fbNGOs in meeting those challenges. The fifth section addresses the religious dynamics at play in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, and their relevance for the study of fbNGOs. Finally, we present the structure of the book and provide an outline of each chapter.

Neoliberalism and Economic Change

The history of neoliberalism in Africa has been extensively studied, and we will refrain from providing yet another overview. Suffice it to say that, after the 1980s, the economic dynamics of sub-Saharan African societies dramatically shifted from state-centred development to liberalisation, under the pressure of international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). A sharp decline in natural resource prices at the end of the 1970s had prompted a deep economic crisis in most African countries, which were highly dependent on exports of minerals and agricultural products. African governments were increasingly portrayed by international institutions as ineffective and corrupt, in contrast with the private sector, which was perceived as key to reducing national debts. As a result, African states were pressured to reduce the size of their bureaucracies, privatise key sectors of their economies and cut spending across the board, including in education and health care.

Since the 1990s, under the combined effects of economic crises, structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed by the IMF and post-Cold War realities, most African countries have engaged in processes of political liberalisation. In this context of rising economic neoliberalism, both scholars and international funding agencies have portrayed NGOs as key social structures. According to various researchers, the activities of NGOs in the field of socioeconomic development serve to consolidate both democratic gains and civil society (Almond and Verba 1989 [1963]; Clayton 1996; Hudock 1999; Marcussen 1996;

Raghavan 1992). Furthermore, as pressure is exerted to reduce the political and economic powers historically concentrated in the hands of the state to the benefit of the market economy, civil society and, in particular, voluntary associations, the latter have been regarded as privileged sites for the renewal of collective life. They are often described as safeguards against social alienation in the context of commodification. In this way, civil society is often portrayed as the world of 'ordinary people', where solidarity is valued over conflict and equality over authority. From this perspective, associations that bring together like-minded citizens would serve as a counterweight to the deleterious effects of neoliberalism. In a number of African societies, the 1990s saw the emergence of civil society actors in newly liberalised public spaces. Examples include student protest movements, women's associations demanding more equitable family laws, and religious revivalist movements. In fact, various scholars agree that, by the end of the 1990s, most African countries had experienced significant growth in urban and civic movements. Associations' activities shifted from rural areas to popular-class neighbourhoods in urban contexts, and rural development and charitable activities gave way to new forms of solidarity and citizenship (Bourdarias 2003; Le Bris 1998).

However, over the past couple of decades, a number of 'upheavals' have disrupted these emerging forms of solidarity and raised questions about the concrete role of civil society as the standard bearer of human rights and social progress. From climate-related problems and SAPs to political instability of all kinds, the continued deterioration of living conditions has led observers to wonder about the lack of consolidation among associations and to call into question the assumed autonomy and democratic potential of civil society (Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Kasfir 1998; Haberson et al. 1994; Lewis 1992; Otayek 2002). Indeed, issues of democratisation highlight the importance of relations between the state and various social actors. In particular, they raise the question of just how empowered these social actors are in relation not only to the state (Edwards 2004; Gellner 1994; Ghandour 2002; Mamdani 1996; Rangeon 1986), but also to the market and international development institutions.

Through the energy crisis of the 1970s, the structural adjustments of the following decade, the various political crises that occurred across the continent, and successive natural disasters, NGOs have progressively entrenched themselves in Africa by playing a key role in humanitarian

assistance. The trend towards the NGO-isation of associations and religious groups intensified during the 1990s, and became especially strong in the following decade (Freeman 2012b; Hearn 1998). 'NGO-isation' refers to the increasingly significant responsibility taken by NGOs for services that were historically provided by the state – especially in education, health care and public safety (Giovannoni et al. 2004; Hearn 1998) – as well as the adoption of a neoliberal logic of economic growth by civil society actors. To some extent, processes of NGO-isation encourage a move away from forms of mobilisation that challenge state and international agencies' policies on the part of civil society actors. Moreover, NGO-isation encompasses the extension of the formal NGO model to a vast array of civic and religious organisations, which previously did not identify as NGOs – including churches and religious, cultural and women's associations. Scholars have primarily studied this trend in relation to Pentecostal churches, whose intimate connection with neoliberalism is widely recognised (Coleman 2000; Freeman 2012a). However, this book argues that the entire religious field has been affected by NGO-isation, albeit in different ways. One of the key questions at the heart of the book relates to the often ambiguous relationship between civil society and NGOs: can collective action in response to government policies and market forces transform NGOs, including fbNGOs, and give them new orientations? Or should we instead speak in terms of the NGO-isation of political life, a process through which collective action is channelled within the logic of economic development and growth (see Hours 1993)?

Our approach also raises the question of how religious institutions and other civil society actors have been transformed by neoliberalism. On the one hand, since the 1990s, West Africa has seen a move away from more formal organisations such as labour unions, and an explosion of smaller-scale associations, including faith-based groups (Soares and LeBlanc 2015). In particular, youth organisations have engaged in various forms of activism, from the Senegalese Set Setal urban movement (Diouf 1992) to local Ivorian Muslim associations (LeBlanc 1998). A number of chapters in this book (chapter 3, Binaté; chapter 5, LeBlanc; chapter 6, Couillard, Madore and Gomez-Perez; chapter 7, Audet Gosselin) show how fbNGOs have emerged from this kind of local activism. On the other hand, some new civil society actors, especially popular-class and faith-based associations, have adopted more formal structures. The chapters by LeBlanc, Audet Gosselin and Koenig (chapters 5, 7 and 9) highlight this

process. Altogether, the book shows why scholars of development have been so fascinated by these twin transformations and their significance for the potential of local and faith-based initiatives in civil society.

Religion and Development

Since the 1980s, religious expression has become increasingly conspicuous in most African countries, including Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. Religious markers are clearly displayed and spiritual activities are commonplace in the public sphere, a trend that scholars have documented primarily in relation to the expansion of Evangelical churches (Engelke 2007; Gifford 2004; Kalu 2006; Meyer 1999; Ojo 2006), but which has also placed intense pressure on 'mainline' Protestant churches and the Catholic Church. Although the latter can still exert considerable influence, they have lost their leading role in gaining new converts to Christianity (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Gifford 1998; Meyer 2004). Meanwhile, a number of studies have documented the transformation of African Islam since the late twentieth century. Some scholars have focused on the variable influence of political Islam, in light of broader changes in Muslim activism worldwide since the 1980s (Gomez-Perez 2005; Loimeier 1997; Osella and Soares 2009; Soares and Otayek 2007; Villalón 1995). Anthropologists have paid attention to the growing visibility and importance of Islamic practice in Africa, as well as its impact on gender relations, intergenerational relations, identity and media use (Gomez-Perez 2005; Holder 2012; Janson 2013; LeBlanc 1998; Masquelier 2009; Soares 2005; Soares and Hackett 2015).

The increasing importance of religious affiliation highlights dynamics that have been observed since the 1980s and that have influenced both national and transnational public spheres. Indeed, the persistence of religious actors and faith-based logic would seem to belie theories of secularisation (Berger 1999; Casanova 1994; Kepel 1991). Some historians have proposed a theory of 'confessionalisation' as an alternative to secularisation in studies on the formation of modern European states (Boetcher 2004; Headley et al. 2004). More specifically, confessionalisation helps explain the significance of the emergence of rival Christian denominations following the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century. In the countries of the Global South, it is important to understand these dynamics not in terms of 'delay' or 'absence of modernisation', but rather in terms of the interpenetration of religious and secular ideals in late modernity,

something that multiple scholars have described as the 'post-secular turn' (Habermas 2008; Koehrsen 2012; McLennan 2010). The emergence of fbNGOs is a key component of growing religious influence insofar as their activities reflect the increased penetration of public sphere and civil society by religious actors. Furthermore, these organisations have become important players in socioeconomic development, which has historically been seen as a rational and secular space.

Recent studies of NGOs and other emerging civil society actors have highlighted the growing presence of faith-based groups (Ben Néfissa et al. 2004; Benedetti 2006; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003; Duriez et al. 2007; Freeman 2012a; Ghandour 2002; Salih 2004). In Africa, the growth of fbNGOs has generally been associated with the democratisation process that began in the late 1980s (Fowler 1993; Hearn 2007; Le Bris 1998). However, researchers have expressed very divergent opinions on the role of fbNGOs. For some, the spread of Christian NGOs has followed logics of colonial expansion. These organisations are portrayed as 'the unarmed wing of liberal globalisation' (Brunel 2006) or as tools for the transition to a market economy (Bayart and Bertrand 2006) and for the privatisation of the state (Hibou 1999). From this perspective, the activities of fbNGOs reflect the imposition of new norms in socioeconomic development, education, health care and governance. Other scholars have analysed fbNGOs solely from the perspective of their religious affiliations and proselytization efforts. For example, Muslim NGOs have frequently been linked to jihadist movements, whose strategies combine humanitarian assistance with armed conflict (Esposito 2002; Ghandour 2002; Roy 2004; Sharma 2006). FbNGOs have also been studied as effective tools that compensate for the shortcomings of the market and the state. In this way, by becoming essential partners in the socioeconomic development of the Global South, these organisations have provided platforms for challenging unfair conditions (Duriez et al. 2007; Fowler 1993).

The latter perspective dominates a body of literature that emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, often produced in close collaboration with international development organisations. In particular, Katherine Marshall, who served as Director of Development Dialogue on Ethics and Values at the World Bank, has conducted extensive research on the extent to which such international agencies could integrate fbNGOs into their activities and policies (K. Marshall 2001; Marshall and Keough 2004; Marshall and Van Saanen 2007). In the same vein, another series of publications underscore how the study of religion is relevant to the field of

development (Clarke 2013; Haynes 2007; Levy et al. 2013) and decry the previous tendency to disregard religious factors in development (Clarke 2006; Selinger 2004; Van Beek 2000).

In this perspective, interest in fbNGOs tends to be strongly connected with their capacity to provide easier access to local populations by leveraging both cultural proximity and religious commitment. Several Islamic NGOs have argued that they now have better access to Muslims in need than Western humanitarians (Ghandour 2002) and that they are in an excellent position to interpret the values of Muslim populations (Benthall 2006). Similar conclusions have been drawn in studies of Orthodox Christian groups (Molokotos-Liederman 2007). Religious affiliation has also been identified as a key motivating factor for the employees and volunteers of fbNGOs, leading to increased efficiency (Clarke 2006; Haynes 2007). According to Clarke, the emergence of fbNGOs was also largely the result of the rise of Evangelical Christianity in the United States. Beginning under the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1980–88), Evangelical organisations have received considerable support from the American government. In particular, the Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Act of 2001 provided for the public financing of groups that engaged in proselytism, so long as they also provided social services. To better implement this new law, US Agency for International Development (USAID) opened a Center for Faith Based and Community Initiatives in 2002, with a mandate to encourage the participation of faith-based groups in international assistance (Clarke 2008: 20–21).

Jones and Juul Petersen (2011) have reacted to the symbiotic relationship between academic writing and the machinery of development by identifying new and interesting avenues for research. First, rather than studying how religion can support development, they have proposed studying how development has helped transform religious life, especially through the NGO-isation of religion. Second, they have called for more studies based on research conducted directly in the field and with fewer pre-determined theoretical orientations, such as Erica Bornstein's (2002, 2005) work on World Vision in Zimbabwe. This recommendation also fits with a growing interest in an anthropological approach to the field of 'religion and development' (Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Hefferan et al. 2009). Such an approach should lead to conclusions based on the lived experience of individual societies, rather than on the presuppositions of the development industry. These two concerns lie at the heart of this book,

which is primarily based on first-hand ethnographic research conducted in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.

Indeed, the multiplication of fbNGOs throughout Africa has inspired a number of ethnographic studies on organisations active in various parts of the continent. Earlier studies mainly focused on central and southern Africa (Bagenda 1994; Barrow and Jennings 2001; Bornstein 2005; Sadouni 2007, 2009; Salih 2004;), or the Arab and Muslim countries of North Africa (Ben Néfissa et al. 2004; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003; Ghandour 2002; Sullivan 1995). Furthermore, the majority of empirical studies of fbNGOs in Africa have discussed transnational organisations such as Muslim Aid, Caritas, World Vision and the International Islamic Relief Organization (Benedetti 2006; Berger 2003; Ghandour 2002; Kaag 2007, 2008; Manji and O'Coill 2002). Studies focusing on locally initiated fbNGOs have only recently emerged (Becker 2015; Freeman 2012a; Jones 2015; Mittermaier 2014). These organisations are interesting precisely because they tend to adopt locally defined values and modes of operation, rather than those of international funding agencies, even if they sometimes align themselves with transnational networks and appropriate the discourses of international development. West Africa has been particularly well represented in this new wave of research (Couillard 2013; LeBlanc and Koenig 2014; Gomez-Perez 2011; Kaag and Saint-Lary 2011; Langewiesche 2011; LeBlanc et al. 2013; Sounaye 2011; Vitale 2012), and the ethnographic case studies featured in this book continue in the same streak by focusing on locally initiated fbNGOs. Bolstered by historical research, these case studies make it possible to better grasp the extent to which fbNGOs can develop and perform as civil society actors in the context of the NGO-isation of West African societies.

New Thoughts on Faith-Based NGOs in the Neoliberal Era

Anthropologists of religion in the Global South have frequently placed neoliberalism at the heart of their analysis. For instance, Hefferan et al. (2009) have analysed the relationship between fbNGOs and capitalism, discussing how some organisations fully integrate with the neoliberal economy while others represent poles of resistance. The same analytical framework has been adopted by Freeman (2012b) in studying the NGO-isation of Pentecostal churches in Africa. In this way, Evangelical NGOs have largely been seen as vehicles of neoliberalism, providing social services in place of the state and promoting an ethics of capitalist

accumulation. Other scholars (Barnett and Gross Stein 2012; Bornstein and Redfield 2011) have examined how religious faith supports humanitarian activities. This approach is very promising insofar as it refocuses attention on the intrinsic motivations of religious actors in the field of development. For example, several categories of individuals associated with fbNGOs – including donors, employees, volunteers and beneficiaries – have been studied regarding the extent to which they perceive their activities as a natural extension of their faith. This book builds on these recent works by seeking to better understand the connection between the NGO-isation and changes in religious and social activism.

While dynamics of the NGO-isation of political life in Africa and the increasingly religious nature of contexts for collective mobilisation have been highlighted by many authors, the articulation of these two processes has largely been ignored in studies on religion and development. The book directly tackles both of these issues, by seeking to understand how faith-based activism has been transformed by neoliberal ideology and involvement in socioeconomic development, and by showing how local actors see fbNGOs as a tool for social change in a neoliberal context. We posit that fbNGOs provide alternative spaces for social activism, especially in national contexts where authoritarian practices persist (Hilgers and Mazzocchetti 2010) and where many people are seeking to improve both their spiritual and material well-being. We therefore approach the study of fbNGOs by keeping in mind the dialectical relationship between, on the one hand, a dominant neoliberal ideology that encourages the privatisation, individualisation and NGO-isation of social activism, and, on the other hand, religious activists' use of neoliberal language and practices to help achieve social and religious change.

This perspective allows us to better understand the pressure on local faith-based organisations (FBOs) to align their activities with models promoted by global development institutions, as well as the growing religious influence in Burkinabe and Ivorian society. Indeed, NGO-isation appears to deeply change the way religious organisations operate. Most churches, missionary societies and Islamic associations were established for religious reasons, with the objective of reinforcing the faith of believers or gaining new converts. However, through involvement in socioeconomic development, they begin to follow a different logic. The logic of development values efficiency and recognition from outside of the faith community, while encouraging the recruitment of employees based on their professional abilities, as opposed to their religious credentials. The