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Islam's 'Public Enemy #1'

Coptic priest Zakaria Botros fights fire with fire.

By Raymond Ibrahim

Though he is little known in the West, Coptic priest Zakaria Botros — named Islam's "Public Enemy #1" by the Arabic newspaper, *al-Insan al-Jadid* — has been making waves in the Islamic world. Along with fellow missionaries — mostly Muslim converts — he appears frequently on the Arabic channel *al-Hayat* (i.e., "Life TV"). There, he addresses controversial topics of theological significance — free from the censorship imposed by Islamic authorities or self-imposed through fear of the zealous mobs who fulminated against the infamous cartoons of Mohammed. Botros's excursions on little-known but embarrassing aspects of Islamic law and tradition have become a thorn in the side of Islamic leaders throughout the Middle East.

Botros is an unusual figure onscreen: robed, with a huge cross around his neck, he sits with both the Koran and the Bible in easy reach. Egypt's Copts — members of one of the oldest Christian communities in the Middle East — have in many respects come to personify the demeaning Islamic institution of "dhimmitude" (which demands submissiveness from non-Muslims, in accordance with Koran 9:29). But the fiery Botros does not submit, and minces no words. He has famously made of Islam "ten demands" whose radical nature he uses to highlight Islam's own radical demands on non-Muslims.

The result? Mass conversions to Christianity — if clandestine ones. The very public conversion of high-profile Italian journalist Magdi Allam — who was baptized by Pope Benedict in Rome on Saturday — is only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, Islamic cleric Ahmad al-Qatani stated on *al-Jazeera* TV a while back that some six million Muslims convert to Christianity annually, many of them persuaded by Botros's public ministry. More recently, *al-Jazeera* noted Life TV's "unprecedented evangelical raid" on the Muslim world. Several factors account for the Botros phenomenon.

First, the new media — particularly satellite TV and the Internet (the main conduits for Life TV) — have made it possible for questions about Islam to be made public without fear of reprisal. It is unprecedented to hear Muslims from around the Islamic world — even from Saudi Arabia, where imported Bibles are confiscated and burned — call into the show to argue with Botros and his colleagues, and sometimes, to accept Christ.

Secondly, Botros's broadcasts are in Arabic — the language of some 200 million people, most of them Muslim. While several Western writers have published persuasive critiques of Islam, their arguments go largely unnoticed in the Islamic world. Botros's mastery of classical Arabic not only allows him to reach a broader audience, it enables him to delve deeply into the voluminous Arabic literature — much of it untapped by Western writers who rely on translations — and so report to the average Muslim on the discrepancies and affronts to moral common sense found within this vast corpus.

A third reason for Botros's success is that his polemical technique has proven irrefutable. Each

of his episodes has a theme — from the pressing to the esoteric — often expressed as a question (e.g., “Is jihad an obligation for all Muslims?”; “Are women inferior to men in Islam?”; “Did Mohammed say that adulterous female monkeys should be stoned?” “Is drinking the urine of prophets salutary according to sharia?”). To answer the question, Botros meticulously quotes — always careful to give sources and reference numbers — from authoritative Islamic texts on the subject, starting from the Koran; then from the canonical sayings of the prophet — the *Hadith*; and finally from the words of prominent Muslim theologians past and present — the illustrious *ulema*.

Typically, Botros's presentation of the Islamic material is sufficiently detailed that the controversial topic is shown to be an airtight aspect of Islam. Yet, however convincing his proofs, Botros does not flatly conclude that, say, universal jihad or female inferiority are basic tenets of Islam. He treats the question as still open — and humbly invites the *ulema*, the revered articulators of sharia law, to respond and show the error in his methodology. He does demand, however, that their response be based on “*al-dalil we al-burhan*,” — “evidence and proof,” one of his frequent refrains — not shout-downs or sophistry.

More often than not, the response from the *ulema* is deafening silence — which has only made Botros and Life TV more enticing to Muslim viewers. The *ulema* who *have* publicly addressed Botros's conclusions often find themselves forced to agree with him — which has led to some amusing (and embarrassing) moments on live Arabic TV.

Botros spent three years bringing to broad public attention a scandalous — and authentic — hadith stating that women should “breastfeed” strange men with whom they must spend any amount of time. A leading hadith scholar, Abd al-Muhdi, was confronted with this issue on the live talk show of popular Arabic host Hala Sirhan. Opting to be truthful, al-Muhdi confirmed that going through the motions of breastfeeding adult males is, according to sharia, a legitimate way of making married women “forbidden” to the men with whom they are forced into contact — the logic being that, by being “breastfed,” the men become like “sons” to the women and therefore can no longer have sexual designs on them.

To make matters worse, Ezzat Atiyya, head of the Hadith department at al-Azhar University — Sunni Islam's most authoritative institution — went so far as to issue a fatwa legitimizing “*Rida' al-Kibir*” (sharia's term for “breastfeeding the adult”), which prompted such outrage in the Islamic world that it was subsequently recanted.

Botros played the key role in exposing this obscure and embarrassing issue and forcing the *ulema* to respond. Another guest on Hala Sirhan's show, Abd al-Fatah, slyly indicated that the entire controversy was instigated by Botros: “I know you all [fellow panelists] watch *that* channel and *that* priest and that none of *you* [pointing at Abd al-Muhdi] can ever respond to him, since he always documents his sources!”

Incapable of rebutting Botros, the only strategy left to the *ulema* (aside from a rumored \$5-million bounty on his head) is to ignore him. When his name is brought up, they dismiss him as a troublemaking liar who is backed by — who else? — international “Jewry.” They could easily refute his points, they insist, but will not deign to do so. That strategy may satisfy some Muslims, but others are demanding straightforward responses from the *ulema*.

The most dramatic example of this occurred on another famous show on the international station, *Iqra*. The host, Basma — a conservative Muslim woman in full hijab — asked two

prominent ulema, including Sheikh Gamal Qutb, one-time grand mufti of al-Azhar University, to explain the legality of the Koranic verse (4:24) that permits men to freely copulate with captive women. She repeatedly asked: “According to sharia, is slave-sex still applicable?” The two ulema would give no clear answer — dissembling here, going off on tangents there. Basma remained adamant: Muslim youth were confused, and needed a response, since “there is a *certain* channel and a *certain* man who has discussed this issue over twenty times and has received no response from you.”

The flustered Sheikh Qutb roared, “low-life people like that must be totally ignored!” and stormed off the set. He later returned, but refused to admit that Islam indeed permits sex-slaves, spending his time attacking Botros instead. When Basma said “Ninety percent of Muslims, including myself, do not understand the issue of concubinage in Islam and are having a hard time swallowing it,” the sheikh responded, “You don’t need to understand.” As for Muslims who watch and are influenced by Botros, he barked, “Too bad for them! If my son is sick and chooses to visit a mechanic, not a doctor — that’s *his* problem!”

But the ultimate reason for Botros’s success is that — unlike his Western counterparts who criticize Islam from a political standpoint — his primary interest is the salvation of souls. He often begins and concludes his programs by stating that he loves all Muslims as fellow humans and wants to steer them away from falsehood to Truth. To that end, he doesn’t just expose troubling aspects of Islam. Before concluding every program, he quotes pertinent biblical verses and invites all his viewers to come to Christ.

Botros’s motive is not to incite the West against Islam, promote “Israeli interests,” or “demonize” Muslims, but to draw Muslims away from the dead legalism of sharia to the spirituality of Christianity. Many Western critics fail to appreciate that, to disempower radical Islam, something theocentric and spiritually satisfying — not secularism, democracy, capitalism, materialism, feminism, etc. — *must* be offered in its place. The truths of one religion can only be challenged and supplanted by the truths of another. And so Father Zakaria Botros has been fighting fire with fire.

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