



ISLAM IN ZAMBIA: SMALL AND NOTABLE

Interview with author Father Félix Phiri

ROME, APRIL 11, 2011 (zenit.org). The Muslim community in Zambia is small — but its presence has been increasingly felt in the last three decades, according to a professor from the [Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies](http://PontificalInstituteforArabicandIslamicStudies) who has written a book on the subject.

Missionary of Africa Father Félix Phiri authored the book *Muslim Associations and the Resurgence of Islam in Zambia* (FENZA with the Lembani Trust, 2008).

Father Phiri spoke with the television program "Where God Weeps" of the Catholic Radio and Television Network (CRTN) in cooperation with Aid to the Church in Need about his work and Islam in Zambia.

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Q: Father Félix, what inspired you to write this book?

Father Phiri: This book actually was a further development of research I had done for my doctoral thesis at the School of Oriental African Studies. I worked a lot with the Muslim community in Zambia to get the information and, as this was about them, I promised them I would give something back. So as a matter of intellectual honesty, I wrote it and I provided the possibility for them to see what they gave to me.

Q: Why particularly this book? What was your inspiration?

Father Phiri: This was mainly to bring out the existing energy of the Muslim community in our country. Just before I started this research there was lot of concern and fear about the Muslim community and much of it was not really based on objective information. People were speculating on what they were seeing and I found it an interesting theme to deal with for my research and also a way of bringing about a clear awareness of what this really was about in the country.

Q: Was there a person or perhaps an event that triggered this?

Father Phiri: Not really. As part of my training I had studied Islam with the intention of working among Muslims in North Africa and I had already done four years of missionary work in Tunisia. When I was offered the opportunity to do a doctorate, I started wondering



what subject I could work on; so, talking with some friends, somebody said: “Why don’t you write about Islam in Zambia?” To be honest I was surprised. There are no Muslims in Zambia except for a few here and there, but then they said: “The few who are there, we do not know much about them so it would be good if you can try to research that.”

Q: Your book is titled, in part, “The Resurgence of Islam,” and yet Islam makes up only 0.5% of the population. What is this resurgence — is it a growth of Islam?

Father Phiri: The term is deliberately chosen and is mainly related to the history of this faith community. Muslims were in the country before Christians, but their presence has only been fully felt in the past three decades or so. So this is a kind of resurgence in the sense that an already existing community becomes more effectively present — there is a new dynamism within this community. So this is what I meant by resurgence.

Q: You say that Islam arrived in Zambia before Christianity. Where did it come from?

Father Phiri: The first Muslims were Arab traders who after a long presence along the eastern coast of Africa slowly started venturing deeper into the continent. Mainly they came as traders who also happened to be Muslims. In their first incursions into the continent they did not spread Islam as such because they only had temporary settlements. But then, slowly with the passing of time, some of these settlements became permanent and in their dealing with the indigenous people — there were a few tribes that collaborated closely with them — some of these tribes converted in great numbers to Islam. This was the case for a good part of the Yao people from Malawi who are also a contributing factor to the presence of Islam in Zambia. So these are the first two communities to which we can attribute the coming of Islam in Zambia.

Q: Is money, for example for the construction of mosques, clinics and schools, coming from local sources or is it coming from Arab or other Muslim countries abroad?

Father Phiri: There is no clear evidence of any particular Muslim or Arab country that is directly sponsoring the development of Islam in the country other than, in an indirect way, the African Muslim Agency. This is an NGO, which somehow facilitates, among other things, the construction of mosques but more in the sense of coordinating the construction of religious buildings than directly sponsoring the spread of Islam. Within the Zambian Asian community — where most of them are involved in commerce so they have local resources and high organizational capacities — some of the simple structures that they have been able to put up especially in the rural areas have been funded locally. There are also some Muslim individuals outside the country who have resources and who offer some work of charity within Africa; these individual families come in and sponsor the building of orphanages and



the digging of wells. So there are resources that are coming from outside of the country — that is true — but not in a kind of coordinated manner; more in a spontaneous manner.

Q: Is charitable work a big part of Islam or is it something emulated from Christian charitable organizations? I'm curious because it seems a relatively new phenomenon.

Father Phiri: I think it is both. On one side you have the Christian model. [...]

The Muslim community then somehow replicates this model, but the deeper motivation is something that exists within Islam itself through what we call Zakat: every Muslim with a certain income is supposed to pay a certain amount ...

Q: Like our Christian understanding of tithing?

Father Phiri: In a way you can compare it to that ... so this brings together quite a number of resources. These resources are meant to help the poorer members of the community and traditionally you would answer the immediate needs of the people. But with the general development of society in Zambia, this is also translated in terms of providing education, health and development. So, in a way, they have not just copied our model because within their religious system there is the possibility of bringing together some resources and they are using these resources in a way similar to what Christians have done before.

Q: How are Christians responding to this? Are they worried?

Father Phiri: The Christian reaction has been one of mainly forgetting the recent history of how Christian missionaries came to the country. The Christian missionaries have done what the Muslims are now doing. Times have changed. So there have been a lot of allegations against the Muslim community saying that they are actually buying converts with material incentives.

Q: Is that a valid argument?

Father Phiri: In a sense it is a valid argument, but as I have said, times have changed so the Muslim community provides the same services that the Christian missionaries did before, which gained them a lot of followers. The Muslims are doing exactly the same thing. [...] The main critique has been that this type of approach is a way of taking advantage of the poor in society because people have material needs; so instead of freely giving them what they need and leaving it up to them to decide, somehow indirectly the way in which you provide the services makes the person feel that there is an expectation. This has been one of the criticisms leveled against the Muslim community — to say that they are taking advantage of the poor of society and, by providing these services, getting new converts.



Q: This raises the question of how valid that life choice is. If it is out of a moment of convenience or need, how deep does that faith really enter the person?

Father Phiri: In a sense that depends on different individuals because, generally, in Islam there is no catechism so to speak. If you have the opportunity, you can be prepared and taught what Islam is before you convert, but in most cases conversion is more or less instant. You learn about being Muslim only after you have converted. So quite a number of these people only discover afterward that actually they have become Muslims. They also realize that the help that is offered is minimal; sometimes it can be reduced to a blanket for example — though that means quite a lot to somebody in a rural area especially during the cold season — but then the hope is that by continuously attending the meetings and appearing to be Muslim they might receive more help. So eventually they start learning about becoming a Muslim and they start learning about praying.

When other people, who are not falling for this type of material enticement, start to question their fellow villagers and ask them why they are being led to another religion because of material enticement, to protect their dignity they will start saying that it is not just material enticement, it is because they are convinced. This is to convince those who are questioning and criticizing them that they are in fact serious Muslims. So in the end the whole process can actually lead to a deeper conversion and deeper belief, although there are some people, of course — those who are only attracted by material interest — who, when they don't see anything coming their way anymore, they leave. So it is a way of testing.

Q: What is the response of Christians in Zambia? Some African countries have witnessed clashes between Muslims and Christians. Are they concerned?

Father Phiri: What has happened so far is mostly more visibility of an already existing community. There has been a long history of coexistence. Many such fears would come more from what is happening elsewhere than what is happening locally because the types of Muslims that most people are acquainted with are distant family members [...] so there is no immediate fear of the Muslims in the country and how they are developing. There is, however, an uneasy association with forms of extremism being experienced elsewhere. In a sense, the Christian community, the Catholic Church in particular, has expressed caution saying that Islam is becoming visible and is growing. What is striking, however — and I think much of it is based on a kind of ... I don't know if I call it prejudice — is that at the same time that a few mosques have been built around the country, the Jehovah Witnesses have built four times as many Kingdom Halls — and that doesn't seem to disturb anybody, partly because I think they are understood to be on the Christians' side.



Q: How is the Catholic Church trying to work with Muslims?

Father Phiri: There have been a few efforts here and there to reach out to the Muslim community. As far as the local Muslim communities themselves, some of them are very open to reaching out to Christians, and to the Catholic Church in particular, but at the moment there are no real permanent structures or means of coordinating a close collaboration between the two communities.

Q: The challenge is that both are missionary communities. Where do we see this going? How do we come together to avoid a potential crisis?

Father Phiri: I still feel that within the Muslim community there are changes taking place, especially within the Zambian context, where Christian converts have links with Christians, so that in itself helps to generate a more moderate attitude toward the Christians and it is actually these converts who are very helpful in making these bridges.

Q: What was the effect of the Pope's Regensburg address on this whole question? The Holy Father was criticized, but in the end some Muslim scholars wrote a common letter requesting dialogue. How important was this?

Father Phiri: The dialogue came mainly as an aftermath of the Muslim reaction and the initiative that was taken by the 38 and then the 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders; that step in itself tried to separate itself from the more or less mainstream reaction to the Pope's speech. So, in a sense, that gave a lot of hope within the Muslim community: people who are willing to have a different approach from what is generally experienced in extremist groups. I think that these are the people who need encouragement from non-Muslims because they put themselves on the line, because there are people who do not think like them and who criticize them for responding positively to a non-Muslim call for either dialogue or a review of a certain way of being in today's world, for Islam in particular.

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This interview was conducted by Mark Riedemann for "Where God Weeps", a weekly TV & radio show produced by Catholic Radio & Television Network in conjunction with the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need.

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On the Net:

Where God Weeps: <https://wherogodweeps.org/wp/>

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