

Introduction

The “Virgin of the Apparition” (*‘adhrā’ al-ḡuhūr*)¹ is a touchstone figure in the Coptic Orthodox imagination today. This image of the Virgin, her arms outstretched and robed in blue and white, looks very much like the French Catholic Mary of the Miraculous Medal.²

Yet, any tourist in Egypt, from Aswan to Alexandria, is far more likely to encounter this icon of the Virgin than the classic Byzantine icon of the Eastern Orthodox Theotokos (*wālidat Allāh*). While claimed as Egypt’s own, the Virgin of the Apparition also evokes a lost ecumenical history in holy saints throughout the Mediterranean Basin. From the ancient shrines of wonderworkers to the medieval lore of relic thefts, saints have served as common currency for Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Egypt, extending their relations with religious affines elsewhere.³ In the modern era of anticolonial nationalism, the Virgin Mary in

1. Copts also refer to this image as the “Virgin of the Transfiguration” (*‘adhrā’ al-tagallī* or *‘adhrā’ al-tajallī*). For more on how this image serves as a site of Christian-Muslim interaction, see chapters 3 and 5, “Territorial Presence” and “Public Order.”

2. The image of the “Miraculous Mary” or “Mary of the Miraculous Medal” is based on the Virgin’s appearance to Saint Catherine Labouré in Rue du Bac, Paris, in 1830.

3. As an ethnographic study based on fieldwork, this book focuses on Christian-Muslim relations to the unfortunate exclusion of Jews. As of 1948, there were seventy-five thousand to eighty thousand Jews living in Egypt, and twenty thousand of them were indigenous Arabs or “Karaite” Jews. Currently, there are less than fifty Jews living in Egypt. For more on the Egyptian-Jewish diaspora after 1948, see Beinín 1998. For more on how this common context gave rise to the Arab nationalization of Copts, see chapter 2, “Redemption at the Edge.”

particular has possessed unique potential to unify Egypt's citizenry across boundaries of faith, and after the foreign rulers and missionaries had already left their marks.

The Virgin of the Apparition refers to the Virgin Mary's culminating appearance at a church in Zaytun, a neighborhood in northeast Cairo. Arguably the most significant event in modern Coptic history, the Zaytun apparitions began in May 1968, on the heels of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and at the height of military territorialism under President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956–70). Seen as bursts of bluish-white light against the dark midnight sky, the Virgin of the Apparition was soon elevated into the consummate image of Egypt's blessed status as Holy Land. Crowds of Christians and Muslims gathered in Zaytun, consecrating the Virgin's status as the holy saint of Christian-Muslim unity. Indeed, Copts often emphasize that Zaytun's first eyewitness was a "Muslim" mechanic and that Nasser donated state property so that Copts could build a larger church building in the Virgin's honor. Infused with nationalist value, the Church of the Virgin in Zaytun is the second largest church in Egypt, following the Patriarchate of St. Mark, the seat of the Coptic Orthodox Pope and the symbolic center of Christianity in Egypt.

In May 2014, I visited the Church of the Virgin in Zaytun. The overall mood in Egypt at that moment was one of overwhelming fatigue, and for many Egyptians, anger and disappointment. Since the revolutionary uprisings that had toppled President Hosni Mubarak's thirty years in power (1981–2011), the country had endured instability and chaotic transitions in political leadership. During the previous summer of July 2013, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's bloody ouster of President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood from power put a brutal end to more than two years of protests and demonstrations.⁴

Since 2001, I had been visiting the Church of the Virgin in Zaytun at least once a year. That spring was the first time I spotted an army tank parked outside its main gates and a Coptic police general on guard asking for my passport. Composing 6 to 10 percent of Egypt's population,⁵

4. Sisi oversaw the Raba'a Mosque Massacre that resulted in the deaths of over one thousand Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers (July 2013). The massacre has been described by leading international human rights groups as "one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in history." See "Egypt: Rab'a Killings Likely Crimes against Humanity," Human Rights Watch, August 12, 2014, www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity (accessed May 6, 2018).

5. The percentage of Coptic Christians in Egypt is a wildly contested figure. According to the Egyptian state census, Copts make up 5–6 percent of the national population, a significantly lower figure than the Coptic Orthodox Church's estimates of 15–20 percent.

Coptic Christians are widely regarded to be the Arab Middle East's largest "religious minority." After Sisi's coup, Copts confronted a steady surge of church torchings in Upper Egypt and the Delta over a period of two weeks in August 2013. In Zaytun, the church's amplified security addressed the fears and anxieties of those Copts who expressed that a repressive police state was more important to them than the unwieldy ideals of liberal democracy.

On the face of it, the Church of the Virgin in Zaytun had transformed from a national site of Christian-Muslim unity into a sectarian fortress of Christian identity. Compared to 1968, when it had attracted mixed crowds of Christians and Muslims, in 2014, it functioned as an imposing security checkpoint for sifting "Christian" insiders from "Muslim" outsiders. The Virgin of the Apparition, an integral element of the church's history, was also entangled in these transformations. Having once provided the image of nationhood beyond religious difference, it now represented the demand for bolstered minoritarian protection under the new Sisi regime.

On closer examination, however, the Church of the Virgin in Zaytun also hinted at more enduring legacies of postcolonial nation-building that had engendered Egypt's current landscape of sectarian differences in the first place. For Copts, the key institution in question is the Coptic Church, and more specifically, the pope-president pacts that have governed Christian-Muslim affairs since Egypt's full independence from Britain in 1952. The reason for my visit in May 2014 was to see the new museum for Pope Shenouda III that had opened earlier that month in the church's back courtyard. The late Shenouda, perhaps the most influential leader in modern Coptic history, reigned for over forty years (1971–2012), outlasting the Mubarak regime. Toward the end of his life, Shenouda's main claim to fame was mismanaging conversion scandals, bringing him into disrepute in the Muslim world from North Africa to Southeast Asia. His most important legacy, however, was the fulfillment of his ambition: "to integrate the Copts—every single one of them—into the church" (Hasan 2003:130). The new museum promoted the memory of Shenouda's

Scholarly literature generally agrees on somewhere between 6–10 percent. Of this 6–10 percent fraction, over 90 percent of Copts are Orthodox, with Catholics and Protestants composing the remaining percentage. Although the Protestant churches command disproportionate weight in Coptic affairs with respect to their small numbers, the Coptic Orthodox Church is by far the most influential, centralized organization that represents Coptic Christians in Egypt. Throughout this book, I refer to the Coptic Orthodox Church as the "Coptic Church," or just "the Church."

lasting impact, in his double role as a political broker of intercommunal relations and the spiritual head of Coptic revival and reform.

Powerfully juxtaposed, the images of Pope Shenouda and the Virgin of the Apparition reinforced an alliance between national histories of authoritarianism and religious imaginaries of holy presence in times of war and violence. Whatever ruptures the 2011 revolution and the 2013 coup had wrought, Copts and Christian-Muslim politics in Egypt were beholden to the firmly entrenched forces of their authoritarian making. The Church of the Virgin in Zaytun honors the orchestrated convergence of mass miracles and state militarism, carrying forth cultural continuities from its Arab nationalist past into the postrevolutionary present. Under current threats of sectarian attack, the church further enshrines the legitimacy of Sisi's enlarged security state and its origins in military nationalism.

Meanwhile, the Virgin of the Apparition also communicates other historical origins of memory and imagined belonging toward fashioning the story of Copts and Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt. Having traversed a variety of Christian and Islamic traditions, the Virgin Mary indexes the rich heterogeneity of ritual practices beyond religious identitarianism under the Egyptian nation-state. While collective imaginings of sainthood have been subject to the space and time of modern nationalism, they also offer an inheritance that exceeds the Coptic Church's institutional grip on miracles, in their secret lives and their sectarianizing fates. This book excavates this inheritance to understand how Coptic Christians envision their ties to Muslims and negotiate their fraught place in a new Egypt.

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This book examines holy saints and their imaginaries as sites of Christian-Muslim mediation in post-1952 Egypt. By "Christian-Muslim mediation," I signal two different kinds of mediation: (1) Orthodox Christian traditions of divine intercession that have long brokered ties across various faiths and denominations; and (2) the Coptic Church and its state-authorized role as an arbiter of Christian-Muslim affairs. An ethnographic study, this book journeys to the images and shrines where miracles, martyrs, and mysteries have shaped the lived terms of national unity, majority-minority inequality, and sectarian tension on the ground. At the forefront of its analysis is the Coptic Church and the religious forms of authority that have rendered Copts into a communal unit to be governed and regulated by the Egyptian nation-state and its authoritarian tactics of security and military control. Rather than taking holy saints to be an expression of an underlying Christian essence,

which risks relegating Coptic Christian beliefs and practices to a minoritarian ghetto, I insist on analyzing how images of holiness—like the Virgin of the Apparition—organize Christian-Muslim unity and Christian-Muslim difference in Egypt. In the chapters that follow, I claim and demonstrate that saints and their imagined activity have played a key role in both advancing and challenging the marginalization of Copts and Coptic Christianity in contemporary Egypt.

Penned in the political present of the Sisi regime, this book's focus on Egypt's Copts also gains renewed significance in an anxious period of tragic violence. In the wake of the Arab Spring and Mubarak's downfall in 2011, Copts have been increasingly identified as the collateral damage of revolution and regime change. In addition to numerous local conflicts between Christians and Muslims,⁶ a string of events since 2011 displayed shocking levels of violence toward Copts, unprecedented in scale and design. Weeks before the Tahrir uprisings, the bombing of an Alexandrian church had left twenty-three dead (January 2011). Under military interim rule, the army's clashes with Coptic demonstrators resulted in twenty-eight deaths, referred to as the Maspero Massacre (October 2011). After the Muslim Brotherhood's forced exit from power, acts of retribution included the torching of over forty churches nationwide (August 2013). In the first years of the Sisi presidency, Copts additionally faced terrorist attacks from ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) fighters, with the kidnapping and beheading of twenty migrant laborers in Libya (February 2015), the bombing in the Coptic Patriarchate that resulted in twenty-eight deaths (December 2016), and the bombings in Tanta and Alexandria that resulted in fifty-six total deaths (April 2017). Given this lengthy chronology of bombings, torchings and killings, Coptic Christians have become more vulnerable than ever to facile equations with victimization, persecution, even extinction.

Providing another frame for understanding violence, this book approaches the quieter corners of divine intercession to deprivilege the sensationalizing din of persecution politics and Islamophobia that

6. Under military interim rule in 2011, attacks on Coptic churches and property occurred in Sul, Helwan, and Imbaba, Giza, in addition to clashes between Coptic demonstrators and the army in Manshiyyat Nasir, Cairo. Compared to Cairo and Alexandria, local incidents of sectarian violence more frequently occur in Upper Egypt, where estimates place the percentage of Copts as high as one-third of the population. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, a human rights organization, has documented at least seventy-seven cases of violence against Copts between 2011 and 2016 in the Minya governorate alone. See "Egypt's Cruelty to Christians", *New York Times*, December 22, 2016.

currently overdetermines the global portrait of Copts. My aim in doing so is not to downplay the horrific nature of atrocities that beset Egypt's Copts, nor to diminish sympathy for the threats that they suffer on a regular basis. Rather, I seek to broaden our notion of violence beyond discrete acts of bombing and torching, shifting our sights to the less punctual and more permanent structures of repression, dispossession, and seclusion that have defined Coptic experiences of suspicion, fear, and rage. Anchored in extensive fieldwork that spans a period of tumultuous political upheaval in Egypt, this book offers empirical glimpses into the broader set of conditions that have made Copts a barometer of national unity and a bull's-eye for sectarian violence over the last several decades. By drawing our attention to the political lives of saints, it delves into these conditions from a particular angle, extending ethnographic and historical insights into the relatively durable images and practices that are too often overshadowed by numbing digests of isolated incidents of attack. Viewing sainthood from the vantage point of the margins enables us to approach politically fraught issues of communal authority, territorial conflict, and fears over security with serious attention to the religious worlds that make them possible.

This book is divided into three topoi—"Relics," "Apparitions," "Icons"—of Christian-Muslim mediation. It is a study of the materialities of sainthood, with a strategic focus on how Copts imagine their relations with Muslims and how the Coptic Church legislates and regulates their imaginings. By "materialities," I mean to signal the diffuse set of everyday practices that establish the space and time of commonness by shaping social styles of embodiment and interaction. Relics, apparitions, and icons are all Orthodox media of sainthood, each indicating a particular genre of imagination: relics are fragments that, in relation to a whole, convey ties of belonging and exclusion; apparitions are visions that activate collective and individual modes of perception; and icons are pictures that circulate traces of personhood in the public. These genres of imagination, given their overlap with Islamic histories of saint veneration, forge senses of both communion and friction among Christians and Muslims.

To grasp the politics intrinsic to holy images, this book further traces how relics, apparitions, and icons order relations between Christians and Muslims through hierarchies of national and religious belonging. More precisely, I analyze how Orthodox material aesthetics shape the Coptic Church's management of national unity and Christian-Muslim difference. In the chapters that follow, I draw on three helpful frames for tracking Coptic modulations of the nation-state and nationhood: "com-

munity,” “territory,” “security.” Imaginings of sainthood endow the Coptic Church, its popes and senior clergy, with the authority to transform Copts into a centralized community that is legible to the nation-state. They are also what transforms church buildings and shrines into cherished elements of the nation’s status as “Holy Land” and into sacred territories that conjure memories of violence and require special police protection. The realm of saints is thus one core domain of instituting national interfaith unity, while also installing infrastructures of segregation and security. In a variety of ways, ritual phenomena such as pilgrimage, martyr commemorations, and public miracles tether religious coexistence to the overarching sign of the nation.

Saints, their holy images and social imaginaries, provide key glimpses into the more general terrain of communal mediation without which Copts cannot even begin locating themselves in the nation. This book’s analysis of relics, apparitions, and icons is an account of how Copts uphold their imagined origins and mobilize the religious grounds of their collective agency. It is my desire that this book will allow us to dwell on the more ordinary textures and settings that define minoritarian experiences at the margins while also considering what they hold for redefining future possibilities of belonging and moving toward horizons of hope. In the remainder of this introduction, I provide an abbreviated historical background of Copts and the Coptic Church in contemporary Egypt. I then elaborate on my theoretical approaches to the material aesthetics of sainthood and the national politics of religious difference, charting how these two fields of inquiry together inform my analysis of Christian-Muslim mediation. I close with a brief account of my fieldwork methodology and an overview that spells out my chapters’ themes and the larger arc that ties the people and places together in this monograph’s story.

COPTS, THE COPTIC CHURCH, THE COPTIC QUESTION

In contemporary Coptic studies,⁷ there are two burgeoning trends that seem to suggest a contradiction. The first trend accounts for the modern

7. Contemporary Coptic studies is relatively small within the international field of Coptic studies. Sociologist Sebastian Elsässer (2014) provides an insightful appraisal about the state of Coptic studies (ancient to contemporary), pointing out that Coptology in European and North American universities has historically focused on classical antiquity due to the central location of Greco-Roman Egypt in the origins of Western civilization. As a result, the vast majority of scholarship on Copts and Coptic Christianity has developed in the scholarly disciplines of theology, history, art, and archaeology.

“Coptic renaissance” (*al-nahḍa al-Qibṭiyya*), including the religious activities of revival and reform that parallel the late twentieth-century “Islamic awakening” in Egypt.⁸ At times celebratory in tone, this research focuses on the explosive growth of youth education, organized pilgrimages, media channels, iconography, and music—all inextricably linked to the Coptic Church’s expanding influence within Egypt and throughout its diasporic communities worldwide. The second trend examines the social and political challenges that have defined Copts as a “religious minority” (*al-ʿaqalliyya al-dīniyya*), directing attention to the systemic repression and marginalization of Coptic Christians in the Egyptian state and society on the basis of their religious identity.⁹ If religion is studied according to this line of inquiry, it is frequently through the violation of religious rights across a range of domains (e.g., religious conversion, religious education in public schools, building and repairing places of worship) that questions of discrimination and denials of equality are explored. These two directions of study—both empirically grounded—attest not only to a scholarly division of labor, but also to a core paradox in the contemporary history of Copts: the cultural revival of religion coincided with its political repression. In this book, I aim to analyze these two concurrently lived realities—religious growth and minoritarian regulation—in order to explain not only their coexistence, but also their mutual reinforcement.

To enter into this paradox that continues to define the political present of Copts and Christian-Muslim relations, one must first understand the centrality of the Coptic Church in the making of the Coptic community and the Egyptian state’s authoritarian formula for governing Christians and Muslims under the sign of nationhood. Nearly all accounts of contemporary Copts include the Coptic Church’s two key popes after the Free Officers’ coup of 1952, the two actors who have exerted the most influence on Coptic communal affairs throughout the presidencies of

8. For this literature on the various cultural aspects of modern Coptic Christian revival, see van Doorn-Harder 1995, 2017; Armanios 2002, 2016; Meinardus 2002; Voile 2004; Mayeur-Jaouen 2005; van Doorn-Harder and Guirguis 2011; Ramzy 2014; du Roy 2014. For ethnographies that touch on the Islamic awakening (*al-ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya*) in contemporary Egypt, see Starrett 1998; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Mittermaier 2011.

9. For literature on the political sociology and legal aspects of Coptic minority politics in Egypt, see Zeidan 1999; Hasan 2003; Makari 2007; Ibrahim 2010; Scott 2010; Iskander 2012; Tadros 2013; Elsässer 2014; Guirguis 2016; Mahmood 2016. For literature on minority communities in the Middle East more broadly, see Hourani 1947; Pacini 1998; Bengio and Ben-Dor 1999; Masters 2001.

Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak: Pope Kyrillos VI (1959–71) and Pope Shenouda III (1971–2012). More than spiritual heads who led religious revival and reform on a mass scale, Popes Kyrillos and Shenouda ensured the Coptic Church's dominant political position as the institutional representative of all Copts vis-à-vis their Muslim conationals, while consolidating the communal identity of Copts in a shared religion. To the dismay of Christian and Muslim secularists seeking increased liberalization and an enlarged realm of individual rights unencumbered by religious identity, the pope and his highest-ranking bishops served as the appointed spokespersons for the Copts and the Coptic community. Across a range of settings, from outbreaks of sectarian violence to conversion scandals, the Church stands at the center of managing Christian-Muslim disputes. Only in light of this history of the Coptic Church's collusion with the Egyptian security state is it entirely logical that the Church had prohibited its flock from participating in the revolutionary downfall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, eventually, in 2013, after cautiously observing the Muslim Brotherhood in power from the sidelines, throwing its support behind Sisi's military regime.

Of course, the Coptic Church was not always so central to intercommunal governance. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the task of defining the place of Copts in Egypt—what became known as “the Coptic Question” (*al-mas'ala al-Qibṭiyya*, *al-milaff al-Qibṭi*)—was intertwined with the question of Egypt's independence from foreign, colonial rule (Elsässer 2014; cf. el-Amrani 2006). As Ottomanists have shown, it was not the clergy, but the Coptic elites with their impressive portfolios in finance and foreign affairs who had previously served as the main channels of arbitration between the community and the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ Moreover, during British colonial rule, it was the Coptic secularists who joined the liberal Wafd delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, when the League of Nations made minorities' protection a core condition for recognizing new nation-states. Eschewing their status as minorities marked by religion, these Coptic leaders upheld the revolutionary slogan: “Religion belongs to God and the Nation belongs to All!” (Bahr 1979; Hanna 1980; Ibrahim 2010). Gifted with an internationalist perspective, Egypt's anticolonial revolutionaries were conscious

10. In her work on Coptic Christianity under Ottoman Empire (2011), historian Febe Armanios has shown that intracommunal politics had been largely defined by the Coptic Church's battle with the Coptic “archons” (*al-arākhina*), the financial and landowning elite who would later comprise the Coptic Communal Council (*al-Majlis al-Milli*) under Ottoman and British rules. See also Seikaly 1970; Guirguis 2008; Swanson 2010.

of the British “divide-and-rule” strategy and further strategized to avoid the intercommunal fate of Hindus and Muslims in India (Carter 1986). Secular-liberal designs of national unity before religious identity emerged with anticolonial aspirations for national independence.

The methodological compulsion to recognize and study Copts in the key of “religion” therefore cannot be taken for granted. Historians of modern Copts agree that the key turning point leading to the Coptic Church’s hegemonic status occurred under Gamal Abdel Nasser after the Free Officers’ coup of 1952. Tasked with building a nation-state, Nasser ushered in pivotal changes toward remaking state bodies of rule and law, organizing sectarian differences, and incorporating the nonelite into its citizen ranks. Establishing the state’s deep ties to parallel orders of religious authority, Nasser effectively transformed the centuries-old institutions of the Coptic Church and al-Azhar,¹¹ one of the world’s most respected and influential centers of Sunni Islamic learning, into state-regulated bodies of control. Consequently, the Coptic community was subjected to an authoritarian formula of rule which has been characterized in scholarship through a range of terms including the “church-state entente” (Tadros 2009), “corporatist-sectarianism” (Elsässer 2011; cf. Bianchi 1989), and the “millet partnership” (Rowe 2007; Sedra 2014). At the risk of overstating my point here, the fact that today’s Copts are integrated into their community through religious practices and understand their rights in terms of religion is thus not a natural outcome of primordial attachments to a “tradition” or “world-view.” It is, rather, a historical outcome of Egypt’s development as a postcolonial nation-state, and more specifically, its political arrangement of managing Christian-Muslim affairs through the Coptic Church—a communal institution centered around religion and religious authority.

Integral to the making of the post-1952 Coptic community, religious revival and reform resulted in the mass popularization and modernization of Coptic Orthodoxy. From the 1960s onward, religion played a critical role in shifting the weight of communal authority from the socioeconomic

11. Established in 973 C.E., al-Azhar has long functioned as Egypt’s most important religious institution and negotiated its autonomy under various rulers and empires. When Nasser came to power, he claimed the appointment of al-Azhar’s grand shaykh to be his executive prerogative, replacing the previous system of internal election. State authorities also gained control over al-Azhar’s finances and secured fatwas legitimating their policies. For more on al-Azhar’s relationship with the Egyptian state, see Zeghal 1999; Moustafa 2000.

elite toward the clergy,¹² incorporating the rapidly expanding middle class and waves of rural-to-urban migrants into the Coptic Church's fold. On the scale of sheer numbers, the Coptic renaissance included the exponential increase of church buildings, monasteries, schools, hospitals, and orphanages, along with an entire generation of highly educated Copts seeking to serve the Church as priests, deacons, monks, nuns, teachers, and volunteers.¹³ Due to mass industries of technology and transportation, the organization of religious education and pilgrimage activities reached a far broader base of Copts than ever before, resulting in more reported miracles and saintly images in the public. According to the widely respected bishop of youth and education Bishop Moussa, "the Holy Virgin Mary kept appearing to many people since the first century after Christ, but her apparitions [have] noticeably increased in the 20th century" (Bishop Moussa 2010:16). What this mass reform and revival meant on the ground was that ordinary Copts were not so much becoming "more religious," as they were acquiring techniques and skills, new ways of knowing their past and their ties to Egypt, along with new frames of social interaction with others. In short, as the politics of communal authority changed, the nature and contents of "religion" also changed.

This book examines the centralizing and assimilating effects of religion and how they sustained the institutional legacy of the Coptic Church's authority over Copts after 1952. By attending the ways in which the life of religion escapes and exceeds the Coptic Church's control, this book also approaches the breakdown and limits of this authoritarian formula that has defined the modern Egyptian state's governance of Christians and Muslims to date. To be more specific, this ethnography covers the last decade of the Mubarak regime, a critical period of both experimental liberalization and fortified securitization. These shifts, which unfolded broadly throughout Egyptian state and society, placed internal and external strains on the Coptic Church, in ways that hint at connections between religious transformations and political dynamics. In particular, internally, the Church faced a short-lived

12. The Coptic Church's democratization of the laity served to centralize its authority over communal affairs with the Egyptian state's backing. After the 1952 coup, Nasser dissolved the Coptic Communal Council, opening the door for Pope Kyrillos and the Coptic Church to reconstitute it with the church-abiding faithful. As a consequence of this new formula, the power of the secularist privileged elite began to shrink in favor of the church-attending rural masses, who would later become the upwardly mobile, educated middle class in the 1970s and 1980s. For more, see Sedra 1999.

13. For a magisterial overview of the scale of the Coptic Church's growth during the papal reigns of Kyrillos and Shenouda, see Guirguis and van-Doorn Harder 2011.

advance of secularist activism from within the Coptic community, while externally, it saw its position weakened vis-à-vis the state's regulation of Christian-Muslim strife.

On the first count, from the early 2000s, a rising number of Copts challenged the clerical hierarchy's privileged access to the regime, pushing for an enlarged civic space that would bypass the Coptic Church altogether. Concurrent with liberalizing waves in media (Iskander 2012) and political activism nationwide (al-Ghobashy 2011),¹⁴ they established organizations like the Maspero Youth Union and Coptic 38, which advocated for state recognition of individual rights, punishment for sectarian violence and new legal channels for facilitating personal status cases (Tadros 2013; Lukasik 2016).

Many of these Copts, characterized as “secularists” (*al-‘almāniyyūn*) for their political stance against church intervention, hailed from a new generation of youth who were raised, educated, and liberalized from within the Coptic Church itself—as priests, deacons, and lay servants. This sociopolitical demographic is significant because it adds more complexity to a somewhat caricatured binary between the pious laity devoted to religious and spiritual affairs, and the secularist activists driven by human rights and supported by international NGO's. Part of this unique development of pious insiders into critics of repression owes to the Coptic Church's growth, in ways which democratized the laity (el-Khawaga 1997), targeting the working and middle classes and investing in women and youth for the first time in its history. Raised from within churches, this group of Coptic secularists became increasingly troubled by the insular and exclusionary nature of their communal institutions, recognizing the limits of their appeal to Muslim conationals outside the purview of the Church. Rather than abandon their churches altogether, they sought to redefine the orthodox terms of religious authority towards revolutionary action against authoritarian rule.

The internal affront to the Coptic Church's centralized power coincided with the development of significant cracks in the church-state partnership toward the end of the Mubarak regime. Two major conversion

14. Political sociologist Mona el-Ghobashy's insightful analysis of the Tahrir uprisings in 2011 shows the convergence of what she identifies as three distinct currents of protest—labor, professional, and popular. Copts were active in all three currents. The most powerful opposition movements to the Mubarak regime included Kifaya (“Enough”), a coalition of professionals and activists that opposed Mubarak's transfer of power to his son, as well as the April 6 Youth Movement which supported protests for factory workers and labor rights. See “Politics by Other Means”, *Boston Review*, November 1, 2011.

scandals and a string of church attacks caused significant breaches in Shenouda's relations with Mubarak and the security state apparatus. In 2004, and again in 2010, the alleged conversion of two Coptic priests' wives,¹⁵ Wafa' Qustantin and Kamilya Shahata, escalated into Christian and Muslim riots nationwide for the souls and rights of these women. Widening the rift between Christians and Muslims, the scandals further polarized the public debate surrounding rights to religious freedom along communal lines. At the request of Shenouda, police forces returned the women into the church's fold and placed them behind monastery walls, catalyzing further rounds of protests against the state's violation of individual rights (Guirguis 2016; Mahmood 2016). In the long run, the scandals resulted in widespread national criticism of the state, and international notoriety for Shenouda and the Coptic Church (for having prevented conversions to Islam) throughout the Muslim world. In the eyes of the Coptic community, these bad marks against the church-state pact were further compounded by a sense that the Coptic Church wielded minimal leverage in its dealings with the police and security forces. At an alarming rate, incidents of sectarian violence, such as the Nag Hammadi shootings and the 'Umraniyya clashes at the end of 2010, seemed to confirm Coptic hunches that state evacuations of police protection at churches under attack were deliberate and strategic. Especially in times of heightened vulnerability, it had become increasingly evident that the Coptic Church was a weak communal arbiter against the state's ability to withdraw security and allow for violence to take its course.

Under President Sisi and Pope Tawadros II (2012–) in the wake of the July coup of 2013, familiar signs of repression took hold in the public imaginary. Like many disbanded human rights organizations, the Maspero Youth Union was seriously enervated if not dissolved, with many of its members jailed and arrested. When over forty churches were destroyed after the military's bloody show of force against the Muslim Brotherhood, Pope Tawadros announced that their burnings were sacrifices for the sake of Egypt. Eerily reminiscent of the 1952

15. The Qustantin and Shahata controversies are explosive examples of a general sectarian phenomenon: on one side, Copts suspect that Muslims are kidnapping and subjecting Coptic women to forced conversion; on the other, Muslims allege that the Coptic Church is imprisoning and torturing new converts to Islam. It is widely known that Qustantin and Shahata suffered abusive marriages. Due to the Coptic Church's strict regulations regarding divorce and remarriage, Coptic Orthodox in search of loopholes resort to conversion (to Islam or Protestantism) in order to be allowed a divorce. Up until 1971, the Coptic Church permitted separation, imprisonment and abuse as legitimate reasons for divorce; since Shenouda's papacy, it has limited divorce to adultery.

coup and earlier alliances of nation-building, the rehabilitation of the church-state formula of communal rule was further enshrined among Copts through visual portraits of Tawadros and Sisi, paired with those of President Nasser and Pope Kyrillos. Now after a few years of Sisi in power, ISIS attacks on Coptic Christians and the Egyptian military have only further underscored the difficult fact that the Coptic Church has no choice but to rely on the security state for its future.

The Coptic Church functions therefore as an institution of political mediation, an arbiter between Copts and the Egyptian state, and the principal organization that defines the parameters of the Coptic Question. In effect, the Church is an organ of authoritarian rule, concentrating the politics of communal representation in the hands of the highest-ranking clergy and delimiting religious practices and controversies that cause problems for Christian-Muslim relations. It is the Egyptian state that regulates the Church through a range of disciplinary acts, from denying permits for places of worship to withdrawing security in contexts of sectarian tension. The church-state alliance is far from a reciprocal exchange; it is, rather, a hierarchical relationship that is also deeply marked by repression and marginalization. Under these conditions, religious revival and reform also give rise to new mechanisms of discrimination and disenfranchisement on the basis of Coptic communal recognition as “religious” in nature. To quote one frustrated Coptic secularist, “What will Copts gain with one more church?” Over a quick fifty years, Coptic Christianity has spread widely and assumed new forms and expressions; concurrently, it has also been increasingly subject to public scrutiny and political regulation.

Approaching the religious dynamics and everyday texture of revival and repression is a challenging task. The vast majority of historical and political sociological accounts of Copts are actor-centered, featuring the Coptic community through the decisions and strategies of its leaders, with relatively less focus on ordinary Copts. Much work on religion—that is, religious practices, discourse and ideology—has advanced its functionalist role as the cultural assertion of identity, and in the case of Copts, that of a beleaguered minority struggling with discrimination and sectarian strife. The widespread assumption is that religion merely serves as a cultural instrument for shoring up social and political structures of authoritarianism (e.g., clerical hierarchy) or identity politics (e.g., communal recognition). If it is religion that serves as a medium for defining the Christian-Muslim divide in Egypt, how might we access its activity and effects without reducing it to a mere vehicle of institutional reproduction or minoritarian expression? What does the study of

religious mediation offer for an analysis of the imbricated dynamics between revival and repression on the ground? By examining the micro-politics of divine mediation, this book seeks to deepen our grasp of the very practices at stake in the modern making of Copts and Christian-Muslim relations under the Egyptian state.

MEDIA: RELICS, APPARITIONS, ICONS

Egypt's cult of saints indexes long histories of divine mediation, or "holy intercession," extending from its desert monasteries along the Red Sea to the Sinai and toward a larger Mediterranean sprawl of wonderworkers and their shrines. The religious life of Copts, regarded as the "early Christians" who trace their lineage back to St. Mark the Apostle,¹⁶ therefore includes a ritual repertoire of images and sensibilities that have been around far longer than the Coptic Church's revival and the modern Egyptian nation-state. As scholars of North Africa and the Levant have described in rich detail, centuries of commingling among Jews, Christians, and Muslims forged a heterogeneous tapestry of sainthood.¹⁷ Following Peter Brown's somewhat nostalgic characterization, saints' festivals and pilgrimages were occasions for "lowering social boundaries," conveying a "warm breath of hope for a lost solidarity" (Brown 1981:102). Martyrs, miracles, and mysteries therefore are not only signs of an otherworldly cosmology; they also extend clues into a social universe that existed before mass literacy and religious identity, when "the simple people" would go and seek a blessing at the same shrine or ask for miracles of healing from the same holy men and women of the village.¹⁸

16. A rich and formidable body of Coptic scholarship on ritual, magic, aesthetics, and theology exists in late antiquity and early Byzantine studies. For a helpful beginning in the anglophone literature, see Bagnall 1993; Frankfurter 1993, 1998a; Brakke 1995, 2006; Brakke and Crislip 2015; Davis 2001, 2004, 2008a; Bolman 2002, 2016; Emmel 2004; Schroeder 2007; Mikhail 2017; Torallas Tovar 2017. Other important references include *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (ed. Atiya 1991) and *The Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia* (ed. Gabra), an online digital resource available to the public at: <http://ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/cce> (accessed May 28, 2018).

17. For work on sainthood and the commingling of religious communities, see Brown 1971, 1981, 1983; Crapanzano 1973, 1980; Gilsenan 1973; Ghosh 1992; Sanders 1994; Hoffman 1995; Cornell 1998; Taylor 1999; Meri 2002; Cuffel 2005. Aside from the topic of sainthood, there is also significant work on the religious aspects of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interaction in law, trade and urban life. See Greene 2002; al-Qattan 2007; Campos 2010; Bashkin 2008, 2012; Sharkey 2017.

18. For more on the political and ethical life of this image of "the simple people," see chapters 5 and 6, "Public Order" and "Hidden Faces."

In their essay “The Other Christianity?” (in Hann and Goltz 2010:1–32), anthropologists Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz take issue with stereotypes of Eastern Orthodox traditions as backward, stagnant, and authoritarian by nature. Challenging Protestant-centric approaches to language and ideology,¹⁹ they propose that attending to the material specificities of Orthodoxy can helpfully shift the comparative enterprise of religious studies, showing how Copts, Ethiopians, Armenians, Syriacs, and Greeks share more with particular strands of Islam than they do with Christianity in the West.²⁰ Given their multiple historical layers of encounter and exchange, the material cultures of sainthood provide an entryway for delving into the heterogeneity of overlapping Christianities and Islams in Egypt: the Coptic Orthodox have common intercessors with Roman and Eastern Catholics, journeyed to the same shrines with Sufi and Shi‘i Muslims, and confronted opposition from Protestant Evangelicals and Salafi Muslims who both oppose the mediation of saints and their representations. In such contexts, the categories of “Christian” and “Muslim” are curiously unstable.

This book centers on three genres of saintly imagination: relics, apparitions, and icons. By studying how they organize everyday social relations between Christians and Muslims, I approach these material images as media of Christian-Muslim relations. By invoking the term “media,” I consider these images as communicative vehicles across two related domains.²¹ In the theological domain of holy intercession, relics, apparitions, and icons serve as conduits which mediate the heavenly

19. Since the late 1990s, the anthropology of Christianity has steadily emerged as a subfield of anthropology and advanced new approaches to the study of conversion and materiality, among other themes. Although much of the inaugural work focused on Protestant traditions such as Pentecostalism and Calvinism, more recent work has engaged varieties of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. For more background, see the excellent edited volumes Robbins 2003; Cannell 2006; Robbins and Engelke 2010; Hann and Goltz 2010; Robbins and Haynes 2014; Norget, Napolitano, and Mayblin 2017; Luehrmann 2018. Another helpful resource is the online Anthropology of Christianity Bibliographic Blog or “anthrocybib,” founded by Jon Bialecki and James Bielo: www.blogs.hss.ed.ac.uk/anthrocybib (accessed May 28, 2018).

20. For anthropological work on Orthodox interactions with Islam, see Mayeur-Jaouen 2005; Valtchinova 2010; Albera and Couroucli 2012; Bowman 2012; Keriakos 2012; Bandak 2014. For ethnographic work on Orthodox Christianity, see Herzfeld 1982; Stewart 1991, 2012; Dubisch 1995; Kan 1999; Naumescu 2008; Rogers 2009; Zigon 2010; Luehrmann 2011; Kormina 2013; Engelhardt 2014; Martin 2016; Pop 2017; Boylston 2018.

21. In the interdisciplinary study of religion and media, a growing number of scholars have pushed to consider “religion as media,” regarding processes of technical and technological mediation to be intrinsic to the concept and practice of “religion.” For insightful reviews of this literature, see de Vries 2001; Stolor 2005; Engelke 2010.

and earthly realms, representing otherworldly figures and acting in the world on behalf of holy others. In the political domain of governing religion, these same media also constitute public sites of martyr veneration, collective memories of sectarian violence, and national horizons of intercommunal unity. By conjoining these two domains, I seek to direct attention to the ways in which deep histories of interacting with holy saints create new problems and possibilities for modern Christian-Muslim coexistence.²² Furthermore, I resist studying these Coptic images as objects of varied interpretation relative to various audiences; in other words, my ethnography is not a comparative analysis of how Christian and Muslim communities attribute different or similar meanings to the particular relic, apparition, or icon in question. Here, I do not mean to suggest that these other methods are “wrong.” Rather, they elide important analytic insights about the instabilities of Christian-Muslim difference that are internal to social acts of imagining saints and their mediation of divine authority in the world.

Relics, apparitions, and icons offer rich sites for exploring how Orthodox materialities of mediation shape the ways that Christians and Muslims imagine one another. An ethnography of the present, this book examines traces of Coptic Orthodoxy in its “open dynamic of means and effects” (Pfeiffer 1994:3), in its sustained continuities with the distant ancient past and in its fragmentary remediations under forces of modernization—all of which reveal myriad interfaces with Islam.²³ With this aim in mind, I study images of sainthood as a diffuse complex of practices and styles of mediation. To develop my approach toward media and materiality, this book builds on a body of theoretical literature in anthropology, semiology, and media studies which enables my analysis of the collective dimensions of religious aesthetics and their implications for the politics of Christian-Muslim relations.

22. My approach to relics, apparitions and icons thus departs from the distinguished tradition of studying art and artifacts as carriers of Coptic heritage and civilizational identity within the broader historical canvas of Greco-Roman and Islamic influence. For current surveys of Coptic art historiography, see Du Bourguet 1991; Skalova and Gabra 2001; Immerzeel and van der Vliet 2004; Bagnall 2007; Farag 2013; Gabra 2014.

23. I find inspiration from media theorist K. Ludwig Pfeiffer’s emphasis on effects rather than hermeneutic depth: “Communication here is not supposed to connote understanding, coming to terms, mutuality, exchange. It unfolds as an open dynamic of means and effects” (Pfeiffer 1994:3). Intrinsic to any study of Christian-Muslim relations is a theory of communication. By taking a materialist approach to communication, I take the grounds of “commonness” to lie in dynamic contexts of technical and technological effects that exceed any one religious tradition’s ritual forms and practices.

My approach to holy images is material, but the materiality of holy images requires some explanation. Rather than approaching relics, apparitions, and icons as distinct categories of discrete objects, I take each to represent a set of techniques and technologies that form a distinct genre of imagining sainthood. Much of this book's study is therefore devoted less to particular images in shrines or on the streets, and more to the whole range of embodied skills and media technologies that characterize an image and demarcate its bounds. For example, my two chapters on relics do not so much engage a select collection of relic parts (e.g., St. Mark's head or St. Marina's hand) as they do a diffuse set of sensibilities (e.g., visualizing death at the location of the body, or touching the edge of a fleshly fragment) and a wide variety of their material supports (e.g., a glass case or a television screen).²⁴ These techniques and technologies of intercession are constitutive of human capacities to inhabit the world and imagine other worlds. Borrowing from the anthropologist Daniel Miller's formulation of the bodily habitus, "much of what we are exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us" (Miller 2005:5).²⁵ What Miller's approach to materiality emphasizes is the transformative and fluid nature of human perception as it is externally shaped by objects like relics, apparitions and icons. As the media studies pioneer Marshall McLuhan has further specified, there are "sensory ratios" for different media, troubling the idea that there is an exclusive domain of sensation referred to as the "visual" (Mitchell 2005a).²⁶ In my study, I pay special attention to the visual-tactile aspects of engaging Coptic images of sainthood as these images interface with multiple fields of mediation, from the print and photographic industry to other religious traditions of intercession such as Roman Catholicism and Islam. This

24. Following my approach, there are no essentializing features that distinguish "relics," "apparitions," and "icons" from one another. For example, a martyr's hand exhibited on the television screen is both the representation of a body-part ("relic") and the display of a visual appearance ("apparition"). Conceived to be different zones of imagination, relics, apparitions and icons are characterized by overlapping styles of sensory interaction that reveal their blurry boundaries and challenge the idea that they are distinct categories of art-objects.

25. For other theorizations of habitus as developed by Aristotle, and later by Pierre Bourdieu, see Mahmood 2005 and Hanks 2005.

26. A fruitful range of anthropological work on the sensorium has shed light on the politics of visibility and perception. For a useful beginning, see Howes 1991; Taussig 1993; Seremetakis 1994; Ivy 1995; Morris 2000; Pinney 2003; Hirschkind 2006; Mazzarella 2013; Spyer and Steedly 2013; Classen 2014. For sensory approaches in the field of material religion, see Morgan 2007; Meyer 2009; Promey 2014.

multiplicity speaks to the openness of Orthodox mediation, as it reconfigures practices of visibility and as it is reconfigured by mass modernity across the religious divide.

Moreover, because holy images have specific characteristics, they require careful inquiry into the status of representation. Images of intercession are also the likenesses of saints, raising issues at the heart of anthropological theories of personhood: how is a holy person represented? How does he or she circulate? Imagining saints and their activity in the world is a material practice of interacting with ordinary signs of extraordinary presence in space and time. Relics, apparitions, and icons are all vehicles for disseminating the special qualities of saints, or their virtues, to enhance their social recognition, or their “fame,” through the “mobile circulating dimension of the person” (Munn 1992:105).²⁷ As the philosopher Marie-José Mondzain (2002) suggests, the Orthodox icon, in particular, participates in a vast semiotic operation of incarnation which fulfills the universalizing reach of Christian territorial rule. Beyond Orthodoxy proper, the icon is also a classic representation of holy personhood, a “likeness” that intercedes by virtue of its similarity and semblance to its prototype (Peirce 1955). Inasmuch as Christians and Muslims are both invested in religious significations of holiness, my approach throws doubt on essentializing characterizations of Orthodox Christianity as an “iconophilic” tradition on the one hand, and Islam as an “aniconic” tradition on the other.²⁸ This book, rather, examines disputes over holy representations by entering into the semiological legislation of any given image, its materiality and its authoritative truths. This task involves accounting for “people’s assumptions, either tacit or explicit, that guide how they do or do not perceive or seek out signs in the world and respond to them” (Keane 2014:314).

Ultimately, the circulation of relics, apparitions, and icons activates multiple “social imaginaries,” or the ways in which people imagine their

27. Personhood is a classic anthropological topic that explores social systems of value and embodiment, inspiring work on themes including gift exchange, organ transplants, property, and ownership, and the social ontology of art and things. See Appadurai 1986; Strathern 1988; Munn 1992; Gell 1998; Sharp 2000; Myers 2001; Palmié 2006.

28. In recent years, world events including the Taliban’s destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan 2009 and the cartoon controversies in Denmark in 2005–6, and then again in France in 2015, have driven stereotypes of Islam as iconoclastic and aniconic in its essence. As art historian Finnbar Barry Flood has pointed out (2002), these hasty conclusions fail to problematize the vocabulary of iconoclasm in Islam, in the ways that the abundant literature on the Byzantine controversies over the visual representation of images has done.

belonging to a collective whole. As many scholars have shown, these imaginaries are central to modern political formations of mass-mediated participation such as the “nation” and the “public” (Habermas 1989; Anderson 1991; Taylor 2004). Crucially at stake in these imaginaries of belonging and exclusion are social imaginings of “Christian” and “Muslim.” Images of sainthood are the constitutive vehicles of imagining the self and its limits: the relic-parts of martyrs mediate the transcendent unity of the Coptic “community,” and the iconic “holy fool” mediates the anonymous, fleeting outsider. The reverse is true as well: images of sainthood are also subject to the social epistemologies of the nation-state and its instruments of collective representation, which, for Copts, include the category of “minority.” In the case of the Zaytun apparition of 1968, for example, what the collective imaginary of “Christian-Muslim unity” entailed was the enumeration of witnesses and the subsequent drive for “Muslim” testimonies. It is worth pointing out that this imaginary aesthetics of majority-minority difference internal to religious mediation can be found in postcolonial societies elsewhere, at times, with threatening effects. In her work on Hindu monuments and majoritarian recognition in India, for instance, art historian Kajri Jain argues that the commensuration of images with specific communities meant that “an attack on an [image] was construed as an attack on the community” (Jain 2017:19; also Spyer 2008; Larkin 2013). Imaginaries of sainthood lead to uneven registers of religious difference, signaling both national unity and sectarian threat in imagined relation to others. Holy images, therefore, both create collective forms of belonging and are subject to the institutions that manage the politics of collective belonging.

We can see the latter dynamic in the ways that the Coptic Church attempts to regulate the representation and circulation of saints. The regulation of religion’s public forms, or the “public expression” of religion, is intrinsic to the politics of religious difference.²⁹ The cult of saints is public by nature and has enjoyed centuries of crossing boundaries between Christians, Muslims and Jews. Relics, apparitions, and icons

29. The public/private distinction and the status of religion in the public sphere are core themes that have defined the interdisciplinary field of secularism studies to date (Casanova 1994; Asad 2003; Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and van Antwerpen 2011). Anthropologists of religion and media have directed attention to how religious practices reconfigure politics of authority and difference, giving rise to new multiple “publics” (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008; Meyer and Moors 2006; Eisenlohr 2012). Recent work inspired by linguistic anthropology has further studied “publicity” as a communicative effect of making a phenomenon, such as religion, public (Cody 2011; cf. Engelke 2013).

are all public media of holiness, expanding the social recognition of any given saint through the material expression and circulation of miracles that, in theory, know no borders. As such, the cult of saints presents a tricky challenge of public relations on behalf of holy figures. For the Coptic Church, the modernity of revival has moreover led to new, unintended forms and practices in the intercessory imagination that, at moments, exceed the Church's purview and disciplinary powers. From the Egyptian state's standpoint, the religious mixing of Christians and Muslims presents a serious problem of governance and poses a threat to public order and security, topics I will discuss further in the next section. Religious mediations reveal inequalities and cleavages internal to the national public, giving rise to other competing and fractured publics (Hirschkind 2006; cf. Rajagopal 2001; Warner 2002). Insofar as they index the state's management of the religious divide, images of sainthood also expose the ways in which "secularity and publicity are inextricably linked" (Engelke 2013:xxiii). I underscore throughout this book the ways in which the political regulation of Christian-Muslim relations involves extensive transformations of how holy images can act and move. More than a mere matter of keeping miracles inside homes and off the streets, the politics of public sainthood entails interventions in various styles of communication and their social effects.

The material aesthetics of envisioning saints, then, forge social imaginaries and political horizons of belonging and action. Against the impulse to romanticize holy intercession as a timeless, special domain of liberation from communal identity, it is important to recognize that the religious lives of Egyptian Christians and Muslims today are largely carried out in entirely separate and distinct spheres, and by governmental design. At the same time, it is also crucial to understand that the Christian-Muslim divide is not a natural, primordial condition but rather pivots on an imaginary politics of access to the divine which is subject to contemporary transformation. Holy images thus afford one strategic venue for accessing the disparate histories of mediation that underlie Christian acts of imagining "Muslims" and Muslim acts of imagining "Christians."

By placing relics, apparitions, and icons at the center of my analysis, this book sets imaginaries of sainthood on empirically defensible terrain and engages with the material elements of Christian-Muslim difference. By beginning from Orthodoxy's asymmetrical status with respect to Islam, it additionally specifies the broader conditions of marginalization and insulation that have rendered Copts a coherent and distinct

community. In doing so, this book exposes what the communication of images reveals at the precarious limits of national unity and minoritarian belonging in Egypt.

MEDIATING CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

In narratives of modern belonging, it is the hierarchical frame of the “nation” that inscribes the nation-state’s authority over religious difference. After an incident of sectarian violence in Egypt, one may safely expect the reinvigoration of stock religious symbols marshaled toward the performance of interfaith coexistence.³⁰ The telos implicit in these political imaginaries is one of Egyptian national unity, captured by symbolic couplets such as “the cross and the crescent,” “the church and the mosque,” “the priest and the shaykh,” in addition to the Virgin Mary and her beloved status above and beyond confessional lines. Scholars of religion and postcolonialism have convincingly shown how the modern project of instituting nationhood ended up naturalizing categories of recognition once foreign to the fabric of native life: “minority” for explaining the unequal status of Copts and Baha’is in Egypt (Mahmood 2016),³¹ “sectarian” for documenting the ascendancy of the Lebanese confessional state (Makdisi 2000; Weiss 2010), and “community” for describing the nature of Hindu-Muslim conflict in India (Pandey 1990; Kaviraj 1997). On a global scale, the secularizing powers of state law and nationalist historicism have resulted in the rise of religious identitarianism and the concomitant reconfiguration of religious worlds. National imaginaries, instead of transcending matters of religion, hinge on the state’s most intimate entanglements with religious difference at its multiple orders of mediation.

30. Civic repertoires of Christian-Muslim brotherhood and interfaith harmony are common, especially in moments when the nation’s status is under threat. Months after Mubarak’s downfall, the interim cabinet established “The Family House” (Bayt al-‘A’ila), an organization devoted to training priests and shaykhs in interfaith dialogue and developing educational materials to promote shared religious values. Critics of these methods of rehabilitating pluralism have argued that these exercises are overall cosmetic in nature, at worst providing an alibi for the state’s inaction after incidents of violence.

31. In *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* (2016), anthropologist Saba Mahmood interrogates the concept of “minority” and “minority rights,” analyzing the contradictions internal to secular-liberalism’s ideal of religious equality. Due to its potential to invite foreign intervention in Egyptian affairs, the Coptic Church and leading Coptic figures have historically rejected the term “religious minority” (al-Gawhary 1996; Makari 2007; Scott 2010). For studies of minority politics and the limits of secular pluralism elsewhere, see also Tambar 2014 and Fernando 2014.

Accounts of religion's role in the politics of inclusion and marginalization invariably risk smuggling in assumptions about what "religion" is and what it does. To the extent that it reiterates static expressions of belief or ideology, the interfaith industry of "Christian-Muslim relations" reinforces identitarian models of religion and its analytic disassociability from the realpolitik of states and societies. The result is a bewildering methodological impasse that is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the mirrored formulations averring that sectarian conflict has "everything to do with religion" and "nothing to do with religion at all."³²

This book advances sites of Coptic Orthodox mediation as sites of Christian-Muslim mediation to trace the work that religion performs toward the making of consummate nationhood. Underlining the creative instabilities characteristic of nationhood's making, my ethnography thus focuses on the ways in which imaginaries of holy presence invoke and refurbish horizons of Christian-Muslim unity, and arguably more so under conditions of threat, violence, and repression. As I have suggested so far, the imaginary domain of sainthood, as a realm of richly fragmented pasts and a mosaic of religious pluralism, offers one fruitful perspective into grasping what is gained and lost in holy modulations of unity and difference among Christians and Muslims in Egypt. Here, my approach hinges on the observation that religious and national imaginaries are dynamically interlinked; in short, that nationalism did not so much "supersede" religion as it had derived its cultural forms through its "strong affinity with religious imaginings" (Anderson 1991:12, 10). From a slightly different direction, I am also interested in retaining the scholarly problematic of the "imagination" and entertaining the inadequacies of modern nationalist epistemology. Borrowing from historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's hypothetical scenario, "what if the real, the natural, and the historically accurate did not generate the feeling of devotion or adoration?" (Chakrabarty 2000:149). By tracing continuities between religious and national mediations of belonging, I study how saintly mediations produce imaginaries of Christian-Muslim difference under the hegemonic sign of the nation. By also lingering on their discontinuities, I seek to draw out the ways in which various histories of mediation elide the primacy of the nation, leaving remainders of difference that lie outside the nationalist rubrics of "religious" or "communal" identity.

32. For an insightful discussion about methods of approaching connections between religion and conflict, see *American Historical Review's* forum on "Religious Identities and Violence" (2007).

This book's focus on sites of Coptic Orthodox mediation as sites of Christian-Muslim mediation, moreover, tackles the unwieldy dynamics of sectarian difference internal to the making of national unity. Indeed, the term "Christian-Muslim relations" itself falls short of capturing social and political relations of marginalization and exclusion that inhere within religious semiologies of nationhood. To understand minoritarian belonging to the nation, I pay special attention to the flexible calibration of Orthodox Christian imaginaries from the margins—what may be regarded as the "lived" aspects of the Coptic Question. As I argue it, everyday slippages between national unity and sectarian enmity speak to the limits of the hierarchical frame of the nation-state over religious communities and the promise of nationhood as the solution to otherwise irreconcilable differences.³³ Mediations of Christian-Muslim difference articulate with structures of nationhood and state regulation, further offering clues into the disciplinary remaking of the religion and the ways in which minority worlds mobilize interventions into spheres of imagination. In the remainder of this section, I flesh out three core axes of political belonging—"community," "territory," and "security"—that ground this study on the encounters of sainthood with minoritarian nationhood and state power from below.

To be recognized as part of the nation, Copts rely on images of self-representation that render them into a coherent body politic—a "community"—vis-à-vis the nation-state and Muslim-majority society. As I described in my historical discussion of post-1952 Egypt, the Coptic Church's rise into the centralizing vehicle of communal recognition resulted in the mass incorporation of Copts into the Church institution and the making of Orthodox Christianity within the terms of modern nationhood. Given the Coptic Church's origins in martyrdom, the ritual memory of violence provides the "common traditions" through which a "local community define[s] its own identity and project[s] its image to others" (Pandey 1990:8). When the Coptic community confronts an incident of sectarian attack, Orthodox imaginings of martyrdom and violence mobilize multiple, at times contesting, horizons of communal belonging to the nation. What is the value of a martyr's death? Which clerical and state authorities are accountable to the memory of violence? Linking religious and national registers of mediation, "the cross and the

33. A historical version of my argument asserts that "sectarianism" had not preceded the nation-state as a premodern phenomenon to be solved, but rather co-emerged with modern institutions of colonial and national rule (Makdisi 2000).

crescent”—the classic image of Christian-Muslim unity—is subject to the flexible recalibrations of “the cross” and its semiotics of remembering sacrifice and redemption. By specifying mediations of authoritative origins in holy death, we can examine the making of the “community” into an addressable whole and in imagined relation to Egyptian tropes of brotherhood and national history.

Territorial imaginings of Egypt as “Holy Land” are another key domain in which Orthodox Christianity modulates ties and tensions between Christians and Muslims. Representing a sacred geography of pilgrimage, “the True Egypt” for many faithful Copts is claimed through its ancient images of sainthood availed in places like Muqattam Mountain, desert monasteries, and shrines tucked inside the urban city landscape. The onset of modern Egyptian nationalism placed the material mediation of Christian-Muslim coexistence within a bounded territorial space that generated new conceptions of spatial reality and linked nation-building with epistemic truths (see Abu el-Haj 2001). Collective experiences of dispossession, both national and minoritarian in nature, resulted in different horizons of territorial identification at various points in history. At the height of Arab anticolonial nationalism after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, for example, Christians and Muslims were allied against the losses of the Holy Lands and the Church of Zaytun was transformed into a holy site of majority-minority unity. Deeply felt territorial losses gave rise to modern epistemologies of holy appearance and Christian-Muslim difference. Not long afterward, identitarian aspirations for more church buildings propelled Orthodox imaginaries of territory in a more sectarianizing direction. The national image of neighborly coexistence (“church and mosque”) slipped into the sectarian image of minoritarian marginalization (“church versus mosque”). This slippage exposes the sectarian difference internal to imaginings of national coexistence.

As Coptic churches turned into sites of minority identity, they also increasingly served as sectarian strongholds of national security. Threats of sectarian violence led to enlarged police and military presence at prominent churches, along with hired security guards, ID checks, and/or surveillance machines at many other churches. Religious mediations of Christian-Muslim sainthood incite anxieties about conversion, the potential for disorder, and risks associated with unsanctioned activity across communal lines. Regulating the boundaries between Christians and Muslims for the sake of public order and stability, the Egyptian security state enforces “spatial and social segregation” (Guirguis

2016:57). In this context of institutionalized identitarianism, the state's protection of minority rights must strike a tricky balance between "uphold[ing] the sanctity of religious belief" and "limiting its public expression" (Mahmood 2016:177). On one level, preserving national order via Christian-Muslim harmony is a state priority. Yet the public nature of religion—of appearances, miracles, and virtues—is thoroughly transformed through coercive tactics of Christian-Muslim segregation. Furthermore, the securitization of religious practices generates imaginaries of threat and violence, rejuvenating structures of Christian-Muslim division that are attached to secrecy and fear. These continuities between national security and sectarianism mobilize minoritarian desires for protection against further isolation and vulnerability.

For the Egyptian nation-state, the status of Copts and Christian-Muslim relations has always been a highly politically sensitive issue. Many of the state's authoritarian impulses turn on its capacity to bolster national unity above sectarian strife and guarantee order and protection for its minorities. Analyzing the logics of "community," "territory," and "security," this book examines how religious mediations calibrate relations between Christians and Muslims, ordering hierarchical distinctions between national and religious belonging. To critically interrogate the statist telos of interfaith harmony, it moves past the formulaic dichotomy of "conflict versus coexistence." My analysis rather considers how the national frame of Christian-Muslim unity itself produces new dynamics of marginalization, dispossession, and threat. This ethnography also draws out the fresh traces of holy intercession in everyday contexts that pose practical challenges to the state's regulation of Christian-Muslim difference. Understanding Orthodox mediation therefore helps us navigate the political lives of saints in the ways that it both fulfills and exceeds minoritarian structures of the nation-state.

FIELDWORK AND OVERVIEW

I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork during a period which unexpectedly coincided with the final years of the Mubarak regime. This ethnography, therefore, covers select sites of Christian-Muslim tension leading up to Mubarak's downfall in 2011 and offers limited glimpses into ordinary life under unstable turnovers of rule, from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in 2011 to the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012, and finally to Sisi's military state in 2013. Although it springs from a defined period of unprecedented tumult nationwide, this book aims to track the

longer, more durable legacies of authoritarian rule that have shaped the institutional imaginaries of violence and vulnerability that Copts continue to face today. As the anthropologist Talal Asad once anticipated in his critical reflections on the Egyptian “ruptured state” in the wake of the Arab Spring, the “danger of an eventual return to authoritarianism is real . . . because of the logic of the fears that issue from the fluid political situation” (Asad 2012:272). Christian-Muslim mediation is one recurrent domain of harnessing such fears. It is a historical by-product, moreover, of religious transformations that preceded a state-centered timeline of revolution and counter-revolution.

This book is grounded in thirty-four months of fieldwork carried out over multiple trips of varying duration during the following years: 2004, 2006–7, 2009–15. It reaches different neighborhoods in greater Cairo including ‘Abbasiyya, Muqattam, al-Azhar, Old Cairo (Fustat), Warraq (Imbaba), Shubra, Shubra al-Khayma, Musturud (Qalyubiyya), Heliopolis, and ‘Ayn Shams. North of Cairo, it also features sites and people from Alexandria and Maryut, Mansura in the Delta, and Port Said in the Suez region. Southward in Upper Egypt, it reaches Beni Suef and villages in Minya such as Manahra and ‘Aur. By providing insights from various regions in Egypt, I seek to avoid a Cairo-dominated account while also recognizing that what I am giving here is far from a geographically even picture of Copts and Christian-Muslim relations.

The chapters move in three parts according to the genre of imagination: relics, apparitions, and icons. Each chapter works through a specific style of holy intercession to consider the politics of saintly imagination. All three parts consist of two paired chapters that are crafted in counterpoint, each chapter providing a slightly different political angle to the same genre of imagination. Throughout the book, I begin with the material aesthetics of sainthood to show how religious transformations constitute social and political relations between Christians and Muslims.

In “Relics” (part 1), I focus on the communal institution of the Coptic Church and its authoritative making into a “national” church. “Remembering Martyrs” (chapter 1) explores ritual practices of visualizing death and resurrection to analyze the internal dynamics of communal self-representation vis-à-vis the Egyptian state. This chapter analyzes the Two Saints’ Martyrs, the victims of the 2011 bombing in Alexandria, whose collective memory catalyzed emblematic performances of Christian-Muslim unity calling for Mubarak’s resignation. Martyrs’ relics incorporate the laity into the body politic of divine sacrifice, transmit signs of papal authority, and set moral limits to the



MAP 1. Major cities and monasteries in contemporary Egypt. Map by Bill Nelson.

clerical hierarchy. At the heart of this chapter is the question of communal transformation and political accountability for violence. In “Redemption at the Edge” (chapter 2), I attend to the external dynamics of the Coptic Church, tracing its tactile expansion through pilgrimage and the sympathetic flow of *baraka*, or “holy blessing,” across the Christian-Muslim divide. Highlighting the bordering “edge” of relics, I chart out the material reproducibility of saintly parts in contexts of dispersion and dispossession, as well as mass-mediated rituals of virtual extension among the diaspora. More historical in its orientation, this chapter also studies how the Church’s ritual making of Egypt into

“Holy Land” intersected with the anticolonial making of the Egyptian nation-state and its territorial borders. It thus ends with the timely coincidence of two anticolonial returns in the spring of 1968: the Roman Catholic Church’s return of St. Mark’s relics in the wake of Vatican II, and the Virgin’s apparitions in Zaytun after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. These two imagined returns solidified the hierarchy of Christian-Muslim nationhood over the “ecumenical” ties of Christendom.

“Apparitions” (part 2) considers mixed settings of Christian-Muslim interaction and the fraught implications of overlapping practices between Christians and Muslims. Taking off from the Virgin of Zaytun, “Territorial Presence” (chapter 3) demonstrates that the same national image of Christian-Muslim unity in 1968 transformed into a sectarian image of Christian-Muslim enmity in 2009. This transmutation in the saintly apparition’s meaning (but not form) originated in territorial contests over churches and mosques in one of Giza’s more industrial neighborhoods. By unpacking the phenomenon of “collective apparitions,” this chapter further reveals how modernizing epistemologies of visual objectivity organize differences in “Muslim” versus “Christian” witnessing. The key principle governing this sensible form of Christian-Muslim difference is majority-minority identitarianism. In “Crossovers and Conversions” (chapter 4), I shift attention from collective apparitions to a collection of individual encounters with otherworldly presences such as saints, angels, demons, and jinn, as well as with the figures who mediate them such as exorcists, magicians, and holy men. I make the case that there is enough overlap between Christian and Islamic practices of dreaming and prophecy to yield ambiguities and transgressions. This chapter foregrounds heterodox forms of holy intercession which take place outside of churches and mosques—in shops, homes, villages, and marketplaces that escape the purview of state-sanctioned religious authorities. The chapter also includes a narrative of conversion from Sufism to Christianity which suggests the degree to which Christian and Islamic worlds of messengership, visionary experience, and folk healing can intermingle, crossing over and folding into one another.

In “Icons” (part 3), I engage the public nature of holy personhood by examining how the Coptic Church and Egyptian state regulate the publicity of miracles across the Christian-Muslim divide. Building on the overlap between Christian and Islamic worlds of holy visions and healing, “Public Order” (chapter 5) turns to the case of a Coptic woman whose dream led to controversy between Christians and Muslims along the Suez Canal. This chapter centers on the miracle icon of the Virgin in

Port Said and the efforts of security state officials to manage its public circulation. I argue that the policing of public order led to the polarizing segregation of Christians and Muslims, transforming the material circulation of holy power in the process. The containment of the icon, made into a “communal” image, continues to generate new suspicions, rendering open shrines into outposts of secrecy. In “Hidden Faces” (chapter 6), I trace the effects of insulating Copts into communal enclaves of withdrawal from the larger mixed Christian-Muslim public. My focus is on the cult making of contemporary saints and the mystical imaginaries that yield the collective image of “the simple people.” I show that one key outcome of containing and repressing signs of sainthood is an amplified imagination of secrecy and hiding. This covert politics of holy secrecy, moreover, can further serve to ameliorate an authoritarian narrative of communal belonging under the nation-state.

Finally, I close this book with an epilogue centered on the Libya Martyrs, the twenty-one migrant laborers who were beheaded in 2015, and the alarming rise of ISIS across North Africa and the Middle East in 2013–14. Despite its unprecedented nature, I show how the terrorist execution of Copts and its immediate aftermath activated older strands of religious mediation that I have described throughout this book: the communal dynamics of martyr commemoration, Arab nationalism versus Christian Rome as competing referents of political belonging, the outbreak of contests and threats tied to church territory, and the cult making of contemporary martyrs in the Coptic Church. By recounting the Libya Martyrs’ various contexts, the epilogue invites reflection on how acts of violence that exceed the Egyptian national frame—through impoverished Coptic migrants and pan-Islamic militant groups—exacerbate old structures of sectarian tension in a new era of postrevolutionary militarization.

As a whole, the book offers an analysis of Christian-Muslim mediation through the political lives of saints in Egypt. By engaging the materialities of holiness, it seeks to enrich our perspectives on millennia-long traditions of instituting authority and their contemporary interventions in spheres of minoritarian repression and authoritarian state rule. It is my hope that this work may also shed light on the more ordinary vistas of belonging, including the roads that have been taken and have yet to be fulfilled. On that note, we turn now to the Copts on New Year’s of 2011, the revolutionary opening for the Tahrir uprisings.