The bodily threat of miracles: Security, sacramentality, and the Egyptian politics of public order

ABSTRACT
This article examines the political and public culture of Coptic Christian miracles through the circulation and reproduction of images and the mimetic entanglements of artifacts and objects. To understand the threat posed by one case of a woman’s oil-exuding hand, this study points to how semiotic orders of security and sacramentality intersect in the regulation of bodily miracles. It explores Coptic Orthodox Church and Egyptian state efforts to contain the activity of images and transform the public nature of truthful witness and divine testimony. In doing so, it suggests how the material structure of saintly imagination introduces bodily and visual challenges to an authoritarian politics of public order. [images, miracles, materiality, embodiment, security, secrecy, visuality, religion, public culture]
Figure 1. The miracle icon of the Virgin Mary is located in the Church of St. Bishoi in Port Said, Egypt. Gifts of oil descend from both hands of the popular Catholic image, known worldwide as “Miraculous Mary” or “Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.” Photo by Angie Heo, February 20, 2007.

During this period of containment, Samia’s hand ceased producing oil, and the print poster of the Virgin in her prayer cell began to exude in her stead. In the words of Father Boula, “The icon exudes oil so then why would her hand exude oil? That’s enough.” Following months during which her body emitted no holy oils, the state granted Samia permission to return to Port Said. After this displacement of one miracle-image for another, she left Bilqas and entered the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Port Fouad. Today, it is the print icon of the Virgin that exudes for public spectatorship, year after year, as the fount of abundant oil and the prized image of ritual commemoration. “Buckets and buckets of oil!” as one friend had once described to me in lively fashion, pulling out a keychain replica of the Marian poster from his pocket.

Following Egypt’s momentous revolution in January 2011 and the subsequent downfall of the Mubarak regime, Coptic Christians confront the challenges of an uncertain political future. For all Egyptians, much of this uncertainty is owed to the radical dismantling of state security and its replacement with the more precarious and pernicious powers of the military (i.e., the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, or SCAF). For Copts, commonly characterized in the press as among the “casualties of the revolution,” a series of violent acts such as church burnings, riots, and murders have drawn attention to their sociopolitical status as a “religious minority” in times when “security is lax” (Tadros 2011). Such incidents have prompted various hypotheses concerning the position of Copts in a fragile period of transition: among them, the notions that their increased vulnerability is owed to the lack of adequate police protection and that the newfound prominence of Islamist groups in the political scene will further endanger the public life of Christianity in Egypt. As they wait for a new ruling order to emerge, especially in the wake of Pope Shenouda’s death in March 2012, the nervous silence of leading Coptic Orthodox Church dignitaries signals the perceived unreliability and instability of new alliances.

Politically, what interested observers scrutinize perhaps most closely in post-Revolution Egypt is the relationship of the Coptic Orthodox Church to shifting structures of the Egyptian state. This scrutiny sits in line with longstanding historical and sociological scholarship on modern Coptic politics that examines the development of church-state relations as both a cause and an outcome of the increasing alienation of the Coptic community from larger structures of societal and political participation. After all, it was not always the case that the Coptic Orthodox Church had an all-encompassing regulatory grip on communal affairs. Concomitant with British colonial pressures and cleavages between the elite and the middle class, the Coptic laity council (maglis al-milli), instituted in the late 19th century, enjoyed varying levels of power vis-à-vis the church, especially in its early years (Sedra 1999, 2011; Seikaly 1970). During Nasser’s presidency, the Coptic Church under the leadership of Pope Cyril VI flourished through widespread measures of religious revival and reform, and it was in this period that the laity council was dissolved (Hasan 2003; Voile 2004). As many have noted, during Sadat’s presidency, the state lent support to various Islamist factions, leading to serious strains in church-state relations and culminating famously in the monastery arrest of Pope Shenouda in 1981 (Miller 2005; Pacini 1998; Zeidan 1999). With Mubarak’s ascent to power, Shenouda’s strategy was less one of overt resistance than of strategic church alliance with the state in regulating Coptic affairs (Guirgis and van Doorn-Harder 2011; Tadros 2009). In the absence of civic infrastructures for political engagement, Coptic Christians consequently experienced a “withdrawal” into church activity and the “religious sphere,” at the expense of their independence from the church, which rapidly came to assume the function of their representative spokesperson (Guirgis 2012; al-Khawaga 1997, 1998).
During the past 50 years or more, the prominent role of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the political affairs of Copts has given rise to much heated controversy—both from within the church and among its laity and from without among secularists, Muslims and Christians alike. Across a variety of conflicts, from conversion scandals and ensuing sectarian tensions to disputes over the legal prospects of civil marriage, the actions of the Coptic Orthodox Church have been repeatedly characterized as those of a “state within a state” (al-‘Awa 2010; Leila 2010; Michael 2010). By pointing to its unchecked powers, this characterization suggests that the church contravenes the state’s obligation to protect the rights of citizens—at times, acting “above the law.” From an opposing viewpoint, a number of commentators have also argued that the church too easily capitulates to state mechanisms of exercising control over the Coptic community. For example, after the bombing of Coptic worshippers in Alexandria in January 2011, many protestors angrily rejected their church’s pleas to maintain calm, angered by its inability to call the state to account for the lack of police protection for churches under threat.

In this article, I seek to offer a richer ethnographic account of church and state in Egypt by analyzing a peculiar complex of Marian miracles in Port Said, its public nature, and its political encounter with forces of state security and clerical authority. Rather than assuming the church and state as distinct, coherent political actors, whether at odds or in cahoots, I build on the insights of anthropologists who have drawn attention to the ways in which institutional power is identified through its “effects” (Aretxaga 2003; Trouillot 2001). Further, I believe that a certain impenetrability and emptiness attaches to common claims such as “the state has failed to adequately protect Copts” or “the Coptic Church just does what the state wants it to do,” although I am certainly sympathetic to the origin of these charges. Rather than focus on the failures of particular institutions or the necessity of reforming them to enable religious livelihood (often glossed as “religious freedoms”) to flourish, I propose that we meditate on the actual religious practices and sensibilities that people understand to be endangered in the first place.

I thus begin with a detailed consideration of Coptic religious practices and the entanglements of church and state power in the public making of saintly testimony and sanctifying acts of witness. The most outstanding event in the account with which I open this article is the moment when Samia is placed under monastery arrest. This explicit act of violence, for the sake of public order, requires some serious, analytic footing in the material politics of Coptic miracles. To better grasp the contours of state power and church authority, I first break down their respective workings and effects into smaller, analytically coherent elements—into images like Samia’s hand, the excesses of oil, and the surface of skin and icon. What was so threatening about the transgressive hand of a woman, its origins, and its successive replica? What was the church’s investment in hiding this woman away in a monastery? What is the nature of violence exercised in the act of prohibiting her from moving freely in public? And what are the effects of this prohibition on the material accessibility of Coptic miracles, of divinely authoritative truths and the public possibilities of eyewitness?

I argue that distinct, political orders of visibility and concealment converge on the circulation of miracles and their uneven infrastructure of images at the very moment that divine communication takes the public form of bodily exposure. I refer to these orders as “security” and “sacramentality,” the former definitive of state power and the latter of church power. By probing the material logics of these communicative orders, I draw attention away from notions of either church or state as internally consistent and contained organs of power, free of contradiction and failure. In their wholly separate yet consonant logics, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Egyptian state were ambivalent and wary about the public visibility of Samia’s hand. Its threat entailed both the capacity to cultivate particular forms of religious truths (namely, a saintly mimesis of testimony) and the strategy of worldly powers to contain and delimit these forms, thereby intervening in the public nature of Marian communication. I further suggest that the subordination of certain kinds of fleshly mimesis was also implicated in a material politics of public order. In brief, that which endowed Samia’s hand with the force of truthfulness also rendered it a significant challenge to the ordering of religious truths and their governability.

On a final note, I point to the methodological limitations of this ethnographic account and its implications for the scope of claims that I am able to offer as a result. At the outset, I must be clear that I did not have access to state security documents and, for quite obvious reasons, did not pursue interviews with police or security officials either before or after the downfall of the Mubarak regime. Despite this, I insist on drawing the shadowy effects of state regulation into analytic visibility, within the microdetail of images and their activity, visual practices of memory, forms of mass media (e.g., pamphlets, photographs, DVDs), and the narrative account of Father Boula.1 My goal is thus less to identify and analyze “state security” as an institutional actor than to understand structural traces of its operation, its organizing logic for rendering and preventing certain forms of religiosity in the public space. Following Nancy Munn’s invocation of James Frazer’s writings on the task of ethnographic description, I pen this article as much in the spirit of an “anthropological detective—purveying both clues and answers” (1996:446) as I do in pursuit of a “partial” account of intentions, following my unmet desire for an ethnographic recovery in full.
This article is organized into four parts. The first considers the visual–tactile circulation of images, in the way they successively work together to secure the efficacy of saintly action. The second analyzes the material stakes of truth-making practices by examining images’ potential challenges to state security and the church institution. The third explores how the priority of public order turns on a prescribed shape of religious truths and differences, one in which “confusion” serves as the grounds for intervention. The fourth tracks the dynamics of containment and secretion, how, for example, the movement of oils serves to propagate the publicity of miracles, even as it is circumscribed by priestly authorities. I conclude with reflections on the secret nature of testimony and how the politics of religious imagination may affect the public status of the Coptic community beyond the realm of holy images in Egypt today.

Miracles and the bodily circulation of truthful images

Everything began within the interior recesses of Samia’s body. Late in the evening of February 19, 1990, a couple of months after being diagnosed with breast cancer, Samia met the Virgin Mary in her dreams, within the moving drama of saintly images in tactile exchange. “Are you going to cut off my breast?” Samia asked. “Don’t be afraid, I am the one who will do surgery for you,” the Virgin assured her. A jolt of heat surged through Samia’s chest, Samia shouted, the Virgin grabbed her right hand. After waking up, Samia discovered her clothes bloodied and her chest unscarred, fully intact: She had been miraculously healed. The lump of clotted tissue on her chest, later identified as the culprit tumor itself, was the ultimate sign of saintly triumph. In this “tactile optics” of nearing the saints (Taussig 1991), the dream offers the visual scene of veneration. As the Coptic fathers wrote, in their teachings on icon veneration, “What is perceptible through the senses sympathises only with what is perceptible through the senses.” The dream is the sensory medium for the visitation and reproduction of saintly powers made perceptible, for the exertion of grace and the exit of death by means of bodily vision.

Today, pilgrims may inspect photographs of Samia’s bodily artifacts in a glass display case in the Church of St. Bishoi in Port Said (Figure 2). These “objects of evidence” establish the truthful status of Samia’s verbal testimony—such as her blood-soaked white sweater, her gauze bandages marked with bloody crosses, even the congregate of the tumors in a glass jar of formaldehyde (Engelke 2008; Keane 2008). These images of diseases and dream, as material impressions of fleshly emissions from inside Samia’s body, are now exposed for all to see. Using medical scan technologies and reporting to the church on the results, at least six physicians in Cairo confirmed that Samia no longer had cancer. In this truthful making of saintly authority, believing in the Virgin’s miracles rested on forms of trustworthy evidence and reasonable evaluation (Justice 2008; Vidal 2007). What was significant was not so much that scientific expertise verified that the healing “really happened” but that the miracle was so readily assimilated into the “extraordinary course of nature” (Daston 1998).

What served as further evidence of the miraculous was Samia’s body, in its capacity to continually reproduce and offer up new images of saintly power and knowledge. Gaps in the originary dream of February 20 (the official date of the miracle) evoked new events of dream visitation. During the surgery, the Virgin had not been alone but, rather, three other saintly figures had accompanied her as assistants: “I saw the Virgin and a big woman, and an old man and a little boy.” After waking up from the dream, Samia used portrait icons to identify the “old man” as St. Bishoi, the patron saint of her church, and the “little boy” as St. Abanoub, the child martyr from Samanoud. However, the identity of the “big woman” remained unknown, and people urgently wished to know who she was. About ten days after her miraculous healing, Samia dreamed again of the same saintly cast of
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Such movement, from image veneration to becoming-an-image oneself, is the force that transforms people into saints. This sanctifying force is difficult to anticipate and materially offensive in its physical trajectories. Across interfaces of flesh, objects, and domains, it transgresses borders that mark the intimate privacy of dreams and the fleshly periphery of the human body, so central to the integrity of the individual. Rather than exteriorized reflections of soulful devotion, the visitation of the Virgin and the activity of bodily blood and oil offer material artifacts of divine workings in a common realm of truths. Samia's miracle, and, moreover, the entire sequence of miracle-images, is an actively public testimony of Marian power. As a form of public truth, it is also the material means through which witnesses are moved to partake and also participate in the making of images—as one bystander witness put it for me, of “friends of Christ.”

A wealth of anthropological literature investigates the dangers signaled by the transgression of bodily boundaries, much of it penned by heirs and critics of Mary Douglas's classic symbolic analysis Purity and Danger (1966; see Ortner 1973; Parker 1996; Rouse and Hoskins 2004). The stakes concern more than “a matter of truth,” so to speak. My use of the term security invokes the double sense of ritual secretion at the boundary of Samia's body and of the institutional practices of “security” (cf. Warner 2006). Through the secretion of matter like blood and oil, Douglas argues, the very political order is contravened, as the body's edges and orifices are understood to symbolize the weakest point of society (1966:117). Secret is the etymological kin of secretion, and the social and political structure of the secret (Simmel 1906) is also formative of distinct spaces and realms of security—from the intimacy of gender-segregated communities (Abu-Lughod 1985) to the rituals of state citizens and covert societies (Ferme 2001; Herzfeld 1997). We might thus understand Samia's bodily porosity, and the excesses of fluid that it produced, as a precarious site of public attention and political performance. In its continual activity of secretion, her oil-emitting hand was the material structure of security.

To my knowledge, not many bodily miracles have caused police intervention in Egypt, but I have certainly
heard rumors among Coptic Christians of this occurring on rare occasions. One example stands out in my memory, of Father Fanous of Beni Suef (south of Cairo), whose light-emitting hand and “phosphorescent” face had attracted so much attention that the state asked the church to send him to stay for a time in one of the Red Sea monasteries. However, though miracles of healing are quite common, parallel phenomena defined by the ongoing bodily reproductions of light, oil, and blood are extremely rare among both Copts and Muslims (Mayouer-Jaouen 1998).

And yet, as many ethnographers of Egypt have richly detailed and analyzed, the policing of sainthood cults has been regular enough to demonstrate that state presence in Samia’s case is not unusual but representative of a long-standing pattern of ruling interventions in public appearances of divinely mediated presence. For instance, the British colonial authorities banned moulids (saints’ festivals) as “classic occasions for ‘mob’ formation, trouble and ‘disorder’” (Gilsenan 2000:611), and Egyptian police during the Mubarak regime aimed to “civilize” moulids by instituting public order through bodily habits and spatial organization (Schielke 2008). As part of its larger ambition to regulate and control the religious lives of its citizens, the Egyptian state has strategically cemented alliances with religious institutions of Al-Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church “in service of the state” (Moustafa 2000; Tadros 2009). Such acts of state-initiated regulation and reform have thoroughly transformed, for example, Islamic forms and pedagogical practices of knowledge (Starrett 1998), which consequently intersect and compete with long-standing discursive traditions of virtue and ethical discipline (Agrama 2010a; Hirschkind 2006). It is perhaps of little surprise that the governing structures of religious institutions have subsequently changed. Most notably for the purposes of this discussion, current critics of the Coptic Orthodox Church have pointed to the increasingly hierarchal and centralized nature of its internal government—what one lay Coptic deacon characterized to me as “haramiya” (pyramidal). Evidence of the heavy-handed powers of high-ranking clergy may be seen in the way the state has directly responded to the appeals of Pope Shenouda and other bishops in moments of scandal and disorder (El Amrani 2006; al-Bishri 1981; Hasan 2003; Tadros 2009).

Here, I point out the overlapping of spaces of security with the governing of the sacred, or the “sacramental.” This is the place where two modalities of order, and their legitimate relations to objects and systems of circulation, meet in intersecting domains of authoritarian rule. In what follows, I show further how such semiotic orders of material imagination are not fully assimilable to the realms of state and church institutional control (cf. Caduff 2012). According to Coptic teachings, the “sacrament” (as-sîr) is the “channel” by which the “graces and blessings of the Holy Spirit” are ritually conferred and received. As ritually “public” manifestations of divine “mystery” (cf. Shenoda 2010), the sacraments organize the bodily and material accessibility of what is imperceptible. Within five of the seven sacraments, holy oil (Coptic, al-mayrûn) is used toward various ends—from blessing the newly baptized, confirmed, and married to conferring legitimacy on members of the consecrated priesthood. In all these sacramental rites, the hands of priests serve as the authorizing conduits for distributing blessing and imparting the ritual effects of holy power. Of related interest is the observation that the “hand” symbolizes “beneficent invisible power” in Egyptian folklore (El-Aswad 2002) and the focus of respect due to legal hierarchs in Islamic contexts more largely (Messick 1988).

The unknown origin of the oil exuded by Samia’s hand presented a kind of “sacramental” challenge to church hierarchy. As the tactile conduit of Marian blessing, her hand introduced the “counter-routine” quality of charismatic authority (Weber 1968). One high-ranking Coptic Orthodox bishop explained to me, “I don’t think Samia’s hand was a miracle, but her dream was.” When pressed to elaborate, he further explained that people are “simple” (basîtha), that they would be confused by her, and that it was of no spiritual benefit to Samia to continue to attract so much attention. If what happened to her had truly been a miracle, she could simply “keep the miracle to herself.” As I understand him, mixing Samia’s human identity with that of a wonder-worker or saintly figure risked the sin of idolatry. Or perhaps, one could speculate, it broached what the Eastern Orthodox fathers, in their writings, called “deification,” more daringly expressed than in the Latin tradition—“the idea that God became man so that man might become God.” The power of this mixing derives from its manifestations in public. As one Coptic friend pointed out to me with a bit of mischievous humor, “After all, didn’t Christ himself begin the whole Christianity thing with miracles?”

In miraculous scenarios like the one I describe, securing the public order of holiness thus relies on a particular form of “sacrament” precisely to curtail its worldly expansion through bodies, objects, spaces, and so forth. No wonder, then, that the highest-ranking Coptic Orthodox bishops, in turn, seek to scrutinize and regulate all such saintly images within the space of the church and through the consecrating mechanics of their own hands. What is the relationship between divine images and church authority? What is it about the “living” quality and reproductive potential of images that renders “holy persons” and iconic objects threats? How might we consider the public and political stakes in the legitimate making of divine likenesses and representations?

There are many forms of iconoclastic inclination, notably, those derived from impulses toward the immaterial transcendentalism of the Protestant Reformation (Keane 2007; Pietz 1987) or the materialist suspicions of Marxist realism (Mitchell 1986). Drawing on a deeper history of
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icon wars in Eastern Christianity, I find it useful for enriching our theoretical imagination to return to the eighth-century Byzantine quarrels over divine images. They were wars in which an Orthodox theology of the icon was not merely a proxy for political issues in imperial battles against the church; rather, they concerned “the very conception of power at the highest level of hierarchical authority” (Mondzain 2005:1). Against explanations of the iconoclastic controversies, which suggest that the icon was part of a “doctrinal vocabulary to rationalize an essentially political conflict” (Pelikan 1977:92; see also Mitchell 1986), we might understand it as central to the debate over the nature of the holy and its governability. This is to consider the politics of iconicity as intrinsic to the imaginary foundation of the church and to its relation to the state.

Here, I draw further on the illuminating insights of Marie-José Mondzain’s analysis of the sacramental tradition for theoretical direction on this point. Mondzain employs Emile Benveniste’s distinction between hiéron and hagion (the Greek terms used in the eighth century), arguing that the iconoclast and the iconophile hold to two competing orders of divine authority:

In respect to the Greek material, Benveniste concentrates specifically on hiéron and hagion, the sacred and the holy. The sacred—hiéron—occurs in relation to the terminology of sacrifice and venerated places or people … On the other hand, hagion indicates rather “that the object is not allowed to be violated in any way.” [The] definition of the hagion protects it from any human contact … [on the contrary], the hiéron comes into contact easily with the profane by means of sacrifice and human legitimation. [2005:118, emphasis added]

Mondzain goes on to characterize the logic of iconoclasm as one rooted in hagion, whereby only specific images, such as the Eucharist or relics, are made holy through the transcendent origins of priestly institution (Bourdieu 1991). Iconophiles are more ambitious, defining the space of sacredness, hiéron, as one of “communicative unfolding” wherein the divine works in visible ways (cf. iconophilia vs. “freeze-framing” in Latour and Weibel 2002). At stake is the communicative potentiality of objects and bodies to be in touch with divine power. In circulating and transmitting sacred signs, they also forge the grounds of mystery (Arabic, as-sirr; as noted, also the term for “sacrament”).

This distinction, between hagion and hiéron thus concerns the relation between the nature of divine authority and legitimate forms of sacramental power. In their materially excessive form, liquids, like oil and blood, introduce vehicles of hiéron that are difficult to contain, that is, to secure. As propagating extensions of bodily and iconic forms, they communicate by seeping against and across borders of skin and surface. This enduring Coptic sensibility of saintly action is illustrated in a legendary excerpt from a tenth-century Coptic manuscript of a homily on the Holy Virgin attributed to Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria (C.E. 384–412). In it, he describes an icon’s bleeding as both threat and miraculous testimony:

The workmen looked and saw the tablet of wood, set up on top of the wall, the Icon of the Virgin being drawn therein. They took it, and saluted it, and embraced it, and kissed its hands and feet and continued to salute it a long time, pressing it to their bosom in great faith. [Then one] seized the tablet of wood which was in their hands and shattered it, and broke it into small pieces and cast it into a basket … when the workman picked up the basket, blood flowed continually from the basket which contained the icon of the Virgin … The icon remains ever unto now, and it shall remain world without end. [Skalova and Gabra 2001:33, emphasis added]¹⁴

The power of the icon lies precisely in its capacity to overcome efforts to contain its transmissive effects in liquid form. It was Samia’s body, in imitation of iconic matter, that made her the sign of competing forms of sacred truth and holiness. Such sacramental action leads to corollary forms of violence.

Samia’s weeping hand was concealed behind monastery walls for five years. Indeed, a ban on images is grounded in the prohibitive notion of holiness, the hagion. Conceptually, it is not a coincidence that hagion reappears when Giorgio Agamben also draws on Benveniste in his exposition of the “separation of life” from “the world of the living” (1998:66). Here, it is a certain concept of holiness, and its legitimate forms of communicativity, that is reinscribed in this act of violence. A metaphysical structure is not reenacted, but a structure of public religiosity is introduced. The productivity of hagion results from prohibition: The power of Samia’s body intensified once it was placed at a physical distance, in the realm of invisibility. In prohibiting the accessibility of oil, of holy images flowing anew from Samia’s hand, new images were consecrated outside the realm of priestly legitimation, introducing a mimetic engine of Marian nearness and reproduction. What they also introduced were new forces of movement on witnessing bodies, material and spiritual in nature.

“Confusion” and public order

In the glass display case of the Church of St. Bishoi, adjacent to the photographs of bodily artifacts of Samia’s dream, there are also photos of Samia squeezing oil from her right hand into jars, with people—mostly Copts—watching all around. The spectacle of her hand attracts attention, and the mimetic accumulation of oils introduces the possibility of broader bodily circulation. Part and parcel of the public structure of eyewitnessing, spatial proximity to the residual activity of her hand is what makes the experience powerful.
For her testimony of Marian intercession to move others, Samia's bodily images must be seen — and even touched.

We might probe even further into the material politics of the threat posed by this image economy of Marian miracles, particularly at the point at which Samia's hand exuded oil. For, in addition to disrupting certain communicative arenas of church and state power, her hand was identified as a sign of public disorder, that is, a danger to the public beyond the confines of the Coptic Orthodox community. As I now show, the convergence of church and state authority critically turns on a particular notion of what public order looks like and the authoritative shape of religious truths necessary to uphold it.

In the days following Samia's miraculous healing, the newspapers began to report on it and people began to talk. During the ten-day period between the Virgin's initial dream visitation and St. Elizabeth's self-revelation, the unknown identity of the "big woman," referred to by Father Boula as "the fourth," posed a problem of saintly authority. The Friday after Samia's healing, the mosques in Port Said announced, "The Virgin and Sayyida Ayesha came and healed a woman." This announcement stirred unease among Copts, who asked for the identity of "the fourth." This public urging for divine clarity prompted a second dream in which the mysterious lady visited Samia, this time with the message that she was St. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

In the words of Father Boula, it was "confusion" (al-balbala) that initially raised alarm among security officials in Port Said. As ethnographers of Islam have pointed out, the term confusion, also connoting "public disorder," frequently serves as the stated reason the Egyptian state intervenes in the public realm of Sufi imagination (Gilsenan 2008; Mittermaier 2008; Schielke 2008). Coptic-Muslim relations are not the same everywhere in Egypt, and two points are to be noted with respect to Port Said. First, the recent surge of Salafism along the Suez and within Alexandria and smaller cities in the Delta region has increased the exposure of Port Said to new types of religiosity and regulation (Brown 2011). Second, this trend has led to more suspicion of cults of sainthood and commemoration practices, both Coptic and Muslim. This lies in stark contrast to cities in Upper Egypt, which are arguably more characterized to date by the presence of Sufi shrines and practices. There is a strong likelihood that these two aspects of a shifting religious landscape in Port Said have affected both church and police sensitivities to public forms of sainthood veneration and their potential to catalyze "confusion."

About two weeks after the second dream, Samia's hand began to exude oil, attracting crowds to the Church of St. Bishoi, where she was staying. Some days after this bodily image drew significant attention, local police detectives in Port Said examined Samia's hand and then notified the Office of the Ministry of the Interior in Cairo in Midan Lazoghli. At the request of Egyptian Security Headquarters, Father Boula and Father Bishoi accompanied Samia to Cairo to see Chief Magdy Bey Shareef in his office along with 10–12 officers. In my interview with him, Father Boula provides a detailed account of the dialogue between the police chief and Samia, as well as of the staging of bodily investigation that led the chief to make a consequential decision. According to Father Boula, Bey Shareef asked, "Samia, is your hand truly exuding oil?" She did not answer. After rolling up her sleeves, he scrubbed her hand with soap and wrapped her right arm, hand, and fingers with cloth. And, then, they all waited. Father Boula describes the steps of the examination:

Then, [Bey Shareef] rose, got the cloth from her, and found her hand steadily glistening (bitlamma). And he went and gave her another piece of cloth, and she took it and the entire thing soaked up the oil. This was in front of him and other officers, in his office. They all saw the oil and some of them were afraid of her. They said, "She is doing this so that Muslims will believe," He said, "Where are you going, Father?" "We are going to the monastery," "Fine. It would be best if you stayed there a little bit and don't go home now. If you go home, it will make confusion (al-balbala) between Muslims and Christians."

This narrative account, offered by Samia's priestly patron, illustrates a genre of eyewitness testimony but reveals little of the intention or strategy of state security officers. The contagious logic of cause and effect is familiar. Isolated from its originary setting of conveying saintly power, Samia's hand is tested to see if it "truly" produces oil. Scrubbed, wrapped, and unwrapped, it creates new, contact-borne artifacts of evidence. For Father Boula, who reports its visualizing effects as evidence of its power, her bodily image is one that advances Muslim spectators toward fear: She is exuding oil so that Muslims will believe. In his imagining of possible consequences, the realm of spectatorship risks moving people toward uncertain ends.

Whether this risk was appropriately assessed remains subject to speculation, and only that. After recounting what Father Boula had revealed to me, I asked a Coptic friend, who organizes civic dialogues between priests and sheikhs in the Delta region, for his opinion on whether this risk seemed reasonable and why. He suggested the possibility that her oil-seeping hand might have been understood as potentially placing her in danger from those offended by it. Aniconic sensibilities certainly exist among both Muslims and Coptic Christians (particularly evangelicals), but it would be premature to conclude that they necessarily lead to offense. I recall the words of one custodian at the popular Abbasid Mosque in central Port Said, who invoked a Qur'anic reference in response to my asking if he had heard of the oil-emitting icon of the Virgin: "They said, 'Show us
God in public signs’ but we in Islam, we believe in God, whether or not anybody saw him. That’s why the Prophet said, ‘My companions are those who believe in me without seeing me.’” My point here is not that the risk perceived by Father Boula and the police was off the mark, or completely fabricated, but that varied religious sensibilities toward material signs of miraculous truth should not be too readily equated with disruption, disorder, and danger. We might say there is also room for a kind of “indifference” to images built into the reasoning logics—in this case, characteristically “modernist”—of various religious traditions.

What thus remains from her police visit is the widely observed, verifiable fact that Samia was sent to stay in the Convent of St. Dimyana. State security had some level of investment in preventing her bodily visibility and, perhaps more so, in delegating custodial powers over her physical location to the Coptic Orthodox Church. This security measure of sequestering a Coptic woman behind monastery walls, conjointly enforced by church and state, is neither unprecedented nor unique. In contrast to Samia’s situation, however, the public presence of other women, in different contexts and moments, was considered potentially threatening to the national order (Mahmood 2012). In such cases, it is notable that the key point of political contention has been the problematic role of church intervention in matters involving the security and rights of individuals. As I mention above, the Egyptian state maintains strategic alliances with religious institutions like the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al-Azhar to regulate the public and political happenings of everyday religious life. In other words, it is the institutional position of the church vis-à-vis the state that is also at stake in the political making of public order.

In regulating Samia’s body—its public presence and activity—the state and church also had a hand in transforming the public nature of Samia’s testimony, that is, the shape of religious truth. Here, I pause and think through the implications of Father Boula’s claim that Samia would generate “confusion” and suggest another explanation for her sequestering. On the mere face of it, this move would seem to pit Muslims and Christians against each other, the assumption being that these two religious traditions are intrinsically at odds with each other. But it also concerns the genealogical underpinnings of “public order,” as both a concept and an armature crucial to modern state power.

In her analysis of John Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, political theorist Kirstie McClure brilliantly makes the case that Locke’s late position as a “liberal” must not be seen as a divergence from his early position as a defender of “authoritarian” modes of power. Instead, she argues, his theory of liberal toleration reflects continuing strands of his commitment to the prerogative powers of the state—only in other terms. She shifts the grounds of analysis, usefully pointing out that what we refer to as “wars of religion” were, as articulated from within religious perspectives, “wars of truth.” She further explains that the aim of Locke’s state model was to articulate such truth claims as matters of “political indifference”:

[Locke’s letter] makes clear that this privilege of [worship acceptable to the conscience of the believer] has its epistemological ground and limit in the absence of worldly injury. “Indifferent things” remain the peculiar jurisdiction of civil authority, but a distinction between civil and religious “indifference” is marked by the claim that properly religious practices concern only a care for salvation . . . Conversely, political authority over indifferent things is specifically directed to such things as do produce discernible worldly effects . . . for “the public good is the rule and measure of all lawmakers.” [McClure 1990:377, emphasis added]

Within a liberal politics of toleration is an ordering of those aspects of religious livelihood that are subject to state regulation and those that are not. As McClure describes it, the transformation of religious truths, into private beliefs and outward practices that “concern only a care for salvation,” enables the rise of state power over all things that concern “the public good.”

To be clear, government under the Mubarak regime is not considered that of a “liberal state.” And yet, where McClure’s critical study of liberal power (in my reading, a study of its disguised antinomic relation to authoritarian models of state power) provides productive insight is in the way she shifts attention to the intrinsic linkages between the ordering of truths and the making of public order. As Hussein Agrama proposes in his work on “public order” (*al-nizām al-‘ām*) in Egyptian state courts and what he argues to be the “indeterminate” nature of secularism, sensibilities that are intimate and “secret” are critical to the ordering of the “private” from the “public” (2010b:511–517). Against speculations surrounding the reception of Samia’s hand, what can be safely concluded is that its sequestering had an effect on the testimonial structure of Marian miracles. Recall that whatever role her bodily transgressions played in the force of testimony was contingent on their capacity to be seen. It was precisely this material capacity that was constrained and circumscribed behind church walls. Thus, the province of salvific truths was transformatively secured in realms that are inconsequential to the status of public order.

In such an undoing of truth making, Samia’s hand was stripped of its significance as an image of divine testimony, in intimate relation to other images and objects that carry Marian presence and power. Samia’s hand and the oils it produced, insofar as they caused “discernible worldly effects,” were made “indifferent” to salvation. For they posed a risk to a form of public order in which the interlocking
mimesis of flesh, blood, and oil does not—or, more exactly, should not—really “matter.”

**Materialities of containment and secretion**

After visiting the Ministry of the Interior in Cairo, Samia went to the Monastery of St. Bishoi in Wadi Natroun with Father Boula and Father Bishoi. There, they received a phone call from the Metropolitan of Tanta: “There is no permission for Samia to enter Port Said now. Wait a little bit.” “A little bit” became five years. During that period, Samia moved to the Convent of St. Dimyana in Bilqas, where she and her hand were cloistered behind convent walls. Her testimony of Marian intervention, which began with the exit of cancerous blood and ended with the emission of holy oils, was defined by the travel of liquids from inside to outside. For this reason, her body’s edges were policed and its activity of public secretion managed. This ban from visibility (hagion) set into play a competing dynamics of Marian propagation (hiéron).

Sometime during Samia’s five-year period of containment, a peculiar displacement occurred: Inside her prayer cell, a print poster icon of the Virgin began to exude oil. It did so through autoconsecration, its iconic authority deriving from the outpouring of a dream rather than from priestly anointment. As a technology of traversing earthly and spiritual worlds, the icon serves as a vehicle of spatial and bodily occupation (Buck-Morss 2007; Mondzain 2000). Its surface and edges, where saintly presence begins and where it ends, make publicly accessible the passing movement of divine power. To look at the image of the Virgin is thus to become another image of saintly communicativity: As one pilgrim explained to me, “Sometimes I don’t think about anything. I just look and receive what the saints have for me.” From a more theological perspective, one might think of this bodily passage as characteristic of Christian beginnings: In the words of St. Theodore the Studite, who stages his Orthodox defense of icons as one fundamentally of the incarnation, “In the same way, you should understand that the Godhead has also remained uncircumscribable in being circumscribed” (1981:First Refutation, 3). As public witness to Christ’s fleshly envelope, then, the icon testifies to the paradoxes of divine bodily mediation. Even while contained by boundaries of skin and paper, the porous dynamics of expansion and release intrinsic to all holy images are always there (see also de Abreu n.d.). Their multiply mediated exposure thus sets the material conditions for saintly distribution and movement.

Saintly icons themselves might also be considered “pores,” portals and openings accessible at their surfaces. In practical imagination, the surface of the icon is where saints travel between heavenly and earthly realms. Thus, Coptic informants have described to me their visions of saints who appear through their icons: St. Abanoub walks through his image to heal a sick woman, Al-Baba Kyrollis jumps out of his frame to ward off a thief. Objects are also exchanged through an icon’s miraculous boundaries. The History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church (Ibn al- Muqaffa 1904–10) provides the example of one ninth-century ruler who throws a bunch of basil to the icon of St. Theodore the Martyr and is astonished when the saint catches it. I have also heard the legend (source unknown) of the Coptic monk who, in a moment of despair, catches a rose thrown at him from an icon.

Today, the ritual image of veneration associated with Samia’s miracle is the poster icon of the Virgin, foregrounded inside the Church of St. Bishoi in Port Said. Framed with wood and a garland of flowers, situated at the sanctuary entrance, the Marian portrait is encased within glass and surrounded by velvet rope. These reinforcing borders circumscribe the physical domain of Marian presence. The icon itself is a popular, familiar image of the Virgin dressed in a blue and white robe, her hands outstretched, her head tilted downward—what Copts identify as al-manzar at-tagalli (the apparitional pose). Pilgrims gaze at her, sing hymns, take photos, and record videos on their cell phones to capture her mobile activity. Remitted through aural circuits, the Marian similarities of dream visitation appear once again, this time emerging within the “age of its technological reproducibility” (Benjamin 2008). And yet, the poster is exhibited as the quintessential image of saintly authenticity and irreplicability. Bound to its alcove within the wall of the church, the Marian icon renders the place of its shrine in Port Said unique, as one earthly “locus sanctorum” among others (Duval 1982). Its enclosure is both the “condition and consequence of disclosure” (Kockelman 2007:304).

When pilgrims come to see the Marian icon in Port Said, they pay attention to the activity of the oil. Its movement is aggressive, pulling the weight of the image downward. Its viscosity makes it capturable and containable. Caught in a plastic tarp at the foot of the image, stored and distributed in finger-sized vials, the oil leaves the church and goes to homes and to the ailing bodies of petitioners. In my conversations with pilgrims, most emphasized that the icon generates oil by itself and that the volume of oil is infinitely abundant. In this final displacement, the oil serves as the mediating tissue between stationary icon and mobile persons, as the residuary medium of “transferal” (intiqal; Pandolfo 1997). As they exit the church sanctuary, the priest blesses the flesh of the pilgrims who carry the vials by dabbing their wrists and foreheads with oil (Figure 3). Oil is skinlike in its capacity to seal and move evenly across surfaces, and its material capacities “help . . . associate it with the spreading or transfer of virtues or properties between skins and across individual bodies” (Connor 2004:182; cf. Turner 2007). From the icon’s interior to its exterior, the oils serve as the vehicle of secretion, the communicative
making of a “secret.” Across the icon onto bodies, the oils create new surfaces of containment, the anointment of holy flesh, akin to the “baptism of priests.”

For its visitors, the icon is the remembrance (ad-dhikra) of February 20, the date of the Virgin’s miracle in Samia’s first dream. And yet, in the church, there is no mention of her second dream of “the fourth” or of the controversies surrounding the excesses of her hand. Shortly after the icon began to secrete oil, Samia’s hand stopped doing so and, upon confirmation by the church, the state permitted her to go home to Port Fouad, across the Suez Canal from Port Said, where she entered the Convent of the Good Shepherd. Through the eruption of oils from the icon, Samia was effectively released, her return enabled by a materially lateral transfer of miraculous media from skin to paper. This translation of saintly power, that is, the transport of holy images from one place to another, is what makes the establishing of new sites of holy authority possible.

Now “dead to the world,” Samia is a nun, an ascetic who quietly serves in Port Fouad, having ceded the replication of miracle-images to the mediation of a print poster and the effluviae of oils. Her new name, “Sister Elizabeth,” and the exuviae of her hand are the only remaining fragments of a public dispute over a past set of truths. In the meantime, oils travel outward from the church to witnesses longing for new Marian miracles. “Bring me a vial for my sick mother-in-law,” one of my friends in Cairo requested before I headed to Port Said.

“Secrets” and their effects

Before my vials of oil made it back to Cairo, they first passed by other places. After hearing that Samia’s dream had been of interest to Muslims in Port Said more than a decade ago, I hoped to find more fieldwork clues. It was a challenging and awkward hunt. After leaving the church gates, randomly asking shopkeepers and passersby if they had heard of the oil-exuding icon of the Virgin, I was still at a loss. A manager in the National Bank of Egypt noticed me and then invited me for tea in her office on Midan Manshiyya, just catty-corner to the Church of St. Bishoi. After I explained that I was trying to learn more about the miracle icon and whether Muslims in the neighborhood knew of it today, she posed a question. “Did you see it with your own eyes?” Her question reminded me of Father Boula’s refrain throughout: “So that everyone could see for themselves.” At this point in our conversation, I took the vials from my bag, and she opened each one, peering inside and sniffing the fragrance. Then she said something that caught me a bit by surprise: “Christians do most of their activities inside the church. I don’t know what goes on inside there.”

Unlike others nearby whom I had briefly engaged, many of whom claimed ignorance or dismissed the icon as a kind of trick, with no reference to dreams or controversies over envisioned identities, she pointed out to me the plain fact that the icon was located inside the church. For that reason, she simply had no basis for knowing much about it. Each year since 2007, I have visited the Church of St. Bishoi to study the oil-exuding Marian icon. From the start, it was immediately clear to me from full days spent inside, chatting with church employees, pilgrims, and parishioners, that Copts were overwhelmingly the ones physically present—even though talk of Muslims also coming to visit the church consistently resurfaced as a common theme. After my last visit, it had also become evident that these Coptic visitors themselves were partial to lost traces of the icon’s testimonial memory. For it was only during a follow-up interview in late December 2010 that Father Boula, for reasons still unknown to me, decided to share bits of a “secret” about the state’s involvement in the publicity of miracles. Indeed, this article was largely enabled by his decision to share bits of what he had deliberately omitted beforehand: “What I didn’t write in the book and what I will tell you now . . . .”

By way of conclusion, I offer some thoughts on the legacies of church and state intervention in the public nature of miracles and the political structure of religious communication. It is through the critical lens of the “secret” and its variable effects that my reflections begin. Drawing on Joseph Masco’s characterization of counter-terrorist power, I see much of the church’s secrecy as owing to “the ability of officials to manage the public/secret divide through the mobilization of threat” (2010:433). In recent years, Coptic churches have experienced an intensified presence of police guards and a security apparatus fortified with metal detectors bolstered with ID checkpoints. Much of this is a response to perceived threats of attack (particularly in the post-Revolution moment), the assessment of which lies beyond the scope of this discussion. According to one highly problematic
viewpoint, such a reaction on the part of the church reflects an ongoing stereotype of Copts, widely held in the Egyptian public, as “devious and secretive”—possessing a “secretiveness” entrenched in a cultural psychology, that is, in a “natural desire for self-preservation” (Pennington 1982:178). Taking this view further into the public realm of accusation and conspiracy, the church’s efforts to police boundaries are also vocalized as signs of their ambitions to establish a separate Coptic state and develop “storehouses for weapons” (Fawzi 2010). For example, in one inflammatory interview on Al Jazeera on September 16, 2010, one prominent Islamist intellectual, Muhammad Salim al-Awa, suggested that churches in Port Said are stockpiled with weapons transported from cargo ships. The harnessing of threats, against churches and through churches, thus risks having cyclical effects.

Secrets are productive, propelling imaginings of what unfolds behind walls and gates, what is concealed and revealed within a multiplicity of objects and persons. Knitting communities as knowing and known intimates, they also transmit effects of alienation as communicative borders and boundaries. It is, after all, not sufficient to “see” miracle-images with one’s own eyes. My host and tea companion suggested that the baseline circumscription of all Christian-specific activities to the church’s interior prevented her from having a face-to-face encounter with the icon, even if she was exposed to the oils carried outside. Muslims have entered the church and inspected the icon (Father Boula has shown me photos), although given the heightened presence of hired guards at the gates, and sometimes of state police, finding Muslims in churches is an increasingly rare phenomenon (as a non-Muslim non-Egyptian, I have also been “carded” upon entering mass more than once). This organization of imagined inaccessibility, a virtual “ghettoizing” of Christians from Muslims, is indicative of other domains of boundary making and hidden activity. For instance, a number of Copts have lamented to me that the days are long gone when open doors of Christian and Muslim neighbors signaled an everyday permanence of mixed mingling and exchange. People express nostalgia not only for interreligious openness but also for a time before churches and homes became the necessary, protected “safe havens” of Christian activity in Egypt.

To characterize the Coptic community as “secretive,” as one also under threat from outside, is to overlook a crucial point. I have devoted much of this discussion to ethnographically accounting for the ways in which distinct orders of “secrecy”—analyzed as “security” and “sacramentality”—are implicated in the making of church and state powers. Secrets also have to be made; it is not only the Copts who are “in” on them, if they know of them at all. Historical shifts in relations between the Egyptian state and the Coptic Orthodox Church have resulted in various measures directed toward regulating the Coptic community and securing public order between Muslims and Christians. Church–state relations are both currently vulnerable and ripe for transformation. As I write these final paragraphs, the newly elected Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi has dismissed Marshal Tantawi, former head of SCAF, and the Coptic Orthodox papal seat remains vacant for the first time in over 40 years (outlasting the duration of the Mubarak regime).

And yet, of course, a change of headship is merely part of what would be required to recover the forms of religion left behind. “Sacramentality,” as one realm of “secrecy,” is an order divergent from the political structure of majority–minority difference and of church–state separation. Materially constitutive of divine authority, it intersects with related orders of “security” definitive of a range of transgressions—bodily, spatial, reproductive, perceptual. The institution of public order takes the form of hiding women from view. The person of faithfulness is replicated in the active icon. The power of miracles is, at once, skin deep and skin superficial. In these provocations, what I mean to stimulate within our intellectual imaginations is recognition of the far-reaching effects of religious and political authority within the intricate density of “secrecy.” They involve more than a Muslim woman not “knowing” of the icon in the church. Rather, the very nature of mimetic knowledge, the memory of her Coptic neighbor’s dream vision once offered in the Marian icon, is radically forgotten. Which pilgrims, Copts included, remember Samia’s bodily displacement when gazing at the icon?

As the testimony of the miracle icon suggests, the publicity of religion is also transformed, through the regulation of imagination and material action. The very capacity for Marian presence to circulate “within and across religions,” mediated by various images, is what was arrested in Port Said. It is this secret that is mobilized to undo the workings of saintly threat and to create new measures of protection for a transformed memory no longer attendant to the truthful implications of a woman’s dream.

Notes

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1. More specifically, the vast majority of these pilgrims belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Over 90 percent of Christians in Egypt are Orthodox, and the remainder are mainly Coptic Protestants and Catholics. Numerous current studies indicate Coptic Christians compose anywhere from 6 to 12 percent of Egypt’s population.

2. Here, I introduce the term *miracle-image* to characterize an image regarded as miraculous because of its unique activity, quality, or effects recognized as divinely authored.

3. This article is a result of fieldwork I conducted in Port Said, during annual trips from 2007 until 2010. Pilgrims who visited Port Said from Cairo were also interviewed. During each trip, I stayed one to two days and interviewed pilgrimage participants, church members, and nuns in the Good Shepherd Convent.

4. I rely on the details of Samia’s dream as described in church pamphlets and DVDs and the church website. I have found the accounts to be largely uniform, with very minor discrepancies, most likely because they all internally replicate the same sources.

5. This quote is taken from *Order of the priesthood* (*Tartib al-kahanāt*), a major text of the Coptic Orthodox Church from the medieval period. Its authorship has often been attributed to the tenth-century Coptic theologian and historian Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa (1955).

6. My concern here is not whether these miracles were “real” or illusory–false, or if they were “supernatural” or human in origin. Historically, the categories for evaluating “exceptional phenomena” have widely varied. Here, I find valuable the insights of historian of science Lorraine Daston, who argues that early modern natural science in Europe was largely founded on the anomalies and oddities understood as internal to the workings of the natural world. See also Daston and Park 1998.

7. According to anthropologist Robert Hertz’s spatial orientation of moral order, the right represents beneficence and activity and the left, impurity and maleficence. For more detail, see Ochoa 2007.

8. The aroma issued from multiple fragrances, or *al-hanāt*, which is simply a generic name for a mixture of perfumes. Al-ḥanāt is used to anoint the relics of saints and distribute their blessings. To my knowledge, there was no effort to regulate Samia’s odor, only her visibility.


10. This definition is widely assumed and is elaborated by a contemporary Coptic theologian, Bishop Mettaous, the abbot of the Monastery of St. Syrian. For more, see his tract “Sacramental Rites in the Coptic Orthodox Church” (Bishop Mettaous n.d.).

11. These issues have recently been vibrantly debated among contending figures of the Coptic Orthodox Church. In his book *Deification of humankind* (*Ta‘līh al-insān*; 2006), Pope Shenouda III charges the deeply respected late monk Matthew the Poor (givin the pseudonym “the writer” *[al-mu‘ālīf]*) and ex-communicant-turned-Anglican theologian George Habib Bibawy, of importing Western ideas about “deification” into the church. For more on these theological debates, see the last chapter of Stephen Davis’s *Coptic Christology in Practice* (2008).

12. Pope Cyril IV (1854–61), known as the “Father of Reform” (Abū ʿĪlāh), is deemed a modernizer and iconoclast, having removed all icons from the Cairo Cathedral and set them on fire: “God alone should be adored.” Historian Paul Sedra (2011) persuasively suggests that it was English missionary John Lieder’s influence on the pope that led to this public image destruction.

13. The texts Mondzain closely analyzes are *Antirrhetics*, by Nikephoros, patriarch of Constantinople (C.E. 758–828); the *Horas* of the Council of Hieria (C.E. 754); the *Pseuseis* of Emperor Constantine V; and the *Acta* of the Council of Nicaea (C.E. 787).

14. In the homily, it is the “Hebrew” or the “Jew” who represents the figure of the iconoclast and, upon witnessing the miracle of the bleeding icon of the Virgin, converts to Christianity.

15. The Virgin Mary, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist are shared figures in Islam and Christianity (though with different biographies). Dream visitations and miraculous healings through visions also occur among Muslims in Egypt, as studies of Sufism have detailed (Hoffman 1995; Mittermaier 2011). Historians of late ancient Egypt have proposed that aspects of Christian shrines of dream incubation might have originated in earlier Greek practices associated with the cults of Isis and Asclepius. For more, see Frankfurter 1998 and Bagnall 1976.

16. In 2004 and again in 2010, the alleged conversions to Islam of two Coptic women, specifically the wives of priests, sparked public controversy over the status of their identities and, more significantly, the power of the church to intervene in the private affairs of citizens. In these cases, the church relied on state security forces to “return” the women to their families and, ultimately, to the custody of the church. Both women remain in Coptic monasteries, their precise locations unknown. For more detail, see Tadros 2011 and Mahmoud 2012.

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Trouillot, Michel Rolph

Turner, Terence S.

Vidal, Fernando

Voile, Brigitte

Warnier, Jean-Pierre

Weber, Max

Zeidan, David

Angie Heo
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11
Göttingen 37073
Germany
heo@mmg.mpg.de