

OBSERVATIONS ON ABUNA ZAKARIA BOTROS (AND A BOOK REVIEW)

BY ABU DAUD¹

Stuart Robinson with Peter Botross, *Defying Death: Zakaria Botross—Apostle to Islam* (CityHarvest Publications: Upper Mt Gravatt, Australia). 152 pages.

If I had to make a list of the most important people in the history of Christian witness in the Muslim world, the first place would go to Blessed Ramon Llull, a Roman Catholic layman, philosopher, and missionary. The second place would go to Fr. Zakaria Botros, the Coptic Orthodox priest who famously hosts a program in Arabic on satellite TV—a program that can be seen throughout most of the Arab world.

In this program Zakaria, “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.”²

He raises infamous questions about *ridaa’at al kibaar*, for example, which is Arabic for ‘the breastfeeding of adults’ whereby a woman can breastfeed a man unrelated to her and thus be allowed to be in his presence without a *mahram*; or the sexual appetites of the Prophet, for example; or his habit of wearing his child-bride’s

¹ Abu Daoud is a missionary in the Arab World. His native country is the USA.

² Raymond Ibrahim, ‘Islam’s “Public Enemy #1”’ (March 2008) in *National Review Online*, accessed 28 Aug 2009 [www.article.nationalreview.com]

clothing; or possible homosexual proclivities. Such are the curious topics brought up by Fr. Botros.

But that is the part of the man we all know about. How did this one Coptic priest, born Feyez, become Islam's public enemy #1? That is the content of Robinson's timely and largely competent book: from his birth to the present, only the last few pages mention his satellite TV program. Robinson has chosen a tough task: taking a man who is on the one hand very evangelical, but on the other hand a son of Egypt and life-long Orthodox Copt. Sometimes these seem to work well together, as when we read about the growth in the Sunday School initiative that helped make the Coptic Orthodox Church what it is today—probably the most powerful and successful indigenous church in the Middle East. How can the evangelical *not* rejoice when they read about the young men going out two by two to obscure villages wherein perhaps one Christian family lives, whom they did not even know beforehand, to educate them in the ways of Scripture and Orthodoxy? This was many years ago so planning was impossible; they would arrive at a town and simply ask, where is George's house? Knowing that George was a most common Christian name and if there was a Christian household in the town at all, someone there must have that name. There is a kind of faith seen here in these vignettes from the lives of Zakaria and his companions that certainly demolishes any pretensions among the average Western Christian that he or she has suffered for the faith.

Robinson also is helpful in explaining certain cultural and religious practices that would make little sense to the Western evangelical. His explanation of marriage in Egypt is splendid, for he tells us that in Egypt a man marries a woman and then loves her, not the other way around as the Western world has it. (Not that it has worked so well in the Western world, has it?)

But I wondered if from time to time there was a little theological editing. This would not be unreasonable because there is only so much Orthodoxy an evangelical can digest before the trump

card is played: “That is unbiblical!” (Which is to say, *not evangelical*, or more specifically, *that is not my version of evangelicalism*). Incense and a prayer book and monks might just fly. But what of seeking the intercession of saints? And I don’t mean the living saints, like when your pastor prays for you in his office; I mean dead saints—the ones who have ‘fallen asleep in the Lord,’ as Paul puts it³. This practice, of seeking the intercession of what Westerners would call ‘dead’ saints is integral to Coptic spirituality, yet we don’t have a single instance of it mentioned in this book. Like when we read of the plight of Anisa, Zakaria’s mother, who had not given birth for five years; she fasted and prayed, and she “even enlisted prayer support from her local church community” (p. 5). Did she not just maybe ask Mary or Mark or some local saint for a little intercession? But now that I think of it, Orthodoxy has no problem considering local saints as part of the local church; that they are living or asleep in the Lord matters little to a Church that has retained a unified Semitic cosmology over the bifurcated aberration of Enlightenment Europe (and hence of evangelicalism, also a product, in its own way, of the Enlightenment). As the American Orthodox priest Stephen Freeman⁴ always says, we are living in a one-storey universe.

Perhaps my remarks here are too short, sharp, and shocking. And perhaps I learned that from Fr. Botros. On the one occasion when I met him in person he explained to a crowd of bewildered American evangelicals who had been fed on the irenic milk of Kenneth Cragg⁵ that this was always his goal: to say something short, sharp, and shocking. And he has accomplished that.

³ In 1 Thes 4.

⁴ Freeman is one of my favorite evangelists for Orthodoxy. His podcast, *Glory to God*, is available for download through iTunes or his blog: <http://fatherstephen.wordpress.com/>

⁵ I love Cragg, by the way, but really, his approach and that of Botros do not resemble each other in the slightest.

I believe that Botros is an example of contextualized ministry *par excellence*. This might sound like a strange thing to say today when contextualization and a non-polemical approach are seen as inseparable. *Au contraire*. Contextual witness does *not* mean being nice, and it certainly does not mean refraining from criticism of the Prophet of Islam or its book. What contextualization means is that you are *asking* the questions to which people want to know answers. A basic example of this is the now commonplace insight that Arabs are more moved by honor-shame questions than innocence-guilt ones. That is context. And Abouna does this very well: Muslims want to know about Muhammad, the shari'a, the *ahadiith*, and so on. They want to know how Islam can (or cannot) be *al haal*, the solution, as other great Egyptians have argued (Al Banna? Qutb?). And Botros is uniquely prepared to address these questions: for one, his Arabic is excellent, which might not mean a lot to people who have not studied the language, but understand that classical Arabic and common Egyptian Arabic are about as close to each other as Latin and modern Italian. (OK, maybe that's a little bit of a stretch, but not much.) His skills in Arabic permit him to delve into the copious volumes of traditions about the life of the Prophet and Islamic shari'a. Egypt asks Zakaria: in what way can Islam be the solution? Zakaria responds: this is the life of the Prophet and the law of Islam; you make your own decision.

In this Botros is employing a similar tactic to the other guy on my top two list: Ramon Llull. For at the bottom of Llull's apologetic⁶ was one simple statement: *Allahu akbar*. Does the glory of Allah correspond to the sexual practices of Muhammad? Does the wisdom of God correspond to the myths proliferated in the *ahadi-*

⁶ The best volume to start with to get to know Llull is Anthony Bonner (ed. and trans.) *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramon Llull Reader* (Princeton 1985). Then read, in order, his *life*, *ars brevis*, and *the book of the gentile and the three wise men* in it. But beware, the *ars brevis* is not an easy text, but one that is certainly worth reading multiple times. Bonners introductory explanations are extremely helpful.

ith? Zakaria uncovers Islam to Muslims, and lets them be the judge. This is contextualized witness par excellence, for surely it draws on a worldview and metanarrative that Muslims can understand. Muhammad is the prophet of God or he is not. The Qur'an descended from Allah to Muhammad by means of the angel, or it did not. Muslims understand there is not a great deal of middle ground here. Zakaria understands it too. Here there is no place for a Jesus mosque or a slightly modified *shahada*, like it or not. And like it or not, it works.

This example of successful contextualization is, I propose, related to his ability to understand and live in that Semitic cosmology—the one-storey universe I mentioned above. It is easy for a guy from Germany to learn to pray with open eyes and open hands, palm-up, as our Muslim friends may do, but is that really contextualization? What is harder is to live in and believe in the underlying structure of someone else's universe. This is the deep work of contextualization—a movement beyond the adaptation of external forms which has become the *cause célèbre* among so many evangelical missiologists in our days.

In any case, the life of Botros was certainly not easy or conventional, and Robinson does a good job of capturing that in this rather slim volume. There are highs and lows; there are miracles, dreams, prisons, late-night arrests, trials both civil and ecclesiastical - which is to say that it reads very much like the book of Acts or *The Golden Legend*⁷. Botros comes across as a voracious reader and scholar, evangelist, healer, and (after he is forbidden to preach by his Church) a disciple-maker, and family man. His exile from Egypt takes him to Australia, then England, and finally to the USA where he lives now.

There is one glaring omission which really needs to be corrected in future editions. I am speaking of the lack of background information regarding the Sunday School movement in the Coptic

⁷ Which can be read online at www.catholicforum.com/saints/golden162.htm.

Orthodox Church. It would have been a very simple matter for Robinson to insert a page or two of history to explain to us this remarkable movement in Orthodoxy which in many ways transformed the face of Egyptian Christianity and gave the Copts a real vibrant connection to their roots: the Bible, the Fathers, and monastic faith.

A few final notes on the book: the editing is of good quality; I found few mistakes. Robinson has a good sense of humor too, though it is rather dark. After telling us that on one night eight bishops, 24 priests, and a significant number of lay leaders were rounded up in an Egyptian prison, he comments dryly that this “surely represented one of the most important involuntary ecclesiastical gatherings in recent Egyptian church history” (67).

On the whole this is a valuable contribution—the first biography to date written on a very influential man. In years to come we should expect additional material to appear, and I would hope that someday we can be treated to a more exhaustive, academic biography. But given that the story of Abuna Zakaria Botros is continuing today, let us not be in a hurry.