Evangelical Christian–Muslim Relations in Zimbabwe

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Editor’s Note: this essay provides a powerful illustration of the complexity of interreligious and intercultural relations in regional contexts. The story is quite instructive. We are grateful to Munetsi Ruzivo for bringing it to our readers. (Note that the word "halal" denotes food products prepared according to the requirements of Muslim law.)

INTRODUCTION

This article examines relations between Muslims and Evangelical Christians in post-independent Zimbabwe. The relations between the small Muslim community in Zimbabwe and the larger Christian community became acrimonious when evangelical Christians, under the banner of their umbrella organisation the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, mounted a campaign that was aimed at forcing the Government to stop employing Muslims in the slaughter of beef that was to be consumed by the largely Christian majority. The campaign also encouraged Christians not to buy halal certified products in supermarkets. Islamic Scholars threatened to withdraw the license certifying meat products in Zimbabwean as halal, a move which would have

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had a negative impact on Government export interests in the Arab world. This was the first confrontation of its kind in the history of Muslim-Christian relations in Zimbabwe. Further confrontations included the teaching of Bible Knowledge and the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in Government controlled schools. The article will further examine causes of the tensions that resulted between the three parties – Government, Christians and Muslims – and articulate the concerns of each of the parties that were involved in this saga.

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THE HALAL MEAT ISSUE

Zimbabwe is a multi-religious country with Christians constituting 70% of the population and African Traditional Religions 24%. Muslims make up about 2% and other religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and the Baha’i faith account for about 1%. Relations between Christians and Muslims were amicable for many years until the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) proposed a boycott of all halal meat products in 1996. The Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe argued that their freedom of choice and conscience was being violated when meat producers such as the Cold Storage Commission butchers and supermarkets supply non-Muslim consumers with halal meat prescribed for Muslims in their holy book the Qur’an. Secondly they noted that Muslims who constitute 2% of the religious population in Zimbabwe should not be allowed to promote halal meat as the only choice in the meat supply. Thirdly, they argued that Zimbabwans increasingly recognise that buying and eating halal meat products is a religiously loaded decision that sponsors the strengthening and spread of Islam, a religion associated with violence and political unrest in Islamic countries. Fourthly, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe gave an ultimatum to the abattoirs that they stop supplying halal meat by the 20th December 1996, with failure to comply resulting in a boycott by the Evangelical fellowship of Zimbabwe.

In a document entitled The Rationale for the Anti Halal Meat, a group of Christians who called themselves Concerned Christians of Zimbabwe (CCZ), wrote that Muslims in Zimbabwe constitute 2-3 percent of the population and that Christians find it unacceptable that meat suppliers maintain the status quo dating back to about the 1980s when halal meat products monopolised the supplier supply lines. Quotations from the Qur’an 2:173, 02 and Q5: 4:02,173 were offered to demonstrate that halal meat was not intended for Christians but for Muslims. The CCZ made clear that it was understandable that Muslims had chosen to submit to the teachings of their prophet Muhammad and had made choice only to consume halal meat. They also stated
If Muslims were allowed to press their religious ideology through the provision of halal meat, then in the future they might come to dominate and monopolise national and political institutions in the country. That they understood the concerns of certain developed countries over sanitation in some developing countries. These concerns has led to a preference for carefully slaughtered halal meat in such situations. The CCZ thus wrote:

_The Muslims have successfully marketed a religious slaughter ceremony by appealing to the need to prevent the congealing of blood in the animal or bird thus risking health standards. It is also understandable that Islamic countries – which according to the Islamic faith, should strengthen and sponsor the spread of Islam throughout the world – will demand only halal meat products for their imported quotas. It is however totally unacceptable that, in a country such as Zimbabwe, where sanitary abattoirs conditions are generally excellent by international standards, the local meat producers should be obliged or pressured to be certified halal meat suppliers, and to offer only halal meat to consumers. By doing this, meat products suppliers are violating the majority’s freedom of choice and conscience in a democratic religious pluralistic society. If Muslims submit to Islam by not eating meat over which a name other than Allah’s has been pronounced, why believe that Shona religionists, Jews, Christians; etc, do not equally deserve freedom of conscience and choice.”_²

The CCZ were alarmed by the religio-political significance of unchallenged prerogatives assumed by the Islamic community in Zimbabwe: to define, determine and prescribe meat products for the millions of Zimbabweans who are not Muslims. Would not this involve undue tacit government of the strengthening of Islam in Zimbabwe?³

The CCZ were alarmed at this seeming encroachment of Shari’a law. If Muslims were allowed to press their religious ideology through the provision of halal meat, then in the future they might come to dominate and monopolise national and political institutions in the country. The CCZ concluded that in a country where Muslims were in the majority they would not endorse a secular state.⁴

Doctor Ephraim Mandivenga, a Lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe in the Department of Religious Studies Classics and Philosophy, tried to clarify the issue in the Sunday Mail of 16 May 1999. In his article he says that in October 1976 the Cold Storage Commission (CSC) approached the Zimbabwe Council of Islamic Scholars (ZICS) requesting that the Commission’s...
meat products be recognised by the Council as halal meat for export purposes. The contract entered into by the two parties ensured that all their abattoirs would uncompromisingly employ the halal method of slaughter.5

This method allows the maximum drainage of the animal’s blood, with the result that the animal experiences less pain. In the process, the slaughterer utters the words, “In the name of Allah most great,” before cutting the throat of the animal. The purpose of these words is to ask Allah, the origin of life, for permission to take the life of his creature and to remind the slaughterer not to be cruel in performing his task.6

The arrangement between the CSC and the ZICS had remained binding until 1996 when some Christian leaders protested against what they called a gross violation of human rights: the practice of the halal rituals without the consent of all Zimbabweans. The issue raged in the media. The principal complaint was that the halal meat producers were addressing the religious requirements of only 3% of the total population at the expense of the democratic rights of 97% of the population. In other words, the religious concerns of a minority were being allowed to prejudice the constitutional rights of the religious majority in a matter concerning a food commodity commonly used by both groups. Muslims responded that they were not imposing their religion on non-Muslim consumers; they were just protecting their religious interests. They argued that the Cold Storage Commission (CSC) that had initially approached them regarding the halal slaughter of animals meant for export. Muslims had not initiated the contract. Finally, they insisted that the most fundamental elements in the halal slaughter demanded by Islam are hygiene, human health and consideration for the animal.7

According to Doctor Mandivenga, the possible effect of the arrangement on non-Muslim beef eating religious groups was at the time of the initial contract probably not addressed by the parties to the contract. As the issue became enflamed, Christian leaders found no fault in the method of slaughtering except for the words uttered during the process. The CSC then announced that the ritual prayer would not be said in the slaughtering of animals. The Council of
Islamic Scholars (ZCIS) approached the CSC for clarification of the issue. The chief representative of CSC said that he had been misquoted and that from January 1997 the CSC would introduce two methods of slaughter – halal and non-halal. Product labelling would be revised accordingly. The Islamic scholars in that matter responded by publishing in the newspapers that the omission of the ritual prayer and the labelling of certain meat products as halal and non-halal were sufficient grounds for withdrawing their licence. It would be difficult for Muslims to distinguish halal and non-halal meat. Surely the labelling would be prone to error, thus exposing Muslims to the haram (forbidden) meat.8

When the ZCIS threatened to cease certification of CSC products, the Commission complained that its international and local markets would be greatly affected by the move. The company could lose millions of dollars.

It seems the CSC had rushed prematurely to stop the ritual prayer accompanying the slaughter of animals. For the first time since the signing of the original contract, the export market began to question the status of Zimbabwe beef products.

Next, the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe (CCZ) entered the fray and suggested that it would mediate the conflict between CSC and the CIS. Meanwhile the Consumer Council made adequate labelling of meat products mandatory. For 20 years there had been no reported complaints from non-Muslims. The controversy started in 1996 with some Christian leaders complaining that meat emanating from CSC abattoirs – meat they had previously regarded as religiously neutral – had in fact been subjected to Islamic slaughtering rituals. But to whom should the complaint have been made? If the majority of the consumers remained ignorant of the halal meat, whose responsibility was it to educate them? Clearly, the fault resided with the CSC, since that had approached the Muslims to set up the halal agreement. In real terms, it was the CSC that was benefiting from the arrangement.9

FEARS OF SHARI’A

One may ask why this debate generated such attention in the first place. It turns out that the Consumer Council (CCZ) was circulating a document entitled Zimbabwe a Muslim State: Is this Possible? In this paper, the enforcement of the Shari’a Law is described as the path to the establishment of Allah’s rule on earth. The document goes on to assert the aim of Islam is to subjugate parts of the world not yet converted to the law of Allah. Islam’s aim, supposedly, is to rule and to win territories and not human hearts. According to the same document, Islamic state leaders met in Nigeria had agreed:

To eradicate in all its forms and ramifications all non-Muslim religions (such religion shall include Christianity and other tribal modes of worship unacceptable to Islam);
To ensure the ultimate replacement of all western forms of legal and judicial systems with Muslim Sharia law; To ensure that all only Muslim are elected to all political posts; To ensure the appointment of only Muslims into strategic National and International posts; To undertake vigorous human resources development programmes; To establish Tertiary and Vocational centres that are designed to train Da’wah (Muslim missionary) workers; To support, enhance and coordinate Da’wah work all over Africa and propagate the knowledge of Islam throughout the continent; To cooperate with other National or International Islamic organisations for the attainment of its stated objectives.¹⁰

Noting that conversion to Christianity in Islamic countries is not allowed, the document also accuses Muslims of making subtle attempts to entrench Islam through the building of mosques, granting scholarships, providing food and relief aid in Nigeria as well as in numerous other sub-Saharan states.¹¹

In Zimbabwe, the writer of this incendiary document claimed that the Government signed deals with the Malaysian and Iranian governments, arguing that the compacts constituted a surreptitious strategy for the propagation of Islam. Muslim involvement in events and projects across Zimbabwe was cited as further evidence of conspiracy. All Muslim-owned butcheries, mosques, Islamic organisations and schools were listed to underscore the allegation that Islam was a serious cause of concern for Zimbabwe.

THE BIBLE KNOWLEDGE ISSUE

In the year 2000, the ministry of Education, Sports and Culture decided to consider dropping the Bible Knowledge sequence from the school curriculum and replacing it with Moral Education. The decision proved offensive many Christians, the same group that had raised concerns the issue of halal meat. Christians began mobilising against the idea. Was the ministry going to allow Islam to be propagated at the expense of Christianity? In the view of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), the Government had sinister motives. Clearly it sought to curry favor with Islamic countries by eliminating the Bible Knowledge courses from schools.¹²

Members of the EFZ met with ministry officials to register their concerns. The EFZ and the Association of Secondary School Headmasters described the move as retrogressive. They called for greater
consultation on the issue. The Reverend Wutaunashe, the Overseer of the Family of God and a former president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe framed the issue for Christians. “The problem is that even the Minister benefitted from growing up under a predominantly Christian society and he now wants to deprive the future generations who need it most.” In this view, if the educational plan were to be put to a referendum the Minister would lose.

Sylvester Matshaka, the President of the National Association of Secondary School Headmasters, also objected to the Ministry’s plan, arguing that, “we already have two Muslim schools in the country and I think we are better off with bible knowledge as a subject.” Arguing that Christianity and African traditional religion were the country’s two principal faith traditions he challenged the Ministry’s concerns about Muslims and Hindus. Representatives of minority religions had sought action from the government on the grounds that the teaching of Bible Knowledge amounted to making Zimbabwe a Christian state. Evangelical Christians, on the other hand, feared that the government was turning the country into an Islamic state. First, halal meat had been forced on the Zimbabwean people violating their freedom choice. Scrapping the Bible from the curriculum was another ploy to pave the way for Islam.

WHAT KIND OF STATE?

My own research, however, suggests that that the Government had no sinister motive either on the halal meat issue or on the proposal to scrap Bible Knowledge in schools. The Government and the Cold Storage Commission had sanctioned the halal method of slaughter
in order to make Zimbabwean export beef acceptable to the European Union and the Muslim world. Moreover, the Ministry of Education had clearly made the suggestion without outside influence. However, the two issues raised constitutional questions regarding church and state relations. If Zimbabwe is a secular state, why did it allow Muslims to dominate all the abattoirs? Why, on the other hand, did the Government permit the state-sponsored teaching of Christianity and Bible Knowledge? It would seem that the relevant clauses in the constitution of Zimbabwe demand reinterpretation. Given the halal saga and the issue of removing Bible study and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, it would seem that the Zimbabwean Government has not operated in a fully secular way. It can be argued that the Ministry of Education was moving toward a stricter interpretation of secularism but reforming policy in government-operated schools.

In the same year that the Bible issue became contentious, the Government sought to rewrite the Zimbabwean constitution. Various briefs were to be submitted to the commissioners on matters pertaining to the proposed new constitution. It was in this context that the EFZ launched an acerbic campaign for the declaration of Zimbabwe as Christian State. Such a move, they maintained, would aid in halting the advance of Islam in Zimbabwe and indeed across Southern Africa. All church bodies were invited to submit their views. The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference insisted that there should be no official religion of the state.\(^{16}\)

The EFZ petitioned the state that the new constitution uphold the concept of a Christian nation, while still whilst providing for freedom of conscience, association and religion. Evangelicals insisted that the noble aspirations of our nation couldn't be achieved without laying a foundation for godliness, morality and compassion grounded in the bold step of acknowledging that our nation is a Christian nation. Further they argued that since Christians made up 70% of the total population of the country their religion should be formally recognised. If 70% can elect a Government why can't the same government recognise the people who elected them? The EFZ maintained that the Christian faith has been a major pillar of our educational, charitable and welfare institutions, economy, politics, and spiritual and physical development. Several letters of support where written by evangelicals enthusiastically urging that Zimbabwe be declared a Christian nation. Counter letters also appeared in the national media, dismissing the EFZ arguments. The issue was put to rest when a Government sponsored referendum was defeated.

In 2003, Muslims petitioned the state over Christian teaching in the schools. The Islamic Covenant of the Strict Observance (ICSO), which brings together parents of Muslim children attending schools in Harare, argued that the current school curriculum contravened section 19 of the constitution of Zimbabwe, which guarantees religious freedom and freedom of conscience. The petition was sent to the Attorney
General’s Office. In it, Muslims argued that Zimbabwe’s school calendar made provisions for only Christian holidays without any consideration of other religions and that their children’s consciences suffered when they were left to read in the libraries when their counterparts were taken for Christian instruction. They suggested that their children should be instructed in their own faith. Leaving them behind was discriminatory and calculated to suppress their religious beliefs. Grade seven examinations were cited as parochial, since they covered only Christian belief.

The recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in schools was also cited as a gross violation of religious freedom and the right of conscience. Finally, the government was given 60 days to rectify the anomaly or face further court action.¹⁷

What is most intriguing is that the complaint about the Lord’s Prayer and the teaching of Bible Knowledge in schools is essentially equivalent to the Christian objection to halal meat production and the Muslim prayer offered in the process. It’s clear that mutual suspicion is a direct consequence of the lack of engagement and dialogue between the two faiths.

The two issues serve to highlight the urgent need for development of an Interreligious Dialogue Curriculum.

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in Zimbabwe’s tertiary institutions. Conflicts such as these normally begin at lower levels before they engulf an entire nation. Our educational institutions must come up with interreligious curricula that will enable students – the leaders of tomorrow – to know the belief systems of religions other than their own. Lack of knowledge breeds suspicion, and worse.

NOTES

1 “Target 2000”, in W. Mutaris, *Should Zimbabwe be Declared a Christian State?* BA Hons. Dissertation, UZ 2000 p. 23. Muslim population statistics vary from 200,000 to 1.2 or 1.5 million. Cf., http://www.islamicpopulation.com/zimbabwe_muslim.html, 14 August 2007. This website argues that there were 1.2 million Muslims prior to British occupation but that their numbers have plummeted to 200,000.


3 Ibid.

4 *Sunday Mail*, 16 May 1999.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 *Zimbabwe: a Muslim State: is this possible?* Unpaged flyer, 1996.

11 Ibid.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 W. Mutaris, op. cit., p. 43.