This article investigates what it means for the Virgin Mary to be a common figure between Christianity and Islam. Departing from approaches which emphasize the textual biography and personality of figural saints, it explores the Virgin as a contested image of divine intercession among Muslims and Christians on the ground. Beginning with lived contexts of everyday mediation, it thus situates the “commonness” of the Virgin within the thick practical realities of modern communication and imagination. More specifically, it probes one ethnographic case of a Marian apparition which occurred in Giza in 2009, producing eyewitness observation and critical reflection. My aim is to show how the historical phenomenon of “collective apparitions” provides a distinctive visual-cultural platform for evaluating the communicatively public aspects of saintly mediation. In doing so, this study concretely traces how growing cults of the Virgin Mary shape newly widespread practices.
of religious identification and differentiation among contemporary Orthodox, Protestants, and Muslims in Egypt.

THE VIRGIN BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

WIDELY UPHELD AS A BRIDGE between Christian and Islamic traditions, the Virgin Mary frequently serves as a shared figure of veneration and a symbol of interfaith harmony within a growing industry of worldwide Muslim–Christian dialogue. In recent decades, the aims of building “common ground” between faiths and advancing a better understanding of Islam, among Christians in North America and Europe in particular, have gained momentum as a potential solution to prejudices and a viable means to peace (Küng 1987; Hussain 2006; Heck 2009; Pratt 2009). In such a context, the Virgin does not provoke as much problematic disagreement as her son Jesus might: in the words of Pope Paul VI, “Although not acknowledging him as God, [Muslims] venerate Jesus as a prophet; his Virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke” (Vatican Council II 1965; see also Robinson 1991). If there are differences in her biographical details among her faithful devotees, there are more commonalities to emphasize and cherish: her virtues of piety and submission (Haddad and Smith 1989; Armanios 2002), her miraculous conception (Geagea 1984; Kroeger 1988), her resemblance to other holy figures (Sered 1991; Thurkill 2007), and her place in the “highest category of human beings” (Schleifer 1998).

In places with deep histories of Muslim–Christian coexistence, the Virgin Mary continues to be an integral part of an extensive landscape of sainthood cults that remain active to this day. Over the past few years, scholarship focusing on cults in the Mediterranean East has opened up a welcomed perspective on how Muslims and Christians engage saints in contemporary contexts of practical interaction. In Jordan, for instance, Catholics are internally divided as to whether or not they share their Mary with Muslims (Jansen 2009). Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Macedonia mingle during the Feast of the Prophet Elijah, participating together in healing and fertility rituals (Bowman 2010). And in Istanbul, as well as throughout the Balkans and Anatolia, shrines for St. George the Martyr are characterized as a “no-man’s-land that is open to all” (Couroucli 2012). However much the degrees of consensus and discord might vary across the “the horizontal unity of the Mediterranean,” saint veneration seems to suggestively offer, at the very least, that “warm breath of hope for a lost solidarity” (Brown 1981, 1982: 102).
In Egypt, where I have conducted fieldwork among Coptic Christians (or “Copts”) since 2004, many shrines and monasteries have grown increasingly vulnerable to destructive violence. In the immediate aftermath of the military’s coup in July 2013, Egypt’s Copts have obtained significant international attention as victims of church burnings and lootings, mainly at the hands of supporters for the ousted former President Muhammad Morsi.\(^1\) Considered the largest “religious minority” in the Arab Middle East, Copts and their precarious status direct attention to the role that “religion” (and what kind of “religion”) plays in their systemic marginalization in the nation and society. Parallel to the Islamic Revival that swept the Muslim world from the 1970s onward (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006), the “Coptic Renaissance” (al-nahda al-qibtîya) gave rise to expansive administrative, educational, and social reforms (el-Khawaga 1998; Hasan 2003; Guirguis and van Doorn-Harder 2011; Sedra 2011). It was also during this period that the Coptic Church consolidated its powers as the key institution of communal representation with respect to the Egyptian state’s authoritarian rule (Rowe 2009; Shenoda 2012; Tadros 2013). Under neoliberalizing structures of satellite media and migration, Muslims and Christians entered into increasingly segregated spheres of religious activity and capital flow (see Starrett 1995; Michael 2011; Iskander 2012). Given these recent historical shifts, the challenge facing scholars interested in the “religious” predicament of Copts is to identify the structural ties and transformations between various forms of religion and the larger institutions and trends which shape social interactions more broadly.

Here, I hope, is where studying “the Virgin in Egypt” (al-‘adhrâ’ fi mîṣr) can provide some useful hints and glimmers of insight. In Egypt, confessional comparisons of the Virgin are local, current, and very public. For example, in his writings to a mainly Coptic audience, the highly popular priest Father ʿAbdal-Masih al-Basit Abu al-Khayr draws upon a Quranic verse to convey her revered status in Islam: “When the angels said, ‘Mary, Allah has chosen you, and purified you; he has chosen you above all women in the worlds.’” (Al-ʿImran 3:42 quoted in

\(^1\)Copts are frequently attacked because they are readily identifiable amid the complex tangle of political factions against Morsi’s presidency. Of the nearly one hundred attacks on churches (of all denominations) since July 2013, a great percentage of them occurred in Upper Egypt, especially in the governates of Minya and Assyut. Although its nature and scale are shockingly unprecedented, it is critical to check hasty conclusions that this violence proves the Muslim Brotherhood’s otherwise latent animosity toward Christians. Before and after the exit of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, Copts grappled with their troubling, continuous status as easy targets of violence through two spectacular events in particular: the Alexandrian church bombing of January 2011 and the Maspero Massacre of October 2011.
Abdal-Masih al-Basit 2010: 16). Indeed, in my conversations with several Copts, the fact that Muslims also “see” and “believe” in her was a frequent claim, although puzzlingly enough, I had a difficult time finding Muslims where holy spaces were celebrated as “shared.” Back in late August 2011, when the feast of the Virgin had burst into full swing, I spent some nights at the church where Father ‘Abdal-Masih al-Basit serves, the ancient shrine of the Holy Virgin at Musturud located on the northeastern industrial rim of Cairo and known to be one of the old sanctuaries visited by “Christians and Muslims alike” (Meinardus 1999 [1981]). There, amid the thousands coursing through the sacred grotto and holy well, to the street vendors and as far as the enormous Ferris wheel blinking with colorful lights at the end of all the crowds and beeping cars, I spotted only a handful of Muslim women with the coveted, filmy bags of holy water from the shrine (see also Mayeur-Jaouen 2012: 164).

Saints and cults of holy figures have proven to be a fertile field for debating the “syncretic” and “hybrid” elements of religious belonging from North Africa to South and Southeast Asia (van der Veer 1992; Inhorn 1994; Ho 2006). Probing the open interface of cult practices with shifting conditions of media modernity requires additional scrutiny of the ways in which mixed spaces and experienced phenomena are socially orchestrated to be “common.” Departing from approaches which emphasize the textual biography or charismatic personality of divine figures, this study thus explores the Virgin as a contested image of divine intercession among Muslims and Christians on the ground. Beginning with lived contexts of everyday mediation, it situates the sharedness of sainthood within the thick practical realities of communication and collective imagination. My greater interest lies in exploring the broader relations between modern institutions of mass media and transformations in social practices of identifying religious selves and others. As I detail, the material conditions of visual perception, mass reproduction, and spatial occupation constitute the basis from which public claims to commonness across religions gain viability. What I further show is how such common ground of Marian contention also generates novel practices of religious identification and differentiation—Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim—that perhaps do less for creating bridges than they do toward building tension.

This article pursues the case of one Marian apparition that took place at the Church of the Virgin and Archangel Michael in al-Warraq (Giza) in December 2009. Categorized as a “collective apparition,” it drew a mixed crowd of thousands to the corniche along the Nile, producing eyewitness reports and multiple fora of critical reflection. The public focus of its participant-observers was the Virgin Mary as a contested form of visual-cultural mediation. The three main players highlighted in what
follows are the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Coptic Evangelical Synod, and one Muslim man who presented himself to me as a kind of outlier-witness. To specify the modernizing aspects of the apparition, I concentrate on how genres of mass visuality ordered seers according to religious identity and how ideological distinctions between image, speech, and space created a particular object of phenomenal appearance. As I argue it, these distinctions in the evaluation of the Virgin’s communicative form further buttressed institutions of majority–minority difference and church territorial authority. Against upholding the apparition as a divine image impermeable to tides of historical change, we might then better understand how exactly it is that the Virgin is upheld as a “common” figure and to what ends in the political present for Copts in Egypt.

COLLECTIVE APPARITIONS

For Father Salib of Shubra, figuring out if the “apparition is truly the Virgin” is a matter of numbers: “When there is one, ten, or 100 who say ‘no’, and then there is 1,000, 10,000, or 100,000 who say ‘yes’, who are you going to believe” (al-Qahira al-Yaum, December 23, 2009)? According to the Coptic Orthodox Church’s statement of confirmation, the Virgin appeared on December 11, 2009, at the Church of the Virgin and Archangel Michael in al-Warraq. Like other Marian apparitions in the recent past, official verification relied on an aggregate collection of individual eyewitnesses. Composing 6–12% of Egypt’s population, the Coptic Christian minority is arguably afflicted with an “anxiety of incompleteness” characteristic of what Arjun Appadurai calls the “fear of small numbers” (2006: 52). If the viewing majority was understood to be Muslim in al-Warraq, as in nearly all neighborhoods in Egypt, then minorities would crucially require a convincing proportion of Muslim testimonies.

The phenomenon of “collective apparition” (al-zuhūrāt al-gamā‘īya) is, in fact, a historically recent one. Only in the second half of the twentieth century do visions of the Virgin come to be experienced as a group and at the site of a church building, as anthropologist Sandrine Keriakos

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2 Estimates by scholars, state officials, and clerics range wildly anywhere from 5 to 20%. As far as state-level politics are concerned, the estimates are consequential for Copts. On the heels of sectarian violence in al-Khusus Qalyubiyya, the personal secretary to Pope Tawadros II demanded adequate redress in numerical terms: “Copts constitute twenty percent of the Egyptian community. . . . This means they have the right to 100 seats out of 500 in parliament, and the same percentage in ministries, among governors and university presidents, and in the army and police” (Egypt Independent, April 10, 2013). Although Appadurai applies this metaphor to majorities, of course, minorities likewise suffer from this “frustrating deficit” (2006: 53).
keenly points out in her own work on apparitions in Egypt (2012). The Virgin of Zeitoun in 1968 continues to serve as the benchmark example of collective apparitions, “when millions saw Mary” (Johnston 1982). These millions of witnesses were understood to hail from “different countries, races, and religions” (Abdal-Masih al-Basit 2010: 9). Collective apparitions are distinguishable from “individual apparitions” (al-żuhūrāt al-fardiyya): When asked why he had not gone to Zeitoun earlier to see the apparitions, the mystic (and newly canonized saint as of June 2013) Pope Cyril VI replied that “he had been seeing visions of the Virgin Mary since his early childhood” (Meinardus 1999 [1981]: 118). As recalled in Coptic liturgical memory, the Virgin only appears to select individuals so as to intervene in moments of danger and distress: to the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mun (813–33 CE) before he was about to destroy a church; to Pope Abraham I (976–79 CE) to assure him that Copts would survive the threat of destruction (Shenoda 2007); to contemporary saint Sidhom Bishay (d. 1844) when he faced torture and martyrdom under Ottoman rule, as well as to other politically powerful leaders.

Related to the emergence of collective apparitions is the role of the Muslim guarantor (Mayeur-Jaouen 2005; Keriakos 2012). In 1954, the first mixed apparition of the Virgin took place in a school of nearly all Christian pupils inside the Coptic Patriarchate of Jerusalem, with the exception of one Muslim girl. In 1968, the first eyewitness of the Virgin in Zeitoun was recorded to be Muslim garage-workers who spotted her from across the street. In 2009, the first eyewitness in al-Warraq was identified to be the Muslim patrons of the café next door to the church. In the television show Pulse of the Church (Nabd al-Kinisa, December 20, 2009), aired by the Coptic satellite channel al-Aghapy TV, face-to-face interviews highlighted accounts from Muslim eyewitnesses:

I saw the Virgin at around 11.20 or 11.30 pm on top of the big tree and she was still small, she was going to and fro and at around 1.00 am, she appeared in full with a white and blue dress in front.

Hasan Muhammad

And I was crossing at around 12.30 am and I looked, everyone had come from their houses, I was just rushing home. Then I saw a big light moving on top of the left of the dome and to the right for about two minutes or three minutes.

Muhammad Sayyid
I was sitting on other side, across the church doing work on my car at around 11:30 pm and I found people running, and I said—“Hey! What’s going on?” I thought there was a problem at the church, and I ran and I found a big light revolving around the church.

Ahmad Sa’id

It is significant that these witnesses only report what they see, not necessarily whom they recognize. This was made clear to me when I sought a more detailed account from the owner of the neighboring coffeehouse, i.e., one of the first witnesses. Smoking water-pipes outside, with other men seated in colorful plastic chairs, he was not difficult to find. When I asked him if the Virgin had come to the church, he immediately threw up his hands in evasion: “I am no expert on religious things. I just know I saw a bright light and that’s all.”

Here, what I am suggesting is that this relatively new church method of verifying the truth of apparitions creates different categories of seers according to religious identity. Moreover, the collective order of witnessing that it creates, at once equalizing and differentiating, attributes more weight to Muslim seers than Christian ones. Muslim witnesses count more because they are ostensibly less tainted than their Coptic counterparts by the prejudices of wishing to see the Virgin. For if the experiential interiority of modernity’s observers “belonged to time, to flux, to death” (Crary 1990: 24), then “Muslim seeing” would provide access to truthfully objective vision. Such an emphasis on “Muslim versus Christian” is part and parcel of a mass politics of recognition, one in which the majority affirms a minoritarian point-of-view through the increase in numbers.3

In advancing a visual epistemology of majority–minority difference, collective apparitions also shored up a distinctive form of Coptic Church authority.

To gain a better sense of the changes wrought by the historical phenomenon of collective apparitions, it might be useful to visit other precedents of divine visuality in Egypt. For it was not always the case that beholding the Virgin consisted of a collective of individual witnesses seeing the same object of bright light moving on top of a church building. In his analysis of medieval Arabic commentary on divine revelation,
historian of Coptic theology Stephen Davis points out the ontological continuum between sleeping and waking visions (2008). An inner/outer division between subjective seer and objective reality is also not one which organizes the dream landscapes of Sufis in Egypt, as anthropologist Amira Mittermaier shows in her illuminating ethnography on saintly imagination. Rather, it is the hidden meanings (al-batin) of dream-visions which “reach beyond the observable” (Mittermaier 2011: 89). Similarly, among Copts, divinely true visions are not exhaustively based upon an empiricist notion of visual objectivity. At times, modernist sensibilities of the real combine with older ones of holy revelation. As one Coptic woman exclaimed to me, in her explanation of the unique seeing capacities of the late saint Tamav Irini (d. 2006): “We see Abu Saifain [St. Mercurius] in our sleep, but she is at a different spiritual level—she sees him in reality!”

In al-Warraq, by contrast, there is little correlation made between the spiritual status of observers and the accounts that they give. One major consequence of collective apparitions is thus the preservation of religious difference in visual experience. While the Virgin may be a common figure of seeing, the parameters of her public communication maintain differences of ultimately divine reference. This is how Father ‘Abdal Masih al-Basit of Musturud is able to qualify that Muslims “see her as the Virgin according to their own understanding,” thereby maintaining the gap between “the Christian Virgin” and “the Muslim Virgin” (Interview with the author, January 11, 2013). And I might add to his words, as many Copts have insistently reminded me, that Muslims also see the Virgin by puzzling virtue of the fact that “Muslims love her very much, too.”

**IMAGE AND SPEECH**

One remarkable observation that scholars of the Virgin Mary make when catching sight of her contemporary pictures in Coptic Egypt is their resemblance to the Roman Catholic image of the “Miraculous Mary” or “Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.” Captured in standardized form—across print iconography, photography, internet, and now mobile phones, this Mediterranean-traveled portrait of the Virgin is understood to represent the early nineteenth-century vision of St. Catherine Labouré. The icon also speaks to a genre of mass currency (originally via numismatic media) which is recursive in its reproducible effects. Marian apparitions in Egypt resemble the public commonness of mass-mediated pictures. As one witness of the apparition in al-Warraq instructed me, while excitedly pointing to a glossy print poster in her guest room: “See
that picture over there? She looked exactly like that—*exactly*" (see Finnestad 1994).

In the Roman Catholic Church, Marian apparitions, like the ones that had famously occurred at La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), and Fátima (1917), consisted of spoken messages conveyed to privileged seers. In her visions of the Virgin Mary during her evening meditations, for example, St. Catherine reported having exchanged words with her, spoken and heard. By contrast, the envisioned image of the apparition in al-Warraq was silent; it was entirely speechless. Its most frequently reported property was rather its bluish-white light, brilliant and bold—like “the explosion of a luminous planet.” It stood as an upright frontal profile with outstretched arms, what Copts refer to as “the transfigurational pose” or “apparitional pose” (*al-manzar al-tagalli*). This aesthetic form of Marian visuality, moreover, characterizes all collective apparitions in Egypt that have occurred since their mid-twentieth-century inception.

In the case of al-Warraq, it was the problem of speech and speechlessness which became cause for controversy between the Coptic Orthodox and the Coptic Evangelicals. Within a couple of weeks of the Virgin’s reported appearance along the Nile, a scandal of sorts erupted in the Coptic Evangelical church. Pastor Sameh Maurice of Qasr al-Dubbara, a prominent Protestant church located in downtown Tahrir Square, publicly congratulated the Coptic Orthodox Church for the apparition on the church website. Shortly afterward, he received a formal rebuke from the Evangelical Presbyterian Synod of the Nile for misrepresenting the Protestant position. Orthodox priests have often noted to me that Evangelicals cause more trouble than Muslims when it comes to discounting the Virgin’s blessings. Quoting the late Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda (d. 2012), in his televised declaration confirming the apparition of al-Warraq: “Muslims love and praise the Virgin more than some of the Protestants” (*Nabd al-Kinîsa*, 20 December 2009).

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4 Aesthetic histories of Marian imaginaries in Coptic Egypt are deeply rich, and *al-manzar al-tagalli* is not the only iconic form for availing the Virgin. Interestingly enough, in liturgical memory, the Virgin is also valued as a theological homologue to the church building, addressed by honorifics such as “ark of covenant,” “second heaven,” and “golden tower.” And, according to the Coptic monk Father Antunius, the church’s domes are themselves ritual vehicles of divine presence, as the “path by which the vision of one’s heart (bâṣirat qalb-ho) is opened to see heaven” so that one might “enter into participation with the heavens” (1989: 155).

5 A fraction of the estimated tenth of Egypt’s population who are Coptic Christians are Evangelical Protestants. Since the mid-nineteenth-century inception of their career in Egypt and the Middle East writ large, American and British Presbyterian missionaries targeted Eastern Orthodox churches for conversion, those “mummified churches” viewed “as dead as door nails” (Sharkey 2008: 135; see also Makdisi 2008; Sedra 2011).
In an interview with Pastor Refaat Fikry, the media chairman of the Nile Synod at that time, he expressed to me his personal opinion that the collective images of the Virgin are fabrications of laser technology. “They are a superstition (al-khurāfa), something other than the result of reason” (Interview with the author, January 13, 2010). According to him, no solidarity among Christians for the sake of saving face before the Muslim majority was worth compromising the truths of Christian teaching. Suspicions of artificial design were widespread: while passing underneath a glowing electric wire-silhouette of her on the streets of al-‘Abbasiya, one seminary student joked to me: “Here in Egypt, the Virgin appears somewhere every year.” Some days later, I also saw a journalist announce to a mixed group of his colleagues in his office: “Even if [the Virgin] appeared before my very eyes, I would deny her.”

On December 23, 2009, some days after the apparition-event, the popular talk show Cairo Today (al-Qāhira al-Zaum) convened two representatives of the Orthodox Church and one from the Evangelical. In this episode, co-hosts Amr Adib and Mustafa Siddqi pressed the Protestant Pastor Zakariya for his response to the public aftermath of al-Warraq. “Do you believe the apparition is true?” Without giving a direct yes or no, the former secretary of the Evangelical Synod responded with an elaboration of its official position:

We distinguish apparitions according to two types. . . . There are apparitions—“divine” (illāhi), when we read the Bible, we find the first apparition was that of an angel of the Lord to Hagar. [In all divine apparitions], there is a goal, and a reason for his coming, and the person who appears says who he is and the person who sees is certain whom he has seen. . . . The second type is the “deceptive” (kādhiba), it says in the Bible that in the last days, there will be apparitions and prophets that will pretend to be Christ himself. (emphasis mine)

Drawing upon a scriptural precedent, Zakariya described a specific image of a person who acts as a divine messenger in perceptible form: to be truthfully seen, the Virgin, like the angel of the Lord, must say who she is. Not only must she speak, but she must also identify herself in her own speech and the verbal message of her identity must be securely received by the recipient. Envisioned as a type of person, the Synod position thus upheld the speaking angel—not the speechless apparition—as the prototype of legitimate intercession. At this historical conjunction, we see how the collective image of al-Warraq generated a certain vocabulary for Christian self-identification and comparison. On the one hand, the Evangelical Church publicly affirmed the Roman Catholic Church’s
endorsement of apparitional forms where spoken messages centrally feature. On the other hand, it distinguished itself from the Coptic Orthodox Church in its privileging of self-publicizable word over the silence of reproducible bright lights.

This ideology of religious communication also indicates arrangements of media and speech that are arguably modern. In his influential work on Protestant Calvinism (a heritage shared with the Evangelical Synod of the Nile), anthropologist Webb Keane details the ways in which Dutch colonial missions introduced the moral value of the sincere word to Sumbanese Indonesia (2007: 176–222; see also Robbins 2004: 251–258). Drawing upon his analysis, there are two points I highlight with respect to the Coptic Evangelical position on the phenomenal form of divine messengers, like the Virgin and the angels. First, the necessity of sensorial austerity in immaterial speech understood to approach the spiritual locus of the self, interior, and inward. Although Zakariya does not openly refute the visual experiential form of the apparition, he emphasizes the powers of speech to secure revelatory certainty from above and beyond what is merely seen, thus ensuring against the diabolical dress of deception. Second, the distinction between the sensory image and the spoken image, or what W. J. T. Mitchell elsewhere characterizes as the value-laden vexations of “image versus text” (1986). In Zakariya’s response, there is a way in which the communicative properties of the apparition are separated and then distinguished from each other: speech is delimited from the image understood as purely visual. This result reinforces the collective objectivity of the apparition-image, in principle accessible to all while also willfully denied by some.

As the reemergence of “mission encounter,” the Marian apparition of al-Warraq brought in communicative concert the Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical camps. In doing so, it established common parameters for comparison and differentiation, predicated on the division of truthful image from speech. This form of abstraction is what makes largely possible the iconic identification of the Catholic Miraculous Mary with the Virgin of al-Warraq, in their mute and mass-produced similarity (see Stasch 2011). As we have seen, it also enables the ideological distinction between Orthodox and Evangelical, one which also indicates two sides of the same coin of realist modernity. For whereas the Orthodox rubric of the collective apparition relies on a kind of perspectival objectivity with minimal regard to confession (i.e., “I just know I saw a bright light, and that’s all”), the Protestant one of divine apparition turns inward to an interiorized subjectivity blind to the phenomenal outside (i.e., as long as “the person who appears says who he is”). By this, I seek to stress the fact that varied reflections on the apparition’s status begin
from shared assumptions about the organization of vision, speech, imagined subjects, and objects—even if the conclusions end up being so loudly different.

HEIGHTS OF MEMORY

In mid-December 2010, about a year after the Virgin’s appearance in al-Warraq, I went to the Church of the Virgin and Archangel Michael to figure out if and how things had changed since my last visits. This time around, the passageway of its entrance was papered throughout with magnified photographs of the apparition, newspaper cutouts, witness accounts, and the Bishopric of Giza’s official statement of confirmation. As I took photos and read some of the texts, a Muslim witness whom I will call “Ahmad,” also an unexpected outsider, approached me and mistook me for a journalist. Outwardly disheveled and verbose, he attracted the attention of some church regulars who stayed near to make sure I was not being bothered. After some minutes of eavesdropping, they left after deciding that he was reasonable enough, or at minimum, reasonably safe. Ahmad volunteered his own eyewitness account for my recording:

I heard some time ago, I don’t follow this, but I heard that sixty years ago in Zeitoun, the Virgin appeared. Meaning that after forty years it will have been a century, praise and peace be upon the Prophet Muhammad! . . . I will describe her form [in al-Warraq.] She was the expression—forget all that computer and telephone stuff, forget all of that talk! She came from a cloud. Its color was goldish, very close to brown, gold very close to brown, and the cloud came up to her neck. And you found her hair a green color. That’s it. There was no—no veil like you always see when they take pictures of her with the headcovering. Her hair was green and her appearance was marvelous, marvelous, marvelous!

My friends yelled, beeping their horns—teet! teet! teet! “The road is blocked! The road is blocked!” I told them, “By God I will not leave this place!” And afterwards a Christian girl told me: “Take care, don’t think that just any person can see her. Your heart must be pure (tāhir).” Meaning that three-quarters of the people standing there, maybe they are unclean in their hearts (mudannisin fi qalūb-hom). She said: “Maybe your heart is pure so our Lord showed you—a lot of us are standing here, a lot of us and not seeing anything.”

Ahmad’s reported exchange with the Coptic girl is a reminder of a style of seeing that links moral purity with the capacity to perceive what others cannot. As the unique visionary experiences of
While surrounded by photos of images, clearly diverging from the ones in his description, Ahmad told his witnessed version of the Virgin to me. Unlike the standardized features of *al-manzar al-tagalli* (“the transfigurational pose” or “the apparitional pose”), his portrait of the vision included a cloud cover, a gold-colored figure with green hair. His eyewitness is not one that would have been considered a “true” report according to the Church’s collection of accounts. And yet, after Ahmad had left me, the same Coptic bystanders who suspected him to be a little out-of-mind encouraged me to include his testimony in my study. As one of them summed up for me, in a telling contradiction: “He was wrong . . . but he saw the Virgin!”

Such visionary experiences, spiritual and inwardly obliging, often compel acts of offering. Toward the end of our conversation, Ahmed explained how the Marian apparition caused him to search for the priest of the church and ask him if he could build two steeples in honor of her memory:

And afterwards [the two steeples] will become a landmark among landmarks (*ma’lam min al-ma’ālim*) after time. You will die, and I will die, and all of us will die, and this landmark among landmarks will become a blessing to people who pass by, who will come through the place and will say: “This is where the Virgin appeared.”

In the end, Ahmad was unable to receive permission to build on what currently sits as a dismal trash heap next to the church entrance because the property belongs to someone other than the Church. I hear Ahmad’s offering as an exceptional one, given the landscape of sectarian tension that presently envelops the church in al-Warraq. Like some other urban neighborhoods in greater Cairo, the recent flow of Coptic migrants to al-Warraq since the 1970s has precipitated spatial and infrastructural disputes among local Christians and Muslims. Territorial contests are namely waged through the construction of churches and mosques, fairly representative of a larger trend throughout Egypt—what anthropologist Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen refers to as “visual and sonic competition”: “the towers have never been so high, and the churches have never been so

Coptic and Muslim saints suggest, the capacity to behold divine images is an act of spiritual, as much as strictly phenomenal, value. In dialogue with the hosts of *Cairo Today*, Father Salib of Shubra also echoed this spiritual-bodily type of visuality: “Let’s say there is someone who comes and sees the Virgin. Maybe I see her, and I’m not affected by her. But let’s say there is someone who comes—for example, I was with my brother Muhammad yesterday on channel O TV. [He] said, ‘I saw her, and I felt some strong spiritual force inside me (bi-ruhāniya shadīda dakhīlī)’” (*Al-Qāhirah Al-Yaum*, December 23, 2009).
huge” (2012: 167). In the context of al-Warraq, there remains a thriving memory of dispute. In 2002, after the completion of the Church of the Virgin and Archangel Michael in 2000, the neighboring al-Hoda Mosque swiftly erected two minaret towers which were taller than the church steeples.

Since the mid-twentieth century, Marian apparitions have been perceptually formative of Orthodox church visibility in two ways. First, they draw public, collective attention to the domes and steeples of various church buildings (as well as monasteries) where the light of the Virgin is understood to ritually burst into form (also for Egypt’s Catholic churches, see Meinardus 1999 [1981]: 115). Second, they also provide potential impetus for expanding the actual infrastructure of the church, as a kind of monument to saintly power. The most famous example is the one to which Ahmad refers: the Zeitoun apparition of the Virgin in 1968. Following Arab defeat in the 1967 war, the Virgin’s luminary image was widely recognized as a sign of blessing on the Arab nations and a prophetic promise of future victory (Hoffman 1997). Notably, it was President Gamal Abdel-Nasser who donated state property to the Church of the Virgin in Zeitoun so that the Coptic Orthodox might build a larger, taller church complex in the Virgin’s honor. To this day, this church is valued as the second largest church building in Egypt according to surface area.

Often enough, divine visions have spurred Muslims and Christians to make pilgrimage to these shrines, even commanding them to build shrines themselves (Mittermaier 2011; Stewart 2012; see also Frankfurter 1998). By invoking comparative perspective on shrine-building, I mean only to point out that Ahmad’s response to construct a monument is not an exclusively Christian act of devotion. Rather, it hints at practices of perceiving holy figures that evoke other practical histories of response shared among intercessors in common space and time.

As sites of holy memory, shrines thus visually and spatially institute the truths of saintly presence. The Arabic term “al-mash-had” (both “spectacle” and “place” of holy death, see Castelli 2004 on “martyr”) signifies just this doubling of authoritative witness with shrines of divine authority. What this presents is a mode of visuality that is not quite...
assimilable to an objectivist envisioning of divine appearance, nor to an inner sanctum of a speaking self. It is Ahmad’s desire to build steeples in the Virgin’s memory that also falls out of a seeing that braids spiritual purity with spatial and commemorative expansion. This kind of saintly communication might very well offer traces of a past sensibility that had long spread across a landscape of veneration. It also serves as an instructive souvenir of a world of churches, mosques, and other places of witnessing memory which continues on against the encumbrances of religious identity.

MUSLIM–CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

Some days after I had learned from Ahmad about his vision of the Virgin, I decided to consult an imam in one of the local mosques in Heliopolis, a suburb northeast of Cairo. I was curious to learn if there was any position toward Marian appearances, formal or informal, authorized by Islamic teachings. Seated across from me at his desk, the shaikh of the mosque, who happened to be half-blind, reasoned with persuasion:

First, the teaching of faith itself, first of all. Do [Christians] believe in Christ, peace be upon him, or not? If they believed in Christ, then what is the idea that the Virgin appeared or not? What is the idea? Every once in a while, they say that she appeared. Fine, she appeared. Nobody saw her, except them, so it’s not a vision. It’s something seen, but it should be that all people saw her—Muslim and non-Muslims, old and young.

Though his was not an official response, it provides a useful gauge of how Christians were understood with respect to the apparition-event, one which had prompted relatively little public discussion among Muslims. According to the shaikh, only Christians saw her and moreover, the idea of the apparition adds questionable value to their beliefs. His rationale that for it to be true, the image must have been received beyond Christian eyes, raises a key question which motivated this article from its start: What does it mean for “all people” to see the Virgin? For the Coptic Orthodox Church, a sizable number of both Muslims and Christians did see her and for Coptic Evangelicals, that they saw her is irrelevant to the credibility of the image from the start. As for Ahmad, his visionary experience does not quite fit into either of these criteria, and his offering to erect a sign of memory on an existing trash heap is further forestalled by state property laws.

For scholars of Arab Christianity in the Middle East, the emerging industry of Muslim–Christian relations strikes at a growing interest in histories of religious coexistence and interaction between Muslims and
Christians. For scholars of religion and modernity more broadly, what first requires attention is the political making of Muslim–Christian difference, that is, the asymmetries between religious identities and their concomitant transformations in religion. What characterizes a given act or cluster of activities as “Muslim-Christian”? What is presumed about the relationship between religions when one speaks of displays of “Muslim-Christian unity” or outbreaks of “anti-Christian violence”? Advancing these questions gains us precious insights into the role that religion plays in emergent cultures of sectarian tension on the one hand, and the ways in which complex orders of identity and difference determine what is recognizably religious on the other.

There are certainly many factors that have contributed to the widening chasm between Muslims and Christians in Egypt today. A recent event like the Marian apparition of 2009 in al-Warraq and its public critical reflections offers scholarly purchase on how deeply these structural divisions operate and whether or not their origins are, strictly speaking, “religious.” As I have sought to detail in this article, modernizing forces of visuality and related forms of mediation organize the possibilities and limits of a common sainthood. This realization helps us move past the twinned impasse that “nobody saw her except [Christians]” and that “both Muslims and Christians saw her.” It is in the very adjudication of what it means to view the Virgin that religious differences are also shaped, evaluated, and negotiated. Marian mediation involves more than a de-limited figure of perception; in its assemblage of spaces of subjectivity and objectivity, it also concerns more fundamental acts of perceiving in common.

On one level, this study of saintly communication orients an analysis of Muslim–Christian relations toward dispelling the idea of traditions, such as Islam and Christianity, as either eremetically bounded or romantically convivial. On another, it searches for a better understanding of the making of religious differences through their inescapable encounter with public cultures of media and modernity. For if there is hope to be entertained in a common Virgin, it seems equally worthwhile to reflect on the constraints of the practical present toward summoning the reserves of a saintly imaginary presumed to be distantly lost.

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