Egypt's Christian converts risk abuse

Egypt is more tolerant of Christianity than many Islamic nations, but evangelical Christians and Copts say they face discrimination and even torture for their beliefs

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CAIRO, Egypt -- For evangelical Christians such as Beaverton-based Luis Palau, nothing is as important as "making disciples of all nations." They say Jesus Christ himself gave this command to convert non-Christians, in Matthew 28:19-20, a passage known as "The Great Commission."

But this country follows the prophet Mohammed with equal fervor. It rejects the notion of converting its people -- particularly to a religion associated with the West, a religion, it's still remembered, that persecuted Muslims during the 11th-century Crusades. That's why the gathering at Kasr el-Dobara Presbyterian Church in Cairo last February was so radical -- and so dangerous. Here, Palau is openly and unabashedly proclaiming that Christ is the way.

The only way.

Five blocks from the Nile River, tucked into a crowded neighborhood that includes the U.S. and British embassies, the narrow five-story building -- the largest Protestant church in the Arab world -- is easy to miss on most nights. But this is no ordinary night.

Worshippers jam the sanctuary and pour into nearby rooms fitted with closed-circuit television. Hundreds more press against a gate, where armed police stand guard. When a door cracks open with the announcement that there is room for five more, people elbow one another and jockey for position.

In the United States, meetings such as this are called crusades. Here, no one knows what to call it. "There are more than 300 million Arabs," Palau explains later. "Many of them have never heard the name of Jesus in a clear fashion. But Jesus commanded us to take his name everywhere."

For four nights, to the melody of Western songs translated into Arabic, Palau preaches the message of salvation through biblical stories such as the woman
who met Christ at the well. "She had an encounter of only 20 minutes with Jesus," says Palau, who often is compared to Billy Graham. "Those 20 minutes revolutionized her life."

Inside the church are several missionaries, including one from Portland who asked not to be identified. He lives in Egypt under the pretense of doing business, although his real support comes from nine Portland-area evangelical churches.

"Souls are definitely in the balance," the missionary says. "A soul is either going to heaven or hell. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be here. It's sandy. It's dirty. The language is hard. The food is different. I'd rather be in Portland. I'm here for one reason, for souls."

Souls, however, are hard to come by. At crusades in the West, converts commonly flock to the altar in a public acknowledgment of conversion. But if anyone converts during this crusade, the rest of the worshippers never see it. Why? Arab authorities say that the effort to "save" Muslim souls -- though technically not against Egyptian secular law -- is certainly against Islamic teaching, which prohibits conversion, and according to some interpretations, decrees punishment by death. What's more, they say such conversion is unnecessary because Islam is a more advanced relative of Christianity, recognizing both Jesus and Mohammed.

"If you're a Muslim, you're a Christian-plus," says Mo'ti Bayoumi, dean of Islamic theology at Al-Azhar University, the Harvard of the Islamic world.

Egyptians who convert to Christianity may incur wrath of secret police But there's another possible reason. Fear. Muslims who change their religion risk harassment, arrest and torture by the secret police.

Although some point to the existence of an openly evangelical church such as Kasr el-Dobara as evidence of Egypt's tolerance, the U.S. State Department and rights organizations such as Amnesty International cite instances of arrest and torture of converts in Egypt. In addition, they allege that Christians are underrepresented in Egypt's government, discriminated against in education and business, and increasingly targeted by terrorists.

"Whoever is baptized will be persecuted," says the Rev. Menes Abdul Noor, who heads Kasr el-Dobara and was host to Palau's visit.
Diminutive and gray-haired, Noor sits behind his office desk, next to a computer displaying Windows 95 in Arabic. Western books, such as "Answering Islam" and Charles Colson's "The Body" line a bookcase. One wall displays a map of Cairo, the other a picture portraying Christ on the edge of a cliff, reaching into a crevice to rescue a lamb. Noor wears a blue tie that proclaims "Jesus is Lord."

Noor says converts he has baptized face rejection by family and friends. He asserts that as many as 10 converts a year have been arrested. Some, he says, have been tortured. The U.S. State Department says there have been "credible reports" of at least two converts being physically abused by state security officers; Muslims suspected of terrorism are also often jailed and tortured without being charged, the State Department says. Egyptian authorities interrogate him almost monthly, Noor says.

They focus on issues discussed in the church. He suspects his office and telephone are bugged. "When I want them to know something, I tell another bugged person," he says.

Noor says that neither he nor his church shrinks from such scrutiny. In fact, they seem to go out of their way to court it.

"If you say we're so nice, so friendly, that's a big lie. I'm under orders," Noor says.

"Am I in danger? Of course. So was the Apostle Paul. So was James, the second martyr. So was Stephen, the first martyr. These are the facts of life."

Evangelical movement helped push religion bill through Congress Evangelicals are Christians who believe the Bible is God's word, salvation comes through Christ alone, and everyone in the world must hear this message.

The evangelical movement is particularly strong in the United States. Surveys by Gallup and others say about one in five Americans identifies himself or herself with the main tenets of evangelism, though they may not use that term. Joseph Assad, an Egyptian working for the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Religious Freedom, estimates there are 300,000 evangelicals in Egypt, although no one knows for certain how many there are.

American evangelicals provided much of the impetus for a bill passed by Congress earlier this month. The bill requires the president to take action against countries that persecute on the basis of religion.
Egypt is considered a key U.S. ally, acting as a stabilizing force in the volatile Middle East. It receives $2.1 billion a year from the United States, making it the second-largest recipient of American aid. It trails only Israel, which receives $3 billion annually. The U.S. State Department has already criticized Egypt's mistreatment of converts. The issue could become even more volatile if that mistreatment is cited as a reason for a sanction under the new religious persecution bill, which President Clinton signed Tuesday.

The bill says freedom of religion is an inalienable right not just in the United States but everywhere, and it cites international documents to prove its point. According to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every person has an inherent right to worship as he or she pleases. That right, according to Article 18 of the declaration, "includes freedom to change his religion or belief."

Because Islam forbids Muslims to change their religion, Saudi Arabia abstained from voting for the declaration in the United Nations. But the declaration, which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year, passed with 48 votes, including the Islamic countries of Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. No country voted against it. Some Asian and Islamic countries have argued since then that the religious clause of the declaration strongly reflects Western values, at their expense.

"The people still believe that if you are a Muslim, you are on the right path, that it's the divine religion," says Hafeez Malik, a professor at Villanova University and the editor of the Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. "If you renounce it, that means there is something wrong with you. Some will go to the extent of saying killing you is justified."

But the 1948 U.N. declaration is still the gold standard for human rights, creating a dilemma for Muslim countries. Do they abide by the international standard and disobey Islamic law? Or do they honor Islamic law and risk the disapproval of other countries?

"The challenge for us as Muslims is to either subscribe to what we have already committed to or provide an alternative, universalist vision," says Abdullahi An-Naim, an expert on Islamic law and a professor at Emory Law School in Atlanta. "On the question of freedom of religion, are we saying Muslims have the right to convert others to Islam but not allow them the right to convert Muslims to their religion?"
Christianity's roots in Egypt date back thousands of years. Even without converts, Egypt is the most Christian country in the Middle East, owing to the efforts of evangelists nearly 2,000 years ago.

By the early seventh century, nearly all Egyptians were Christians. According to tradition, it was St. Mark, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, who founded the Egyptian Orthodox Church about 60 A.D. It was only after Muslims invaded Egypt from Syria in the seventh century that most Christians converted to Islam. Those who did not are called Copts -- a derivation of the word "Egyptian" -- to this day. According to government statistics, there are 6 million Copts, but Egyptian Christian leaders say that number is at least 10 million. The vast majority of Copts belong to the Egyptian Orthodox Church, which emphasizes liturgy and ritual and de-emphasizes evangelism and conversion.

Compared with some Islamic countries where no Christian expression is allowed, Egypt is a haven of freedom. Christians openly walk the streets wearing crucifixes on their necks. Many Copts still follow the centuries-old practice of tattooing a small blue cross on the inside of their wrists.

But that doesn't make them immune. In March, Islamic militants wielding assault rifles and wearing masks and military fatigues walked into the predominantly Christian village of Ezbet Dawoud, 300 miles south of Cairo, and shot everyone in sight. Thirteen men were killed.

In February, gunmen killed nine Christians who were attending a youth meeting at a Coptic church in Abu Qurqas. The Egyptian government strongly denies that Christians are persecuted in Egypt. In March, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told a delegation of clerics from the Council of Churches of the City of New York that there is no government-orchestrated persecution. The government said it deplored the targeting of Christians, as well as Muslims, by terrorist groups and would continue to counter such efforts.

Still, shrill advertisements placed in American newspapers this year by the American, Australian, Canadian, British and European Coptic Associations hold the government responsible. They say that the situation of minority Christians in Egypt is "akin to Jews during Nazi domination of Europe on the eve of being sent to the gas chamber -- or like Armenians about to face Turkish massacre in 1915."

Copts encounter double standard in schools and businesses Privately, many Copts say their situation is more subtle and complex.
Copts have risen to prominence in some business circles, but of the 400 members of Parliament, only five are Christian. Christians cannot enroll at the nation's most influential university, Al-Azhar, because it's open only to Muslims. Students say a double standard exists in the way they are treated at colleges as well as in the workplace.

"If you are in the workplace and are up for a promotion against a Muslim, you won't get it because you're a Christian," says a 21-year-old student at the University of Cairo. "Sometimes, though not usually, Muslim professors make it more difficult for you to get a good grade."

Another, a journalist, says he's been taunted by his editor and censored for trying to write about the problems Egyptian Christians face.

Although evangelical Christians challenge the Muslim majority in Egypt, most Coptic leaders emphasize getting along. Privately, some say they fear that making a fuss about religious persecution could haunt them.

If the choice is between a less-than-perfect government somewhat tolerant of Christians and a radical Islamic movement that wants to submit the entire society to a strict Muslim code, many Christians say they will take the former.

"It's not a matter of Christianity vs. Islam but a question of who will rule the country, the civil government we have or an Islamic regime?" says the Rev. Safwat N. el-Baiady, president of the Egyptian Council of Protestant Churches. "It's wise that the church support the government; otherwise we'll face an Islamic regime, which isn't good for the church."

The Orthodox patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, has taken a conciliatory approach.

"Conflict is not good for us, and we cannot gain anything through conflict," Shenouda told foreign reporters at a recent news conference.

Most Copts have followed the pope's lead. "We live in a better situation than any other religious minority in the world," says Nasim Mijalli, a literary critic and one of a handful of Christian professors at the University of Cairo.

"Historically, we have lived in peace with the Muslims for hundreds of years. "I don't feel Christians are persecuted in this country. There are some problems, some troubles, but there is no persecution at all."

**Egyptian thinks his arrest stemmed from his conversion**
An indentation just above the bridge of Mustapha el-Sharkawy's nose tells a different story. The scar developed when police put a blindfold over Sharkawy's face, then tied a rope around it, says the 38-year-old father of two.

That was in 1991, during a 10-month prison stay. When the rope was finally loosened after two weeks, the blindfold stuck to Sharkawy's face like a bandage, he says. It took five minutes to peel it off.

Even though no formal charges were filed against him, Sharkawy says he was interrogated for two weeks, then put into solitary confinement for 9 ½ months. Sharkawy says his crime was conversion.

After President Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981, an emergency law gave Egyptian security forces broad power to arrest and hold suspects without trial. The law, designed to clamp down on Islamic terrorists, also has been used to arrest converts to Christianity without filing formal charges.

Sharkawy says he was never charged with anything, but state security investigators, also known as the secret police, told him he was an apostate, a renegade from Islam outside the protection of the law who deserved death if he did not recant.

His cell, he says, was 1 meter wide and 2 meters long, illuminated by a single bulb that was never turned off. His only bathroom break was between 9 and 9:05 a.m. each day. He remembers standing naked, his hands tied behind his back, as police poked him "everywhere" with an electric probe. He says his arms were tied by wires to the ceiling, forcing him to stand on his tiptoes for three consecutive days.

Sharkawy was released after international human rights organizations and members of the U.S. Congress complained to the Egyptian government. But his problems didn't end. He says he was fired from two jobs after policemen called his Muslim employers, informing them that he was an apostate. He started his own business making jackets, but he says that ended when police told his customers not to buy from him. His most recent job was with a computer company, but that ended, too, with a call from the police.

"I can work as a Muslim. I can work as a Christian," he says. "But I can't work as a (known) convert."

He can't get the government to use his preferred name, Joseph, or that of his son, "El Fady," which means "Christ the Redeemer." He can't get his
government-issued identity card changed to read "Christian" instead of "Muslim." His son is also listed as a Muslim, meaning he must receive Islamic education in public school.

"I'm asking for help from believers who understand this," he says. "I'm asking for help from people who are interested in human rights."

In 1991, when human rights organizations and some members of the U.S. Congress complained of Sharkawy's jailing, an Egyptian government spokesman said "rumors" that Sharkawy was subjected to torture "are absolutely false and unfounded." The Egyptian government didn't respond to more recent requests for comment.

In March, Britain gave Sharkawy and his family temporary refugee status on the grounds that he was persecuted because of his conversion to Christianity. Despite having to leave his homeland and leave his dream to evangelize more Egyptian Muslims, he says he has no regrets.

"I'm finding something special in a relationship with God," he says. "If somebody doesn't have that relationship, they can't understand. They can't understand why someone would give up their life and suffer for something called faith."

**Converts who announce new belief face persuasion to renounce it**

Jews, Christians and Muslims all teach that they are descended from Abraham. Islam teaches that Jews and Christians are "people of the book" and must be treated as protected minorities. Although Moses and Jesus are considered prophets, Mohammed is seen as the final prophet. The Koran is the final revelation, the perfect guidebook for every aspect of life.

Muslims themselves allow, if not encourage, converts into their religion, though they cite Koranic verses insisting that no one should ever be pressured.

Paul Marshall, a researcher on religious persecution for the Washington, D.C.-based Freedom House, says about 100 Muslims convert to Christianity every year while as many as 10,000 Christians convert to Islam. Marshall says he bases his estimates on interviews with key Christian and Islamic leaders.

The Rev. Mahmoud Farhar, who was trained at Al-Azhar, says: "We don't benefit anything materially from that conversion, but we rejoice because this is a person we have helped on their way to heaven."
For converts out of Islam, there are strict procedures. Converts who keep quiet are generally left alone. Converts who make their new belief public are often interrogated and then persuaded to renounce their choice.

"If he then refuses, he is killed," says Bayoumi, dean of theology at Al-Azhar.

According to Malik, the Villanova scholar, no Muslim country has ever executed a convert. Converts are considered apostates. There have been no verifiable reports of converts being killed, although one person accused of apostasy has been murdered.

Farag Foda, who challenged conventional Islamic dogma, was gunned down outside his office in a suburb of Cairo in June 1992. Gama'a Islamiyya, a terrorist group committed to suppressing heresy and establishing an Islamic state, claimed credit for the killing.

"Anybody in Egypt can kill me because I've converted from Islam. I'm an apostate," says Matthew, who became a Christian in 1986. So why did Matthew convert?

Matthew, who fears to be identified further in print, comes from a devout Islamic family but began to use the Christian name after he converted. No missionary evangelized him. He became a Christian, he says, after a private, personal search prompted by the question: "How is this possible that God has so little love and is so hard?"

"I said, 'I've never read the Bible. I should read it.' That changed my life. Jesus Christ became part of my total personality. I loved Christ more than anybody. He went inside my entire body and made me warm. This was very different from Islam. It was very strange for a Muslim to feel like this."

**Christian says he was interrogated, jailed for discussing his conversion**

For Sharkawy and Matthew, their problems began when they decided to share their revelations. Matthew says that a few years ago, he told several of his Muslim friends, and they, too, became Christians. That's when the police stepped in.

Every day for three months, Matthew says, he was summoned to the police station and interrogated by police who alternated between abusive and compassionate language, always trying to persuade him to return to Islam.
He refused. "Yes, I'm a Christian," he said.

He was also asked to list books he had read and people he had talked to. Matthew says he gave no names, "not one."

Authorities expanded their questioning to family members, neighbors and fellow students. All began to shun Matthew, he says. He says that he was later jailed without a trial for 10 months, and electric shocks were applied to his genitals during interrogation. He was put in solitary confinement in a 1-by-1 ½-meter cell.

Because he was allowed to go to the bathroom only once every two days, the cell was filled with urine and excrement. There was no window or light. It was so dark, Matthew says, he couldn't see his finger in front of his face. "They want to make you crazy in that way," he says.

He was released after members of the U.S. Congress complained to the Egyptian government.

Noor says stories such as this should be no surprise. He expects Muslim converts to Christianity to continue to be mistreated. He says he will continue to preach and to baptize until he dies or is jailed.

"We have to expect persecution," Noor says. "This is part of our Christian faith. Why run away from it?"