

How Egyptian Coptic Church Priest uses TV and radio to reach Muslims with the gospel.

Taken from Joel Rosenberg's remarkable book, "Inside the Revolution"

YOU HAVE PROBABLY never heard of Father Zakaria Botros.

But you need to know his story. He is far and away the most watched and most effective Arab evangelist operating in the Muslim world, and he is by far the most controversial. I think of him as the Rush Lim-baugh of the Revivalists-he is funny, feisty, brilliant, opinionated, and provocative. But rather than preaching the gospel of conservatism, he is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. And his enemies do not simply want to silence him. They want to assassinate him.

An Arabic newspaper has named Botros "Islam's Public Enemy #1". The week I interviewed Botros by phone from a secure, undisclosed location, he told me that he had just learned that an al Qaeda Web site had posted his photograph and named him one of the "most wanted" infidels in the world.² The Radicals have even put a bounty on his head. The Christian Broadcasting Network reported the figure was as high as \$60 million.³ Botros does not know for certain. But just to put that in context, the U.S. bounty on Osama bin Laden's head is \$25 million.

Why are the Radicals so enraged by a Coptic priest from Egypt who is in his seventies. Because Botros is waging an air war against them and is winning.

MUST-SEE TV

Using state-of-the art satellite technology to bypass the efforts of Islamic governments to keep the gospel out of their countries, Botros is directly challenging the claims of Muhammad to be a prophet and the claims of the Qur'an to be God's word. He systematically deconstructs Muhammad's life, story by story, pointing out character flaws and sinful behavior. He carefully deconstructs the Qur'an, verse by verse, citing contradictions and inconsistencies. And not only does he explain without apology what he believes is wrong with Islam; he goes on to teach from the Bible why Jesus loves Muslims and why He is so ready to forgive them and adopt them into His family, no matter who they are or what they have done.

If Botros were doing this in a corner, or on some cable-access channel where no one saw him or cared, that would be one thing. But his ninety-minute program-a combination of preaching, teaching, and answering questions from (often irate) callers all over the world-has become "must-see TV" throughout the Muslim world. It is replayed four times a week in Arabic, his native language, on a satellite television network called Al Hayat ("Life TV"). It can be seen in every country in North Africa, the Middle East, and central Asia. It can also be seen throughout North America, Europe, and even as far away as Australia and New Zealand. And not only can it be seen in so many places, it is seen-by an estimated 50 million Muslims a day.

At the same time, Botros is getting millions of hits on his multiple Web sites in multiple languages. There, Muslims can read his sermons and study through an archive of answers to frequently asked questions. They can also enter a live chat room called "Pal Chat," where they are not only permitted but encouraged to ask their toughest questions to trained online counselors, many of whom are Muslim converts to Christianity who understand exactly where the questioners are coming from and the struggles they face.

As a result, "Father Zakaria"-who has been on the air only since 2003-has practically become a household name in the Muslim world. Millions hate him, to be sure, but they are watching. They are listening. They are processing what he is saying, and they are talking about him with their friends and family.

When Botros challenges Radical clerics to answer his many refutations of Islam and defend the Qur'an, millions wait to see how the fundamentalists will respond. But they rarely do. They prefer to attack Botros rather than answer him.

Yet the more the Radicals attack him, the more well-known he becomes. The more well-known he becomes, the more Muslims feel compelled to tune in. And as more Muslims tune in, more are coming to the conclusion that he is right and are in turn choosing to become followers of Jesus Christ.

Botros estimates at least a thousand Muslims a month pray to receive Christ with his telephone counselors. Some of them pray to receive Christ live on the air with Botros. And this surely is the tip of the iceberg, as it represents only those who are able to get through on the jammed phone lines. There simply are not enough trained counselors to handle all the calls.

Many leading Arab evangelists I interviewed for Inside the Revolution said they believe God is using Botros to help bring in the greatest harvest of Muslim converts to Christianity in the history of Christendom. Botros refuses to take any credit, saying he is just one voice in a movement of millions. But he is certainly excited by the trend lines. He does see more Muslims turning to Christ than ever before, and he told me he has cited Epicenter (Joel Rosenberg's Outstanding book) at least three times as evidence of the enormous numbers of conversions taking place.

What's more, he vows to keep preaching the gospel so long as the Lord Jesus gives him breath. John 3:16-"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son [Jesus], that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."-is the verse that drives Botros. He believes passionately that God loves the whole world, including each and every Muslim. He believes that

"whoever" believes in the lordship of Jesus Christ-Jew, Muslim, or otherwise-will, in fact, receive eternal life. He does not believe all Muslims are Radicals, but he does believe all Muslims are spiritually lost, and he desperately wants to help them find their way to forgiveness and reconciliation with the God who made them and loves them.

"I believe this is the hand of God," Botros told me when we spoke by phone in September 2008. "He is directing me. He shows me what

to say. He shows me what to write on the Web sites. He is showing me more and more how to use technology to reach people with his message of redemption."

TWICE IMPRISONED

Zakarja Botros was born in Egypt in 1934 to a Christian family that raised him to love Christ with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength and to study the Bible for himself. "Since I was a child I loved Jesus and loved to worship Him," he said, sadness struck at a young age, however, when his older brother Fuad, was murdered by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. "But it did not cause me to be against Muslims," Botros said. "I know he was a believer. I will see him again in heaven."

What did affect Botros was a high school teacher who was "a very fanatic Muslim." The teacher was "always asking me difficult questions about the Bible" and mocking Christianity. "I started to study Islam to answer him. I read the Qur'an and other books. And then I became a Sunday school teacher in my church, and I began teaching the youth about what was wrong about Islam and what was right about the Bible."

In 1959, at the age of twenty-five, Botros was ordained as a priest in the Egyptian Coptic church, one of the oldest Christian Orthodox denominations in the Middle East, started in Alexandria, Egypt, by the apostle Mark. "After I became a priest, I began to print lectures and essays explaining how to refute Islam and lead people to Jesus," Botros said. By the time he was arrested and imprisoned for his faith in 1981, he had baptized five hundred believers.

But it was not enough. Botros wanted to have more impact. When he was released from prison after a year, he went back to preaching the gospel and refuting Islam. By 1989, the Egyptian authorities had had enough. They not only arrested him; they sentenced him to life in prison.

After much prayer-his own and the prayers of many of his disciples and friends-Botros was surprised when the authorities made an offer he could not refuse: they would set him free, but only if he left Egypt and went into exile, never to return. He agreed and moved to Melbourne, Australia, where he practiced his faith freely until moving in 1992 to England, where he lived eleven years.

It was there, amid a British society that was rapidly becoming home to Muslim immigrants from all over the world, that Botros began praying about ways to reach more Muslims. He could not bear the thought of speaking to only a few at a time. But he also knew that for security purposes he needed to have a way to get "in the face" of a Muslim without literally being in his face.

In early 2001, the Lord answered his prayers. Someone suggested he set up an Internet chat room where he could have online conversations with Muslims without subjecting himself to physical danger. In April of that year, "Pal Talk" was born.

Soon a producer for Al Hayat heard the growing buzz about Botros and invited him to be a guest on the network. The interview went well. Botros was asked back again and again. In time, Al Hayat executives asked him to host his own weekly program, teaching the Bible and challenging the Qur'an. After much prayer, Botros agreed.

"Truth Debate" debuted on September 1, 2003. At first, the show was taped. "We used to record twenty episodes in a week and they would air them later," Botros recalls. But in February 2008, the decision was made to go live for ninety minutes every Friday night during prime time (9 p.m.) in the Middle East. While a tape of the show was replayed multiple times throughout the week, it was the live broadcast airing on the Muslim Sabbath when families are home sitting around their televisions that changed everything. The audience grew rapidly, and so did the controversy.

"It is much more effective now," Botros said with palpable excitement in his voice. "Now I'm in direct contact with people. They ask me questions in front of the whole Muslim world. They debate me. They challenge me. And then they accept Christ on air. Just this morning, a man named Ahmed prayed with me to become a follower of Jesus. He said, 'I need You, God. I accept You now!... What a joy! That is why I do this.'"

DIRECTLY CHALLENGING ISLAM

Botros pulls no punches on the air or off. He tells Muslims what he believes is wrong with their religion, no matter how painful it may be to hear.

During a 2005 show, for example, he blasted Muslims for abusing children by telling them lies. "Children are brainwashed that Islam is the truth, that Mohammad is the last prophet, that the Christians are infidels, and that the Jews are infidels," he said. "They repeat it constantly."

In that same show, he blasted Islamic leaders for historically spreading their religion by violence rather than by persuasion. "Islam, as portrayed in The Encyclopedia of Islam, in the Qur'an and the Hadith, was spread by means of the sword," Botros said on the show. "The sword played a major role in spreading Islam in the past, and it is the sword that preserves Islam today. Islam relies upon jihad in spreading the religion/ This is very clear in the encyclopedia. This appears in section 11, page 3,245. It says: 'Spreading Islam by means of the sword is a duty incumbent upon all Muslims.' Thus, Islam is spread by means of the sword."4 At the same time, Botros also tells

Muslims the truth about just how costly it can be in human terms to convert to Christianity, even though that is precisely what he wants them to do. "Another thing [you need to know] is the punishment for apostasy," he said. "{The Encyclopedia of Islam says that] 'the punishment of killing any Muslim who abandons Islam is one of the most important factors terrifying all Muslim. He does not dare question the truth of Islam, so that his thoughts will not lead him to abandon Islam. In such a case, he would receive the punishment for apostasy: He would lose his life, and his property.'"

Botros said this reminded him of a true story he once heard about a Muslim cleric trying to spread Islam throughout Africa. "They reached a certain place in order to spread Islam, and they asked one of the locals, 'Do you prefer to worship one god and have four wives, or to worship three gods and have one wife?' We, of course, don't worship three gods, but that's what they said. The African said, 'I like four women, and I don't care which god. I want four women.'

"So they told him to say the shahada [the prayer to become a Muslim], and he did. Then they told him he had to be circumcised in order 'to become a Muslim. He asked, 'Do I really have to? I am a grown man.' They answered, 'Yes, you have to, in order to get the monthly stipend, and you can marry four wives.'

"The man agreed and underwent the pains of circumcision despite his advanced age. They began to pay him the monthly stipend, but after a few months they canceled the stipend. The man went and asked, 'Where's the money?'

"They told him, 'Now [that] you are deep in Islam, you don't need the monthly stipend anymore.'

"He threatened, 'I will abandon Islam.'

"They said, 'If you leave Islam, we will carry out the apostasy punishment on you.' He asked what it was, and they said, 'We will chop off your head and cut you into pieces.'

"This African man began to mumble, 'What a strange religion: when you go in they cut off a little piece of you, and when you go out, they cut you into little pieces.'"

Botros concluded, "This is the punishment for apostasy that keeps people afraid. Even when they reach the truth, they're afraid to express their opinion."

IS IT EFFECTIVE ?

I asked Botros whether it was really effective to be so "in your face" with Muslims. "Some people believe the best evangelism with Muslims is to preach the love of Christ alone, not to deconstruct Islam," I noted. "But you have said that you like to use provocative ideas and language to shock Muslims into thinking about Jesus. You once said, 'This is my way: short, sharp, shock.' Isn't that right?"

"Yes," he laughed, grateful for the question, not defensive. "Short, sharp, shock-absolutely."

"So why do you do that?" I asked. "Is that really the best way to show the love of Christ?"

"I will tell you, Joel," Botros said with the tone of a kindly old grandfather sitting his grandson down to explain to him how the world works. "If you are speaking to a person who is deep in thought, and you say to him so sweetly, 'Oh, I love you, my friend. You are wonderful. I really appreciate you,' does he hear you? No. He cannot hear you because he is so focused on his own thoughts. So how do you get his attention? Throw some water in his face? Hit him in the face? That would wake him up, right? Then maybe he gets mad. Maybe he insults you. 'What are you doing?' he says. 'Why did you throw water in my face?' But now he is paying attention.

Now if you go up to a Muslim and say, 'God loves you' will he really hear you? No. He will say, 'Which of your three god's loves'. If you say to a Muslim, 'The Bible has all the answers for life, will he believe you? No. He will say, 'Oh, you mean the Bible that changed and can no longer be trusted?' They do not listen. They are so focused on believing that Islam is the strongest religion in the world, that Muhammad is the best prophet, they are so focused on how wonderful their own beliefs are that they refuse to even consider the claims of Christ. They are brainwashed. Their conscience is dead. So I have to awaken them first by a shock-by an electric shock. I try to wake Muslims up by throwing some water in their face. I'm not doing it to be mean. I'm doing it because I love them."

"Do Muslim scholars and clerics ever call in or write in to answer you?" I asked. "No one in five years has really answered my questions," he said. "I'm guessing that is what makes Muslims so mad at you," I noted. Botros laughed. "It causes people to want to kill me."

"I WANT THEM TO READ THE BIBLE"

"How, then, do you pivot from making provocative statements to sharing the love of Christ with Muslims?" I asked.

"Once I have their attention, I say to them, 'I read to you from your books about Muhammad and what he had done. If you are searching for the truth-if you are really searching-then compare between Muhammad and Jesus. See what Jesus said about purity and love. But you have to read the Bible to know more. And say to God, 'If Islam is the truth, let me stand firm in it until eternity. If it is not, and if Jesus is the Truth, please let me know.'"

"You are trying to provoke them into reading the Bible to prove you are wrong?" I clarified.

"Yes," Botros said. "I want to them to read the Bible, which is the true Word of God. I want them to

study the Bible for themselves, because I know it will open their eyes to who Jesus is and how He can change their lives forever."

He was making a point I have heard from Revivalists all over the world, from Morocco to Afghanistan: A Christian cannot in and of himself convince a Muslim (or a Jew, or an atheist, or anyone for that matter) of the truth of the gospel and thus "convert" or change him. Only God Himself can do that, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The best that a follower of Jesus can do is to encourage a person to read the Bible and consider the life and claims of Jesus Christ and then encourage him or her to ask God for wisdom to know what the truth is and how to follow it.

This is, in fact, precisely what the Bible tells us to do. Psalm 119 tells us that God's Word "is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" that will "make me wiser than my enemies" and give a person who studies it carefully "more insight than all my teachers."

The Gospel of John, chapter one, tells us that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John goes on to make it clear that the Word of God "became flesh" in the form of Jesus Christ "and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Paul told us in 2 Timothy 3:15-17 that the Scriptures "are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" and that "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

Hebrews 4:12 says that "the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

And James 1:5 tells us that "if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

TEN DEMANDS

Given his provocative style and powerful success, I asked Botros if he was worried for his safety. He is, after all, married and has four grown children and nine grandchildren.

"I have many guards who care for me day and night," he replied.

"They are with me without ceasing—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. And they don't take from me any penny." Botros was speaking of angels. While he is careful not to take unnecessary risks, he has entrusted his fate to the Lord.

Once, during an interview in Arabic, Botros was asked, "What should the Muslims do to make you stop saying these things?"⁵

Botros thought about it for a moment, and then said he had "ten demands" for Muslim clerics and authorities. If they would agree to all ten and truly implement them, then he would stop preaching the gospel and refuting the Qur'an. During our conversation, I asked Botros to recount his top-ten list in English. He graciously agreed.

1. Strike out all of the Qur'anic verses that deny the divinity of Jesus and the revelation of God in Him.
2. Acknowledge that Jesus is the Spirit and Word of God, as they truly believe, without hiding this fact.
3. Strike out the Qur'anic verses and hadiths that incite Muslims to kill Christians.
4. Strike out the Qur'anic verses and hadiths that incite Muslims to terrorism and oppression.
5. Delete all the Qur'anic verses that traduce the truth of Christ's crucifixion, creating doubt about God's plan of salvation.
6. Stop the attacks on Jesus and the Holy Book in mosques and in all the media.
7. Give Muslims the freedom to choose their religion and the freedom to express their belief.
8. Abolish the punishment for apostasy, which is death; stop torturing people who convert to Christianity; and stop imprisoning them.
9. Make formal apologies by leaders throughout the Arab world for the murder of Christians in countries invaded by Islam.
10. Make formal apologies by leaders throughout the Arab world for the insults directed against the Christian faith throughout Islamic history.

Needless to say, there's no need to hold your breath waiting for Muslim authorities to comply with these demands. I suspect Father Zakaria Botros will be preaching the gospel nonstop until the Lord Jesus Himself decides to take him home, or until the Rapture.

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