

House, Church, Cave:
Coptic Landscapes and the Demands of Pluralism in Upper Egypt

by

Aaron J. Michka

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Anthropology)
in The University of Michigan
2021

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Andrew Shryock, Chair
Professor Paul C. Johnson
Professor Alaina Lemon
Professor Erik Mueggler

Aaron J. Michka

amichka@nd.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-9815-0036

© Aaron J. Michka 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project owes everything to the people of al-'Aziya. I thank the many families that fed me, offered me assistance and companionship, and welcomed me into their homes. *Alif shukr*. I hope this study does justice to the richness and beauty of the world you inhabit, and where, for a moment, I was a most fortunate guest.

In particular I am grateful to Fr. Bishoy Yasa for introducing me to the town, and to Bishop Kyrillos William for making my stay at the Coptic Catholic Bishopric in Asyut so enjoyable. Fr. Agnatus, Fr. Kyrillos, and all the other Catholic priests of the Asyut diocese enriched my fieldwork in countless ways. The Comboni Fathers in Cairo did me the great favor of securing for me a residency permit from the Egyptian state. The French Dominicans were always delightful hosts during my visits to Cairo. The Egyptian Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Luxor showered me with care when I was in need of rest and renewal. To these friends in Egypt, and to the many others I cannot name here, I give you my thanks and deepest affection.

Spending time at Michigan anthropology has been one of the great honors of my life. Since my first semester, Andrew Shryock has sharpened my ethnographic sensibilities and helped me mature as a writer, thinker, and person. He showed patience when I switched projects and encouraged me when doubts set in. For eyes to see and ears to hear, his influence can be detected throughout these pages. I had the privilege of being taught by Alaina Lemon early during my coursework, and her work and inquiries have enriched my imagination in countless

ways. Erik Mueggler led an incredible graduate seminar, one of the best of my graduate student career, and this dissertation is a five-year engagement with insights weaned from his class. Paul Johnson has helped me think more creatively and expansively about religion, and I am grateful for him joining my committee rather late in the game.

I also wish to acknowledge those who taught me at Michigan and from whom I have learned so much: Jatin Dua, Kent Flannery, Gillian Feeley-Harnik, Matt Hull, Bruce Mannheim, Joyce Marcus, Mike McGovern, Judy Irvine, and Liz Roberts. Webb Keane, Stuart Kirsch, Tom Fricke, Yasmin Moll also helped me develop and refine my project, and many of the ideas fleshed out in these pages first took root through conversations with fellow graduate students at Michigan. So, a warm thank-you to: Jamie Andreson, Yeon-ju Bae, Farida Begum, Allison Caine, Nick Caverly, Jordan Dalton, Katie Dimmery, Bree Doering, Georgia Ennis, Andrew Foster, Obed Garcia, Simeneh Gebremariam, Huatse Gyal, Randeep Hothi, Geoffrey Hughes, Nama Khalil, Adrienne Lagman, Sheng Long, James Meador, Sandhya Narayanan, Emma Nolan-Thomas, Cyrus O'Brien, Rachna Reddy, Bruno Renero-Hannan, Amanda Respess, Sonia Rupcic, Christine Sargent, Shira Schwartz, Nikolas Sweet, Nishita Trisal, Joseph Vascomi, and the many others I was blessed to meet and study alongside at Michigan anthropology. Angie Heo and Candace Lukasik helped me sharpen my project at key moments. A delightful year at the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study – and a firm deadline – allowed me to finish. Special thanks to Meghan Sullivan for cheering me on at the end, and to Oumayma al-Shamary for her assistance with the translation of the “Life after Death” text in Chapter six.

My journey to graduate school and to anthropology at large was fueled by questions first raised in classes taught by two brilliant teachers at Notre Dame: Fr. Paul Kollman and Larry Sullivan. My brothers in the Congregation of Holy Cross have been incredibly supportive

throughout my time in Michigan and Egypt. I owe a special word of thanks to Fr. David Tyson who, as provincial, first sent me to graduate school and later, as superior of religious in studies, supported me during my fieldwork from afar. I was fortunate to have a home at the St. Thomas rectory during my time in Ann Arbor, for which I thank Fr. Bill Ashbaugh and Fr. Lew Eberhart. Graduate school can be an immersive experience, and I thank Roger and Lorrie Anderberg for allowing me to talk endlessly about my research, often over Saturday morning brunch at Zingerman's.

To my parents, thank you for your undying support, even when you wondered why I was heading back to Egypt yet again. Your love and encouragement have meant the world to me. To my sister and brother, your companionship has been a source of joy throughout this journey. Also, my time in the field would not have been the same without my Egyptian "sisters" who folded me into their family. Samia, Hannan, Nabila, Noura – with you I experienced the best of Egypt. And I would have never learned the language, nor grown to appreciate and respect the Coptic tradition, had it not been for Sister Mary Maurice. An elderly Catholic nun when I met her, she eventually became something of an Egyptian grandmother. We spent countless hours together on the convent veranda, where she taught me the Arabic dialect and many other more important things. She died peacefully in her sleep a few months before I finished this study. With love, I dedicate it to her.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ii
List of Figures	vi
Abstract	vii
Introduction	1
Part I: Pluralism across Space and Time	
Chapter 1: At the Threshold of History	45
Chapter 2: The Domestic and the Sacred	89
Part II: Minority Life in Reverse	
Chapter 3: The Empty Tomb of Father Boulos	133
Chapter 4: An Impossible Reconciliation	172
Part III: The New Coptic Landscape	
Chapter 5: Piety and Wealth on Display	218
Chapter 6: An Archipelago Hewn from Rock and Stone	257
Conclusion	293
Appendix	301
Bibliography	306

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 0.1	The St. George Coptic Catholic church in al-‘Aziya	3
Figure 1.1	A resident holds a cloth that reveals a miraculous bloody imprint	57
Figure 1.2	A view of the Evangelical church from the veranda of the <i>siraya</i>	80
Figure 1.3	The memorial of the founding of the Evangelical church	80
Figure 2.1	The “ancient” or “original” (<i>asari</i>) Catholic church in the Upper Egyptian town of Kom Bouha	93
Figure 3.1	Fr. Boulos, dressed in black, seated with officers from state security agencies	138
Figure 4.1	The construction of the new Orthodox church as viewed from the St. Mark church sanctuary	196
Figure 4.2	The unfinished sanctuary of the St. Mark church	196
Figure 5.1	“Beni ‘Adi: the arrival of caravans from the Sudan.”	226
Figure 5.2	A new house alongside the northern half of the <i>asfelt</i>	232
Figure 5.3	The artist in his studio	235
Figure 5.4	The newspaper article about the stolen painting	246
Figure 5.5	Samih’s reproduction	246
Figure 5.6	A painting in an al-‘Aziya sitting room	253
Figure 6.1	The new cave church at the western edge of al-‘Aziya	273
Figure 6.2	The cover of <i>The Blazing and Luminous Torch of Love in the Heavens of Coptic Monasticism</i>	282
Figure 8.1	The founding narrative of the First Apostolic church of al-‘Aziya	301
Figure 8.2	Hanna Boctor leaves the Orthodox Church	303
Figure 8.3	Jokes about Orthodox rebaptism	303
Figure 8.4	Coptic imagery	304

ABSTRACT

House, Church, Cave examines the relationship between pluralism and placemaking in the context of a majority-Christian town in Upper Egypt. Coptic Christians, a religious minority in Egypt, have historically faced restrictions regarding how they can modify the places they inhabit. However, in the town of al-‘Aziya (pop. 55,000, Asyut Governorate), there are few Muslim neighbors and little state oversight. Building off eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, *House, Church, Cave* examines how Christian residents in al-‘Aziya use this freedom to order space by building, inhabiting, modifying, and bringing into (mis)alignment houses, churches, and other elements of their landscape. It is the first ethnography of a majority-Christian town in Egypt.

By maintaining an analytic focus on this particular town, *House, Church, Cave* offers a reassessment of the ways scholars of religion and Christianity approach their basic units of analysis. In this study, houses, churches, caves, and other dwellings exist in dynamic tension: an aspect of Coptic placemaking that, while often invisible in other settings, is here on display. The freedom residents experience in shaping the town’s landscape is often expressed and negotiated in sites of proximity to the sacred. In this framework, the near-sacred – as found in a house converted into a church, or an icon turned into a piece of art – becomes a privileged site of communal reflection on what it means to be a Christian in Egypt. By focusing on the complex ways that these basic social units are created and transformed, *House, Church, Cave* provides a fresh approach to one of the world’s oldest Christian communities.

In creating a society in the relative absence of Muslims, these residents engage in two forms of pluralism, both of which act as a generative force. The first appears in the unusual challenges created by the absence of the Muslim Other. Having flipped from minority to majority, the Christians of al-‘Aziya claim to experience social disorder, but also the ability to redraw spatial, social, and doctrinal boundaries that elsewhere might appear firm. The second appears in the presence of various Christian denominations: Orthodox Copts, Catholics, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals. This configuration of religious and denominational difference introduces demands that ripple across a multitude of social fields: history and historiography, gender, kinship, ritual practice, expressions of religious authority, aesthetics, and political economy. At each step, the town’s pluralism raises the question of how divisions are established and redrawn. By examining pluralism and placemaking in tandem, the dynamism of this process – of defining religious identity through the shaping of space – is revealed.

INTRODUCTION

There are probably future advantages that we do not yet fully appreciate in the fact that this village is nearly all Christian in population.

Edwin M. Bailey, American Missionary
Letter to Dr. Glenn Reed, February 9, 1949
Presbyterian Mission Society

To travel down the Nile valley is, as Christians will tell you, to follow in the footsteps of the Holy Family. If you go south by train from Cairo, looming cliffs appear at the valley's edge. Sometimes they draw close to the river, other times they are barely visible on the horizon. A few hours out of Cairo you can see Gabal al-Tayr, a cave where the Virgin Mary is believed to have stayed. Further south, where the valley widens and lush farmland stretches for miles, a trained eye can spot Dayr al-Muharraq, an ancient monastery surrounded by a sprawling agricultural estate overseen by its monks. In the center of the monastery is a church with an altar erected on the spot where the Holy Family stayed for nine months. Some believe it is where the Lord will return on the Day of Judgment, a prophecy rooted in the words of the Prophet Isaiah (19:19): "When that day comes, an altar for the Lord will be in the middle of Egypt, and a stone marker for the Lord will be near its border."

Five hours out of Cairo you will arrive at the city of Asyut. A cab ride from the train station will take you past old European-style villas, many in varying states of disrepair. Further west you will see rows of high-rise housing complexes, neighborhoods where the poor live cheek-by-jowl. Beyond the city limits you will come up against a broad cliffside rising above the valley. Etched into its face are caves and tombs. In one section you can even see a collection of buildings, all adorned with crosses and positioned alongside a large procession route that connects the complex to the valley below. It is Dayr Durunka, a monastery built on yet another site where the Virgin is thought to have stayed. Inside the monastery is a cave. Inside it is a church; and inside it, the house of the Virgin. Stacked like Russian nesting dolls, all are in alignment: house, church, cave.

Most Egyptian Christians, also referred to as “Copts,” know about Dayr Durunka. Few have heard of al-‘Aziya, a town of 55,000 that lies twenty miles north along the same ridgeline. From a distance, al-‘Aziya might resemble a monastery. Almost all of its residents are Christian, and the town’s twelve churches have steeples topped with illuminated crosses. In Egypt, it is rare to see Christians living as a majority. The churches have loudspeakers rigged to their steeples, and on Sunday mornings you can hear broadcasts from the town’s various denominations, all colliding in air. Celebrations that elsewhere would be held inside of churches here spill into the streets. Homes are decorated with paintings of the saints. Some are used for prayer meetings. Distinctions between church, town, and house start to fade. At the western edge, there is even a cave.

Despite this vibrant landscape of Coptic religiosity, all is not well. Residents claim they have many problems, more than in towns where Christians are a minority. They point to a list of

social ills: growing inequality, empty church pews, vendettas. “There are many churches in al-‘Aziya,” you might hear, as I once did. “And around them, demons.” It is a landscape in disarray.



Fig. 0.1 The St. George Coptic Catholic church in al-‘Aziya.

Ethnography of an Exception

House, Church, Cave examines how the demands of pluralism inform the way Coptic Christians make place in Upper Egypt. In the town of al-‘Aziya, the focus of this study, pluralism appears both in the town’s unusual majority-Christian population as well as in its different Christian denominations. It is because there are few Muslims that Christians can build churches, control public space, and adorn their houses at will. This freedom has attracted various denominations, and these different churches shape the way residents inhabit their town. This town is obviously not representative of Coptic experience in Upper Egypt and cannot be taken,

as is often the case, as a part standing in for a whole. But this caveat presents an opportunity. As a town, al-‘Aziya is a social unit unlike others in Upper Egypt; as a concentration of Christians, it resembles the sacred spaces Copts throughout Egypt claim as their own. Caught between two worlds, the work of placemaking – of founding, inhabiting, decorating, interpreting, and transforming the built environment – complicates familiar binaries. Sacred/profane, mundane/extraordinary, secular/religious become hard to distinguish, with places and the people who inhabit them shifting from one to the other. Boundaries must be established, and it is an activity that is enabled, even forced, by the absence of Muslim oversight. This town, in other words, makes visual the messy and complex process of making place. As the first study of a majority-Christian society in Egypt, this ethnography traces how the demands of pluralism are expressed in the instability of place.

Landscape politics is often associated with religious pluralism in Egypt. Any time you see a church, you will likely find a mosque nearby. This proximity of houses of worship can be read, alternately, as an expression of coexistence or the spatial residue of sectarian conflict (Purcell 1998). Similar interpretations can be made regarding state restrictions on building churches.¹ This tendency to draw meaning from patterns inscribed in space has played an important role in political spectacle. When President Muhammad Morsi was forced out of office in 2013, some of his supporters attacked and set flame to dozens of Coptic churches, businesses, and homes. Copts were thought to approve of Morsi’s ouster, and this destruction telegraphed a forceful message to the nation at large. More recently, the current Egyptian president, ‘Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, has funded the construction of the largest cathedral in the Middle East. Built alongside a “mega-mosque,” this pairing of church and mosque is intended to represent the state’s commitment to promoting religious harmony. In a country of temples and tombs, where

the stark landscape has often served as a tableau for displays of religious and political power, this mode of public expression remains potent and pervasive.

This study offers a different approach to landscape politics. As opposed to starting from an assumption of sectarian tension, this analysis raises a more fundamental set of questions. Setting aside for a moment the political valence of churches, we can ask: What separates churches and other sacred sites from the places that surround them? In a majority-Christian society that lacks the strong presence of the Muslim Other, how is this town defined in relation to the places that Copts inhabit elsewhere? As revitalized markers of Coptic identity take hold in the Egyptian landscape – such as sacred imagery being placed in homes and shops, and ancient monasteries being restored and revitalized – how does this town, with its own distinctly Christian landscape, provide a unique perspective into Coptic life in Egypt? These lines of inquiry are deliberately scaled at the level of the mundane. One might think that a church, especially in Egypt, can be identified and defined with ease. But common sense is the enemy of good ethnography, and if certain categories seem obvious – such as church, house, town, sacred imagery, or monastery – then their prosaism is all the more reason to subject them to inquiry. The point I hope to make is that engagement with these places involves social labor – these places are not given, but made. Landscape politics in this framing is not about what is represented through the ordering of space, but rather how space itself comes to be ordered. To cite Michel de Certeau (1984:107), a theorist who will appear throughout this work, I am interested in “practices that invent spaces.”

Pluralism is woven into this study in two related ways: through the interaction between Christians and Muslims (or lack thereof), and the interaction among Christians across denominational lines. Discussions of pluralism typically invoke a broader set of values, such as

shared national identity or citizenship, that holds disparate groups together (Connolly 2005). At a national level, this discourse is present in Egypt, especially in cosmopolitan settings and mass-mediated platforms (Ibrahim 2015). One problem with this approach is that it sets in advance the conditions by which pluralism works or fails – conditions that people living within this arrangement may not subscribe to themselves. Moving in a different direction, I will examine the way the ground is set for invocations of pluralism; that is, how concepts of difference – the very concepts that give rise to pluralism – become understood and articulated (Tambar 2014). This approach has its own challenges. How does one recognize “pluralism” without first defining it? As with any act of translation, the assurance one can offer is found in the thick description of ethnography. This initial imposition of a familiar vocabulary (pluralism, religious and denominational difference) is therefore performed in the hope that unfamiliar concepts of space, time, belonging, and difference might begin to emerge (Mueggler 2001:10-11).

By attending to the relationship between landscape and pluralism, this work touches upon themes that extend beyond Egypt. Over the last decade there has been a critical reassessment of the history of sectarianism, its evolution in the modern Middle East, and the ways it has become entrenched or overcome.² Much of this work focuses on the sociopolitical transformations that followed in the wake of the Tanzimat, a series of reforms implemented across the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. As Ussama Makdisi (2000) explains in his historical study of Mount Lebanon, religious minorities had, before the reforms, lived in relatively autonomous communities, each structured by its own set of laws, social hierarchies, and forms of patronage and protection. With the Tanzimat, the empire’s subject population was reframed more explicitly in terms of religious difference, a political project that, while presented as an exercise of Ottoman sovereignty, was in fact an expression of growing Ottoman dependence on Western

powers. As Makdisi writes, these policies “legitimated sectarian politics by organizing the administration and geography of Mount Lebanon along religious lines” (80) – a transformation that marked the beginning of a modern expression of sectarian identity cast at the level of the nation-state.

The example of Mount Lebanon is useful because it highlights the difference between Copts and Christians elsewhere in the Middle East.³ Unlike the Maronite Christians of Mount Lebanon, Christians in Egypt have rarely lived in geographically segregated communities. Little is known about the history of Christians in Ottoman Egypt, though it appears that Muslim and Christian communities largely coexisted in peace (Armanios 2012). Under Islamic rule, Christians occupied a reduced social and political status. Still, there is bountiful evidence of cross-semination of religious ideas and practices.⁴

This coexistence is not unique to Egypt, but the territorial distribution of the Coptic population is. Upper Egypt, the land that runs south of the Nile delta, has traditionally had a higher concentration of Copts. It is a part of Egypt with its own political history. During long stretches of the Ottoman era, for instance, many Copts in Upper Egypt lived under the protection of the powerful Hawara shaykhs – the true rulers of Upper Egypt (Georgy 2015:112). Curiously, Akhmim, another majority-Christian town, was one of the centers of power of the Hawara (114). These provincial arrangements were disrupted during the reign of Muhammad ‘Ali, Egypt’s great modernizer. Population shifts occurred, but they did not result in any significant clustering of Copts (Baer 1969). Much later, when the agricultural reforms of the mid-twentieth century were instituted, Christian and Muslim peasants received parcels of land that, in effect, anchored them in place. Today most Copts in Upper Egypt are scattered across majority-Muslim villages and towns running up and down the Nile valley.

This brief historical overview demonstrates why a town like al-‘Aziya fits awkwardly in a landscape where Christians tend to live in close proximity to Muslims. It also contextualizes the situation Copts face today. To the casual observer, Copts can seem to appear everywhere and nowhere in the country, at one moment at the heart of national identity, at the other the subject of discrimination, even violence. This paradox, which Anthony Shenoda (2011) has described as an alternating Coptic visibility and invisibility, plays itself out across Egyptian society. There are no reliable statistics of Copts in Egypt. One hears wildly divergent accounts claiming that anywhere between five to twenty percent of the country’s population is Christian (it is probably closer to six percent).⁵ This geographical diffusion and political precarity has also enabled the Coptic Orthodox Church to present itself as the sole representative of Egypt’s Christians. Laure Guirguis (2017:74) explains that, in taking this stance, the institutional church has ensured that “ecclesiastical space...has become the principal and perhaps only ‘producer of meaning and value’ in the national environment.” In a way that echoes the instability of Coptic presence, Guirguis argues that leaders such as Pope Shenouda III (r.1971-2012) have made use of the lack of Coptic visibility in the public square to create enclaves within the bounds of the church.

Unable to imprint the emblems of Christianity in Egyptian homes and streets, the church incorporated other areas of life. In creating this total space, Shenuda, as he was accused by many observers, encouraged the Copts’ withdrawal and isolation behind the “walls of the Church,” discouraging their interest in national political life, or anything not directly concerning their own community. (74)

Put in slightly different terms, the relative absence of exclusively Coptic domains, both in history and in the current political environment, has enabled the Orthodox Church to provide the “total space” where Copts can receive the services, protection, and care that the Egyptian state can fail to provide.

From this vantage we can return to where we began. The two sites that I have presented – Dayr Durunka, lodged in the cliffs that rise to the west of Asyut, and the town of al-‘Aziya farther to the north – are unusual, but in different ways. The compound at Durunka is a space controlled by the Coptic Orthodox Church. It is a rare site where Christian activities can occur beyond the walls of a church. Pilgrims who attend its festivities in honor of the Virgin each August often take part in an open air procession. At this time, thousands make their way up the compound’s large promenade. These activities are typically not restricted to Christians, and Muslims have a long history of attending such festivities. But the space remains a monastery, at least in a historical sense, and it is distinctly Christian.⁶

The town of al-‘Aziya is an outlier, but in a different way. It has no ancient history like Durunka, nor is it a major site of pilgrimage. In many ways, it is like any other town in Upper Egypt. However, because the town is almost entirely Christian, its residents are witness to a strange reversal. For instance, when I asked a grandmother in al-‘Aziya to explain how her life compares with the lives of Christians elsewhere, she replied, “Christians in other towns? Those who are far from this town are captives. Here there is freedom. But we don’t do anything with it.” I then asked what she meant.

It means we don’t serve God. As I said, there’s no one here harassing us. In our case, we are in freedom here. There’s no Muslim, I mean, none of those Muslims, they’re not harassing us here. For example, away from our town, one can’t turn on the church speakers and listen to hymns [*taranim*], one can’t ring the bells, one can’t give instruction with a loudspeaker.

As for here, you can give instruction with a loudspeaker, teach in the church, go and visit homes, chant in the streets. Here in the street, right here, you can have meetings in the homes. And could you have meetings with the door open in other towns? Here there is freedom. Freedom!

This town is different from others, and it is a difference inscribed in the landscape: in the loudspeakers hanging from church steeples, in the processions in its streets, in the religious

imagery on its houses. These features merit attention because they are thought to be impossible elsewhere. In fact, it was as if the very idea of a Christian town – even to al-‘Aziya residents – seemed strange. On the few occasions when I called al-‘Aziya a “Christian town” (*qariya misihiya*), I was corrected and told that, in fact, there are about two hundred Muslims residents as well. It was as if no town or any social unit beyond what might be explicitly connected to an institutional church could be called “Christian.” Yet if al-‘Aziya as a town could not be “Christian,” it was not a normal Upper Egyptian town. A new category is needed, though it is not clear what that would be. A thoughtful man who traveled throughout Upper Egypt due to his work in trade told me, when speaking on the topic, that “al-‘Aziya is like a monastery.” Both residents and Christians elsewhere who would learn about my research would caution me to emphasize that the town is an “exception” (*istithna*’), and to appreciate that this unique status exercises a disruptive power over those who inhabit it.⁷ Fitting neither in the sacred landscape of monasteries and churches, nor in the minority context of everyday Christians, the town of al-‘Aziya is suspended between the two. It is an instability that reverberates through a multitude of social domains.

+++++

This ethnography examines how the exceptional nature of al-‘Aziya informs the way its residents make, inhabit, and transform place. The “setting” of ethnography has been a familiar trope in anthropology, and voices within the discipline have long made it clear that people take an active role in shaping and giving meaning to their environment. It can be added that this activity extends to the most basic dimensions of existence, that “neither place nor time is given in nature or by power; both are made” (Mueggler 2001:10). Theoretical talk about space and place can sometimes drift into the abstract (Geertz 1996), but the exceptional character of the

town helps sharpen the focus. Aspects of the town's landscape that elsewhere might seem stable and complete here start to break down or reconfigure. It is a misalignment of place that takes various forms: there is a tomb of a holy man that sits empty, an enormous church with no congregation, and a cave turned into a monastery without monks. This misalignment – the sense that place needs to be changed or corrected – creates problems that invite response. It is a tension that animates the shaping of the town, the ordering of its space.⁸

By focusing on the instability of place – something often masked by places like churches and homes – this study revisits, and complicates, the division of sacred and profane. Once part of the Durkheimian tradition, the importance of this binary has diminished. But the study of Christianity, and certainly of Coptic Christianity, has tended to take the church and its counterparts (monasteries and shrines) as distinct from the space that surrounds them. These privileged sites are the place where the divine is most palpable, where blessings are accessed and distributed, where “Coptic Christianity” is performed. In Egypt, where Christians are the minority, these places tend to be clearly demarcated. Church officials, whose religious authority is linked to these boundaries, have a vested interest in this demarcation. State officials as well are invested in defining the boundaries of churches, especially since the Egyptian security state draws its legitimacy in part from protecting sites of Christian worship. It would be easy for an ethnographer to accept these conventions. Yet in al-‘Aziya these boundaries are in flux. What might be contained within the church – the characteristics that render it “sacred” – here spills into the streets. The example of the loudspeakers illustrates this point most clearly, with church liturgies being broadcast to the surrounding neighborhoods. Other examples will be examined in the pages to come. As we shall see, the freedom that residents claim to experience forces the issue of how these boundaries are to be drawn. It is an opportunity and a challenge.

In studying the making of place, this ethnography asks how these boundaries and limits are created, undone, and redrawn. This activity is not straightforward. It involves individuals, family units, church congregations, even non-human agents (St. George is a recurring actor in the town's history). This activity tends to occur at the periphery of sacred sites. In this society, the near-sacred and the church-adjacent become privileged locations for this social action. Indeed, the town itself can be thought to occupy this category: a near-monastery, an exceptional Upper Egyptian town filled with Christians and churches. This study attends to these sites as they are inhabited and encountered over time. My ethnographic data is largely drawn from this social engagement with place; that is, in the use of material elements to create it (raising walls, painting houses, building churches), the ritual activity that occurs within it (prayer meetings, mortuary oration, reconciliation sessions, processions), the personal and communal narratives that address it (oral and print histories, religious discourses), and the social interaction that crosses the denominational, economic, and kinship divides that shape the town's social order. In examining how residents understand and define homes, churches, and their town, this study illuminates the complex and poorly understood ways this religious minority makes place.⁹

Boundaries are intriguing because they define both what is contained as well as what lies beyond. de Certeau (1984:126) describes this tension as that between "a (legitimate) space and its (alien) exteriority." In drawing a limit, he notes, one necessarily engages with both.

This is a paradox of the frontier: created by contacts, the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable in them. Of two bodies in contact, which one possesses the frontier that distinguishes them? Neither. Does that amount to saying: no one? (126)

Boundary-making therefore involves an act of defining both self and other, which is itself an incipient expression of pluralism. Separated by points of differentiation, both sides are united by a shared border. To view pluralism as an ongoing effort at boundary-making, as I do here, is to

locate the experience of difference more firmly in the textures of place and time. In this vernacular register, questions of religious and denominational identity need not hinge entirely on confession and belief. The different ways that church histories are told, for instance, can reflect attempts at differentiating denominations that nevertheless bind them to shared ideas about what constitutes church history. Women and men, to cite another example, move through church and church-adjacent space in various ways, producing a gendered pattern of denominational pluralism. Furthermore, the relative absence of Muslims raises the question of what, in a majority-Christian society, separates church ritual from the politics of vendettas and reconciliation – an ongoing challenge experienced by residents of the town. In this study, boundary-making will be the primary way in which pluralism is analyzed.

To understand how this lived pluralism takes shape, I will look to theorists who attend to the way that place and its attendant boundaries, limits, thresholds, and horizons are made. While work has been done on place in terms of the intellectual history of the West (Lefebvre 1991; Casey 1997), my interest lies in the local grammar that people use to speak of, shape, and order space. This orientation follows what Gaston Bachelard (1964:xxviii) called “topo-analysis”: a method that culls theory from the way space is inhabited and dwelt within. The benefit of this approach is that it turns assumptions about places like churches and houses into problematics. It asks, in other words, how a setting not only contextualizes interaction, but is shaped by it. Place in this analysis takes on a more active role. In order to understand how place changes over time, I will make use of insights developed by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin saw space and time as two interlinked dimensions of narration. More than just the context of a story, he theorized the two as working together to produce distinct literary genres that allow or foreclose certain kinds of narrative arcs. Drawing upon this insight, I will examine how

churches, houses, and other structures inhabit space-time, or what he theorized as “chronotope” (Bakhtin 1981).

By approaching pluralism in terms of the granular elements of social interaction unfolding over space and time, this study draws upon familiar aspects of “village ethnography” to shed light on a topic typically viewed through more expansive frameworks of top-down state initiatives, citizenship, and national belonging. This study is an ethnography of an exception, of how a unique experience of pluralism shapes the way houses, churches, and other sites of intense sociality are made and inhabited.

Priest, Monk, Ethnographer

While being an ethnography of place and pluralism, what follows is also informed by my identity as a Catholic priest and member of a religious order. Movement within and across boundaries and spaces, in these pages, are approached from this unique “positionality” in the field. As an American, I was a stranger to the residents of al-‘Aziya; as a priest, I was a familiar and welcomed character. This curious arrangement helped me view, from the inside, the complexity of priest-laity relations. I was both an observer and a religious authority, and my attempts at understanding places like churches and houses required me to move through them as a priest, even if, as an American, I did not always grasp what was going on. The only way I could be in this town was to participate in the placemaking I seek to describe.

My research, like that of many ethnographers, began with a series of impasses and missteps. I originally traveled to Egypt in the summer of 2015 to study divorce and remarriage in the Coptic Orthodox Church. I thought I might be able to leverage my clerical identity to gain access to the Orthodox community. It was a novice mistake. To the contrary, being a Catholic

priest proved to be a liability, and I soon realized that the project would have to be redrawn from the ground up. Knowing I only had a few weeks to find a fieldsite and a new topic, I decided to try my luck and travel to Upper Egypt. A Coptic Catholic sister made arrangements for me to stay with the Catholic bishops of the respective dioceses of Sohag and Asyut. Soon I was on a train heading south.

The days were long and hot, and I was not sure what would happen. When I arrived at the Coptic Catholic Bishopric in Asyut – a large compound that houses the cathedral, diocesan offices, the bishop’s residence, and several floors of rooms for priests and guests – I was invited by the local bishop, Anba Kyrillos William, to attend the blessing of a meeting hall in a parish at the southern edge of the diocese. We traveled together, both of us seated in the back of his sedan. Halfway through our two-hour journey he pointed out a cluster of multi-story houses. It was where his family lived. When we finally arrived at our destination, we were greeted by a young, barrel-chested priest with a thick beard and glowing smile. He introduced himself in English as Fr. Agnatius.¹⁰

Over the following week, Fr. Agnatius would accompany me on visits to other Coptic Catholic priests in the region. All of them were native Upper Egyptians who had joined the Asyut diocese. They liked the idea of a foreign priest doing research on Copts, and each arranged for someone to take me around to meet with families from the parish. In every house I was greeted with generous hospitality...and tight lips. Fr. Agnatius explained that people were afraid I might discuss private affairs with their Muslim neighbors. He added that, because of the ongoing vendettas in his town and others, it would be hard for me to live in Upper Egypt. Deflated, I decided to head back to Cairo. At the last minute, though, one of my clerical hosts insisted I meet his cousin, Fr. Bishoy, another Catholic priest who was to take up a pastorship at

a parish in their hometown. Fr. Bishoy had been away for eleven years serving the Coptic Catholic community in Ontario, Canada. “He wants to see you,” my host told me. I accepted, begrudgingly.

Fr. Bishoy greeted me and his cousin when we returned to Asyut. He was in his fifties, of medium height, and sported a trimmed gray beard (Orthodox priests, I had come to learn, let their beards grow long). I was struck by his poise and command of English. We got into his car and headed north out of Asyut. As we talked about my interests in Egypt, the landscape started to change. We first followed the old Ibrahimiya canal, then turned west and passed alongside a large military base. Eventually we reached the western edge of the valley. Further to the west I could see a natural gas refinery and a concrete factory, with the rocky cliffs rising in the distance. After going through several small towns, I spotted several church steeples on the horizon. It was al-‘Aziya.

It did not take me long to realize that Fr. Bishoy was recruiting me to do research. After so many dead ends, his enthusiasm seemed like a blessing. I also liked his pitch. It was counterintuitive and intriguing. Focusing on the town’s vices, not its virtues, Fr. Bishoy listed the topics I might want to study: vendettas, drug abuse, economic inequality, declining church attendance. “All these problems are caused by one thing,” he added. “Freedom.” Fr. Bishoy offered me a guest room in his house on the western edge of town. He also set me up with his brother-in-law, who tirelessly accompanied me on visits to various households – first to those belonging to his family, then to those from Fr. Bishoy’s parish. I had yet to trade my khakis and collared shirt for the black cassock I would wear throughout my fieldwork, and my strange appearance caused confusion when out for visits. Yet after an introduction from Fr. Bishoy’s brother-in-law, where assurances would be made that I am in fact a priest, I would inevitably be

greeted with lively, even frank conversation from the town's families. I began to wonder if Fr. Bishoy had been right about the town's unusual freedom. After a week in al-'Aziya, I asked Fr. Bishoy if he would be willing to host me for my dissertation fieldwork the following year. He happily agreed.

The presence of Fr. Bishoy looms large in this account. From the beginning of my fieldwork people in the town associated me with him, and my first and most enduring contacts were with his extended family. More than a host, he was also a fellow priest. On Sundays I would join him at the altar for the Divine Liturgy (that is, "mass"), and as my Arabic improved, he had me hear confessions on Sunday mornings. Our shared clerical identity also allowed Fr. Bishoy to make certain requests of me. Fr. Bishoy wanted to expand the Catholic footprint in the town, and he would occasionally encourage me to solicit donations from American contacts. People in town would rarely speak ill of another priest in front of me, so I was never sure what people really thought about my relationship with Fr. Bishoy. All the same, at least a few probably suspected I had been brought to town in order to raise money. I learned quickly, for instance, not to talk about "research" (*abhas*), since the word suggested I was assessing the needs of families in order to distribute church funds.

When I returned to al-'Aziya for my dissertation fieldwork, my situation changed quickly and unexpectedly. During my first day back, a thief broke through the roof of Fr. Bishoy's house and took off with most of my possessions. Fr. Bishoy reconsidered having me as a long-term guest, and we decided it best for me to take a room in the (more secure) Catholic bishopric in Asyut, which is where I resided for the remainder of my fieldwork. On most days I would take the half-hour microbus ride from Asyut to al-'Aziya, repeating the same route I had first traversed with Fr. Bishoy. In the evening, after finishing up my work, I would have a hired driver

from al-‘Aziya return me to the bishopric. In this sense, I remained associated with Fr. Bishoy throughout my fieldwork. But I was also relatively free to come and go as I pleased.

My interest in placemaking first took hold in the rhythm of my movement in the town, which oscillated almost entirely between houses and churches. Often I was preoccupied with trying to place people in relation to each other, and to different church communities. Naturally they were trying to do the same to me. In my conversations, place was an object of interest and concern. Upon meeting with a new family, I would be asked two questions: Where had I lived in the United States, and where was I living in Egypt? These inquiries were so simple and direct that the deeper source of confusion was initially lost on me. When I first came to al-‘Aziya, Fr. Bishoy always made a point to introduce me as a “priest” (*qasis*) and a “monk” (*rahib*). I always felt the second part unnecessary, even though I technically belong to a religious order. But as I came to realize, this dual identity made a deep impression on the people I would come to know. When I would talk about my home in the United States, I would be asked to say more about my “monastery” (*dayr*). “It’s not like monasteries here,” I would respond. “Father,” I would be told, “there *are no* monasteries like the monasteries in Egypt.” In the end, monasticism provided a lingua franca for parsing our similarities and differences. In asking about my life as a monk, people sought to comprehend life in America. What is our prayer routine as monks? How regularly do we fast? How is it that I can leave the monastery, and can I return? In their eyes I was an emissary, arriving from the horizon of a shared Christian ecumene.

My identity as a “monk” was therefore confusing because of placement. Monks in the Coptic imagination tend not to leave monasteries, and so I was, in a profound way, out of place. My self-presentation as a peripatetic priest raised another set of concerns. There was always a hint of judgment in these questions about where I was living, since – as I came to understand –

it was widely thought that Fr. Bishoy or another Catholic priest in town should provide me with a room, and perhaps even food and a stipend. Even months into my fieldwork, people would raise the issue. It was an offense that reflected poorly on the Catholic community and the town itself, and eventually a group of church elders approached the priests of the St. George Catholic church to insist I be given the small guest room attached to the church. (For whatever reason, no such appeal was made directly to Fr. Bishoy.) Eventually people accepted that I was being hosted by the bishop, though they continued to wonder aloud why I received no stipend from the diocese or why I could not use any of the bishopric's cars. What can be gathered from this lingering frustration, I think, is the fact that I could only be properly hosted – that is, given a room, food, money, and transport – by members of the clergy. It was an obligation the people of the town could not fulfill on their own. I suspect they resented the fact that the priests in al-'Aziya had shirked this responsibility.

My identity as a priest also informed how I interacted with different parts of al-'Aziya society. Priests are trusted figures, and women would sit and talk with me in ways they would not with other men outside their kin group. Occasionally a young boy would walk with me on my visits, his grandparents trusting that he would eventually make his way back home. I was a guest of honor at almost every church I visited, and there were no Christian families that were off-limits to me. This wide range of access aided and encouraged my study of pluralism.

There were two significant exceptions to this freedom of movement, however. First, I could not attend an Orthodox service, and people in al-'Aziya were generally nervous about showing me around the sanctuary of an Orthodox church without the supervision of the local priest. My experience of the Orthodox Church was therefore one of an outsider. This restriction shaped my fieldwork, and I had to rely more on lay Orthodox men and women to help me

understand their Church. At the same time, my peculiar status as a non-Orthodox cleric produced situations in which residents had to decide, often quickly and awkwardly, where I was allowed (and not allowed) to go. I was once invited by an Orthodox youth minister to say a prayer for a group gathered in his church. Upon second thought, he decided it best for him to simply introduce me and to forgo the prayer – a simple but illustrative example of boundary-making. When a monastery began to take shape on the western edge of town, as we shall see in the final chapter, I was able to enter the cave church and other parts of the complex. But as a Catholic priest, I had no meaningful access to the local bishop who was overseeing this development – another boundary I was unable to cross.

Second, I could not visit Muslim households. Although I sometimes asked residents to arrange a visit to some of the town's Muslim families, they always refused, citing the need to avoid "a conflict." I occasionally crossed paths with the Muslims from al-'Aziya (and with the many other Muslims who would visit the town to shop or run errands), but I never once interacted with them. This absence of the Muslim Other in this ethnography parallels the experience of people in al-'Aziya. My experience as a researcher was therefore orthogonal to that of my interlocutors. I was interested in how this exceptional town might say something new about Coptic Christianity at large; the people of al-'Aziya puzzled over how their unique circumstances only seemed to cause them problems. In related ways, this absence proved troubling and generative for us both.

There were other, less discernible consequences of my unusual freedom. Ethnographers of other parts of the Middle East have made productive use of the need for escorts to move through tribal space. These guides provide access, but they also illuminate social hierarchies, the power of the "name/space," and the necessity of sanctuary and protection (Shryock 2019:33-4).

As is probably clear by now, my space was that of the church and my domain that of priests. I spent much time trying to move from church to house; in the end, I would be pushed back to the church, where I belonged. Thankfully, by a stroke of good fortune, I was blessed with a priest companion who helped me comprehend the complex and ever-changing politics of town and church. When I returned to Egypt for my dissertation fieldwork, I found that the bishop had reassigned Fr. Agnatius to al-‘Aziya to work under Fr. Bishoy. Fr. Agnatius deserves a much more prominent role than I have given him in this ethnography. He was reluctant to be included, and I have tried to respect his wish. All the same, he was my most perceptive and helpful companion. As time went on, he shared with me his frustrations concerning Fr. Bishoy. Eventually their problems spilled into the open, and I was caught in the middle. It was in many ways a tragic situation, but one that oddly reflected what Fr. Bishoy had told me when I first arrived in al-‘Aziya: there are problems here that Christian residents have struggled to resolve. As with so many ethnographies, what began as an abstract research topic became personal and eventually pulled me – the ethnographer, but in this case also the priest – into its grip. These events inform the structure of this study, and they will be covered in more depth in the pages to come.

Places of Piety

“Setting” in the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity might call to mind the sites of worship that frame ethnographic observation; that is, churches, mosques, and other places where piety is visibly practiced. There are practical advantages to designing a research program in such terms. A church or mosque can delineate the members of a faith community. These sites also clarify the doctrinal beliefs that are purportedly held in common. But as we can now begin to see, this approach toward “setting” does not map well onto the world al-‘Aziya residents inhabit.

The churches in al-‘Aziya do not provide a stable point of reference. Residents instead tend to view their churches as existing in dynamic relation with each other. Establishing church boundaries occurs in awareness of other denominations. Churches “expand” into homes and the streets of the town, and other parts of the town encroach on churches. The inability to assume a straightforward “setting” in al-‘Aziya invites consideration into how much flux might be hidden below the surface in ethnographic studies of Christians elsewhere.

As a priest and monk, it was easy for me to observe this instability. Standing alongside other priests like Fr. Bishoy and Fr. Agnatus, I came to appreciate how tenuous their authority might be even within the church. At the same time, I witnessed how the authority of their predecessor – a highly revered Catholic priest who we will encounter later – could extend beyond the church and encompass the town. The freedom I experienced in moving through the town, visiting whoever I might please, also hinted at the unusual way people relate to their churches, especially in their willingness to challenge the clergy. Yet this freedom that characterizes the town also has a moral dimension, one that pertains to the Christian life itself. As one Coptic Catholic priest explained it to me, “When Christians are the minority, they unite. When there are no Muslims, they turn against each other.” Some in al-‘Aziya would also speak of a “lack of pressure” (*‘adm al-daght*) that they found damaging to their common life. This freedom in al-‘Aziya creates its own challenges, and the idiom of place – of the town, its churches, its houses – becomes the focus of correction and the reordering of boundaries.

What happens, then, when the setting is destabilized and itself becomes a focus of study? This question is not as foreign to the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity as it might seem. In Talal Asad’s 1993 *Discipline and Humility in Christian Monasticism*, a classic essay for both bodies of literature, the issue rises to the surface, albeit in an understated way. Asad’s text has

typically been approached as a theoretical study of the cultivation of the self. But read somewhat against the grain, it can also be viewed as a study of place, especially in regard to the drawing and redrawing of boundaries. In what follows, I will tease out Asad's observations on place, piety, and pluralism, all with the aim of linking my study with anthropological theories of place and religion.

Asad's attention, as the title suggests, is directed toward the structure and practice of religious discipline in medieval Christian monasteries; that is, "the conditions within which obedient wills are created" (125). There are several theoretical bones that Asad has to pick, perhaps the most important being his critique of anthropological theories of ritual that, to his eyes, are too quick to separate "the meanings of conventional performances" from "the feelings and intentions of performers" (130). For Asad, these monastic communities were able to cultivate obedient wills because programmatic texts (such as the *Rule* of St. Benedict), the authoritative use of speech (preaching and confession), and work on the body (manual labor) created "a new moral space for the operation of a distinctive motivation" (144). To search for the symbolic meaning of monastic ritual, in other words, would be to overlook the intended outcome of monastic life: the formation of religious desires in its subjects (165).

It should be noted that the historical particularity of this argument is important. Asad is not talking about all, or even most, medieval monasteries. He is interested in the monastic communities that emerged in the twelfth-century through reforms enacted by the new Cistercian order, especially at Clairvaux. This distinction is important because the Cistercian order, in contrast to older, more established Benedictine communities, made great strides at integrating manual labor into the rhythm of monastic life. For instance, whereas farming had been largely overseen by serfs at Cluny, labor supplied by the order itself worked the Cistercian estates.

Humility was thought to flow from manual labor. Activities the other orders had been happy to outsource to local peasants, such as cooking or baking bread, became a staple of monastic discipline. In a sense, the Cistercian communities raised their walls by extending them, encompassing aspects of the world that other monasteries were content to keep at a distance.

This ordering of monastic space is an important condition for the self-fashioning Asad addresses. But as anthropologists have taken up similar themes, the role of place has largely dropped from view. One detects this trend in recent ethnographic research performed on the global Islamic revival. A recent debate illustrates this point well. On one hand, it was argued that any study of the “ordinary” Muslim subject should be animated by the ontological premises of the Islamic Revival (Fadil and Fernando 2015); on the other hand, “the incomplete and inconsistent” textures of life were deemed more important (Schielke 2015). What is striking is how both viewpoints emphasize the individual as located within the context of generalized identity formations such as the umma or the nation-state. Social entanglements at the medium range – those of family identity or mosque membership – are not as firmly rooted and tend to fade from view. One is left to wonder where the discourses and practices that constitute Islamic piety occur in the sense Asad outlines in his study of monastic life; that is, in the boundaries that subjects draw between self/other and us/them. This separation need not exist in space, of course, and the Islamic revival has blossomed in part through the use of mass media – one way of fostering participation in a seemingly “placeless” community (Hirschkind 2006). But even these studies, which hover beyond any explicit connection to place, still suggest that some kind of setting is required for a religious subject to thrive.

Let us return to Asad. In drawing our attention to the ordering of space, he also shows how competing visions of the moral life influence such reforms. We see in Asad’s account how

the rigor of the Cistercian program was heavily informed by debates with other Benedictine communities. These polemics were framed within the context of the medieval church and themselves reflect a kind of pluralism. The same can be said for the different kinds of monks who were drawn into this new monastic arrangement – a step that, as Asad notes, tightened the connection between labor and humility. In short, beyond the important yet abstract conceptualization of Christianity or Islam as a “discursive tradition” (Asad 1986) – an idea of great importance to the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity – there appears a nascent idea of pluralism as well, one manifested in space.

Medieval monastic life does not easily translate into the modern world. Few places, if any, have the same kind of boundedness. Moral concerns instead come from the opposite direction: the seeming lack of such frontiers in the modern world. In Mayanthi Fernando’s (2014:80) sophisticated ethnography of “Muslim French” (her preferred moniker for French Muslims), one of her interlocutors captures this dynamic well: “If one is a French citizen of Muslim faith, that means that all spaces of dialogue, of debate, of social transformation – all these spaces concern us.” These domains of Muslim belonging and French citizenship are expansive, and they reflect the broader destabilization of place in a more interconnected world. As anthropologists now emphasize, globalization has led to a “frictionless world” (Tsing 2005), and network analysis (Latour 2005) and the multi-sited tracing of circulations and flows (Clifford 1997) have shifted attention from the social “in place,” bound by a setting, to processes, flows, and logics that resist emplacement. If one is now to speak of place or “locality,” it can only occur in opposition to that which it is not (Appadurai 1996).

There is obvious truth to the argument that a naïve localism, once inherent to anthropology, is no longer sound. But as Matei Candea (2007) has noted, one wonders if, in the

rush to extend the reach of anthropological study to the national, transnational, and global, old forms of boundedness have been reintroduced, albeit in ways that are less theoretically alert. Consider the example of Saba Mahmood's 2005 ethnography of Muslim women's piety groups, *The Politics of Piety*. The importance of this monograph is reflected in the immense amount of scholarly discussion that has followed in its wake, especially in regard to the Islamic revival. Still, her focus on discourse within the settings of several mosques, used then to scale up to trends in the Islamic revival, introduces a boundedness – the mosque community itself – that is left relatively unexamined. Candea's critique is not directed toward the ineffectiveness of this approach, as if more research sites might be needed to make it complete. Rather, as he writes, "the kind of bounded field-site I am proposing is premised on the realization that any local context is always intrinsically multi-sited" (175). Holding one's gaze and not immediately scaling up can also serve as a kind of intellectual asceticism, one that allows for unexpected interactions to unfold within the frame of analysis – interactions that, like the debates held by Asad's monks, might introduce more heterogeneity than initially meets the eye.

Candea's argument is directed toward the discipline at large, but it has unique appeal for the anthropology of the Middle East. Unlike other parts of the world, where "cold" societies have become "hot" (Lévi-Strauss 1966) and once-limited horizons have, with the onset of globalization, become vastly expanded, the Middle East has long been home to people who inhabit communities both local and diffuse. Here, as Judith Scheele and Andrew Shryock (2019:8-9) observe, "people claim relatedness to others whom they have never met ('We are all sons of Adam') while denying all ties with their neighbors ('they are trouble, and they have no origins'). Horizons are broad, stretching as far as there are Muslims, or Arabs, or Turks, and each of these identities is as transregional as it is local." This tension is not necessarily aligned with

the global flows that define modernity, and in some ways pushes against them. Moreover, this dichotomy might not even best represent the tension at work in a given site, where the local might not be set against the global, but rather against a neighboring village or a distant monastery. An ethnography set in a bounded fieldsite, and cognizant of its arbitrary nature, can better allow for these unique formations and patterns of association to take shape. It provides the stability necessary to observe instability, flux, and change.

An arbitrary fieldsite then highlights the contingency of its boundaries. In recognizing that there is nothing essential to the fieldsite's demarcation, one can begin to ask how these lines are drawn in the first place. In this sense, al-'Aziya resembles the monasteries discussed by Asad, where the points of separation between the Christian community and the world that surrounds them are subject to negotiation and contestation. This division, in Asad and al-'Aziya, is not exactly that of the sacred and the profane. At the same time, the shifting nature of their boundaries does complicate the binary in interesting ways. What are the criteria for establishing one or the other? Who gets to decide? Elsewhere in Egypt, where Christians are a minority, the life of church in a majority-Muslim village will, by necessity, be hemmed in by its walls. But in al-'Aziya, as with Asad's monasteries, the contestation and flux are far more visible as churches, houses, and other places merge with and separate from each other. This dynamism of these places forces new questions about sacred space, how it is made, and the activity that occurs within it.

The exceptionality of this town, and the focus on placemaking that it encourages, marks another point of departure from these bodies of literature. At least within the context of the Middle East, the study of Christianity and, especially, Islam has often been cast in terms of the secular, secularity, secularism, and related concepts. Asad himself has been influential in this

regard. Yet in focusing on the secular, these studies have only amplified its power and have made it harder to register that which lingers in the religious and the secular. A place like al-‘Aziya, which confuses ideas of secular and religious, allows for the dynamism and complexity of religious life to shine through. It draws attention to the church-adjacent or near-sacred: categories that can unsettle certain theories of secularism.¹¹ In fact, as I will argue near the end of this study, the freedom experienced by al-‘Aziya residents enables a more robust account of how Coptic Christians engage with modernity and, one might add, the pressure of secularism. And they do so on their own terms: in the way that icons are turned into imagery (but not secularized), or in the way that a holy man like Fr. Boulos, as we shall see, can be more than an exemplary man, but less than a saint. These problematics are not exactly captured by the ideas of secularism, yet they reveal a preoccupation with distinguishing that which is Christian (or Coptic or sacred) from whatever lies beyond. At a time when the horizons of Coptic Christianity are expanding, the boundary-maintenance residents take up demonstrates how places of piety and worship might reflect and problematize familiar anthropological categories at the same time: a church that is (but not entirely) sacred, a cave that is (but not entirely) eternal, a sacred image that is (but not entirely) a source of divine blessing. It is a tension that is reflected in al-‘Aziya landscape, but one that also points to a broader insight. Unstable places can be puzzling and alluring, and this element of mystery also merits inclusion in an account of Christianity and place.

Egyptian Christianities

While most studies on Coptic Christianity tend to locate Copts alongside Muslims, there is also a vibrant denominational pluralism among different kinds of Christians in Egypt. In al-‘Aziya, Coptic Orthodoxy – by far the largest denomination in Egypt – exists alongside several

others: Catholics, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and even a new Baptist community.¹² Residents attend each other's churches, they intermarry, they are aware of differences in doctrine and worship across denominations, and they view their churches as existing in relation with each other. What exactly it means to belong to any one of these churches is an ethnographic question I will address in the following pages. However, to assist the reader, I want to provide a brief overview of the terminology and history of these denominations.

First, the terminology. In popular discourse in Egypt, Orthodox Copts are what linguistic anthropologists might call "unmarked" Christians, and any other kind of Christian is typically identified by denomination, such as "Coptic Catholics." The term is also politicized, and it is sometimes used by Orthodox Copts in ways that suggest that all Copts, regardless of denomination, are the original descendants of Egypt and children of the Orthodox Church. The overlap of kinship, ethnic, and religious identity in this case is very much intended. For their part, Protestants in Egypt tend to include the Coptic identity in their official titles, and Coptic Catholics will identify themselves as such. When talking about national politics, though, all Christians refer to themselves as Copts, and they are represented by the Orthodox Pope before the Egyptian state. Residents of al-'Aziya refer to each other simply as Orthodox (*urtudux*), Catholics (*katulik*), Evangelicals (*injili*), and Pentecostals or "Apostolic" (*rasuli*) – labels this ethnography will use as well. When writing about Christians or Christianity in Egypt in general, I will rotate through the terms "Egyptian Christians," "Copts," and "Coptic Christianity."

Second, the history. The Orthodox trace the beginnings of their church to St. Mark the Evangelist, who came to Alexandria during the reign of the Emperor Claudius and was martyred in 68. He is considered the first Patriarch of the See of Alexandria, one of the five Sees of the early church. Christians in Egypt faced exceptional levels of persecution during the reign of the

Roman Emperor Diocletian (r. 284-305), an experience that gave rise to the strong cult of the martyrs in Coptic spirituality (Armanios 2011; Heo 2018b). Egypt was at the forefront of debates over Arianism and the person of Christ in the fourth and fifth centuries. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 marks the point at which theological disagreement resulted in schism, with the Coptic Orthodox Church rejecting the council along with other communities now known as the Oriental Orthodox churches.¹³ There have always been other kinds of Christians in Egypt. St. Catherine's monastery in the Sinai, for instance, is Greek Orthodox, and Alexandria, with its famously diverse population, has long been home to Melkites, Maronites, and Armenians (Meinardus 2006). Yet only the Coptic Orthodox Church can trace its beginnings back to St. Mark and the evangelization of Egypt.

Catholics have a less direct and far more complicated history in Egypt. The Catholic Church began to engage with the Coptic Orthodox Church after the Council of Florence (1438-1445), and shortly thereafter a Coptic Catholic Church in union with Rome was established. Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries arrived at various periods over the following centuries. As Alastair Hamilton (2006:277-8) shows, with the notable exception of some areas in Upper Egypt controlled by the aforementioned Hawara tribe, these Catholic missionaries had only marginal success at winning converts. In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman sultan Mohammad II allowed Coptic Catholics and other Uniate Christians to have their own patriarchs and to build churches. Coptic Catholics retain their own rites and canon law, which are different from those of Latin Catholics. Today there are about 300,000-400,000 Coptic Catholics in Egypt (Mayeur-Jaouen 2019:43).

The Evangelical Church of Egypt, whose members al-'Aziya residents refer to as "Evangelicals," is the largest Protestant denomination in Egypt. The church was established as

“the Synod of the Nile” by American Missionaries from the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) who arrived in Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century. The Evangelical Church of Egypt is now an independent ecclesial body and its leadership is Egyptian. The historian Heather Sharkey has written an illuminating history of this church, the missionaries who established it, and the growth of its membership. Sharkey tends to refer to the American Presbyterian missionaries as “Evangelicals” given that, like other self-professed Evangelicals, these missionaries “were social activists who believed that lives could be changed through conversion, individual Bible study, and reflection on Christ and his sacrifice” (2008:25). In this study I will follow Sharkey’s lead by referring to these American missionaries and the Egyptian members of this church as “Evangelicals,” even though the church was originally associated with and developed from the Presbyterian church (UPCNA).

The Apostolic Church is one of several Pentecostal churches that currently exist in Egypt. This church grew out of the Holiness Movement Church (HMC) in Canada, which, through the work of Canadian missionaries, started to spread in and around the Asyut region at the beginning of the twentieth century. Scholars of Pentecostalism tend to identify this initial stage of growth as the “Classical Pentecostal wave,” which is characterized by its explicit connection with distinctly “Pentecostal” churches (Burgess and van der Maas 2002; Nagib 2019).¹⁴ It was during this time of institutional formation and shifting alignments that, in part through the conversion of a key American pastor in Upper Egypt, missionary work originally associated with the HMC switched to the Assemblies of God, another Pentecostal denomination (Nagib 2019:133-4). In 1921, an Egyptian branch of the Assemblies of God was created and was given the name “the Apostolic Church.” This denomination went on to become the largest Pentecostal church in Egypt, and it remains an affiliate church of the Assemblies of God. As with many of the statistics on

Christians in Egypt, the size of the Apostolic Church is not clear, though it likely has hundreds of thousands of members in Egypt. Many Egyptians, both Christian and Muslim, have encountered Pentecostalism through the story of Lillian Trasher, an American Pentecostal who traveled to Egypt in the early twentieth century and founded an orphanage in Asyut. The orphanage continues to operate under the guidance of the Apostolic Church, which also oversees the nearby Apostolic Theological College (*kuliyat al-ihut lil-kinisa al-rasuliya*), established in 1953.

Denominational pluralism in Egypt is structured through a legal framework that grants each denomination relative autonomy over church governance and family law: what might be called the “millet” legacy.¹⁵ Yet an under-appreciated aspect of denominational pluralism is the way these differences are lived and experienced. Part I of *House, Church, Cave* takes up this theme. Focusing less on what each church professes – that kind of doctrinal overview can be found in the literature cited above – I will instead examine how residents and churches interact and shift across denominational divides. The guiding assumption in this analysis is that, in a pluralist society like al-‘Aziya, it is impossible to understand any denomination without taking into account its Christian “others.” This approach echoes William Christian’s (2018: 248) assertion, drawn in part from George Mead (1934), that churches in a pluralist setting “are all, all the time, forming and understanding themselves through interaction.” This engagement does not occur in the abstract. It takes place across space and time. It draws churches into homes and homes into churches, it generates novel forms of prayer and discourse, and it taps into enduring cultural institutions such as hospitality and the integrity of domestic space. Insofar as the town of al-‘Aziya is a place that is made, it is done so through the prism of denominational difference.¹⁶

Anthropological Orientations

Though the anthropology of Christianity initially took root through the study of the Western Christian tradition (mostly Protestants and Catholics and their missionary expansions), it has more recently taken an interest in Eastern Christians, including Coptic Christians.¹⁷ In this section, I would like to review two recent anthropological monographs on Copts. Each one grapples with themes I address in this study, and I would like to show where my research touches upon their findings.

Study A: Minority/Majority

In *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* (2016) Saba Mahmood examines sectarian tension in Egypt through an explicitly international frame. In pushing back against claims that secularism can take various forms (“secularisms”) and the view “that secularism is a solution to the problem of religious strife rather than a force in its creation,” she argues that secularism is a more unified phenomenon, one anchored in “a globally shared form of national-political structuration” and manifested through the “modular form” by which religious difference comes to be regulated “across geographical boundaries” (2). From this brief summary it should be clear that the sources Mahmood draws upon extend across Egypt, Europe, and North America. They also range from early modern Egyptian history to the present day. In fact, Mahmood explicitly foregoes ethnography in favor of this expansive, and explicitly theoretical, analysis.

Through this wide scope, Mahmood is able to tackle the complex issues at work in the concept of religious “minority” (*aqalliyya*), a topic with obvious implications for my own study. There is a long history of Copts rejecting the label of “minority,” which has been thought at times to suggest that Copts are not as fully Egyptian as their Muslim neighbors (Shami 2009).

This stance became clear when Pope Shenouda III forcefully pushed back against a 1992 United Nations report that included Copts in a group of other “religious minorities.” Mahmood shows that this debate is not restricted to Egypt, but instead is subject to several forces – the rise of religious liberty discourses in the West, American Evangelical activism, and an increasingly vocal Coptic diaspora – that have inserted Copts and the “minority question” into a transnational web of political interests. Whether Copts chose to reject or embrace this identity marker, the discourse cannot be disentangled from this broader geopolitical field. She writes,

The fact that all of these developments presuppose Egypt’s subordinate place in the geopolitical order suggests that the minority question in Egypt today continues to be beholden to Western power, as it was in the nineteenth century. To be sure, there are important differences between the past and present condition of minorities in Egypt. But it is striking that despite Egypt’s sovereign status, the fate of the Christian minority and of religious liberty remains tethered to Western projects and designs. (98)

According to this line of argument, the study of the minority question must take into consideration this transnational political field.

Though a compelling analysis, it is hard to tell how deeply this political framework enters into the lives of Copts. Mahmood marshals some dramatic examples to demonstrate the downstream effects of globally-configured secularism: political activism in Cairo, sectarian strife due to kidnappings and abductions, rampant rumors of forced conversions. The problem with this evidence is that these stories and actors are precisely the data points that are legible to the “Western projects and designs” Mahmood invests with such power. Deprived of any ethnography, the reader has no ability to gauge which aspects of secularism, if any, lie beyond this realm of explicitly political and highly visible interaction.

In this sense, Mahmood’s work raises some interesting questions. What might ethnography contribute to a study like hers? Is it possible for ethnography to dispute her claims?

Or does ethnography operate at a different conceptual level? My study touches upon these provocations by holding the “minority question” in tension with granular ethnographic observations culled from a locale far removed from Mahmood’s scope of study. I suggest that a place like al-‘Aziya, where conventional ideas of majority-minority relations are rearranged, shows that ethnography matters in a deeply theoretical way. In Part II, I will examine the relative absence of Muslims in al-‘Aziya, the consequences of which touch less upon national politics than on issues of holy men, feuds, and reconciliations. These are aspects of Upper Egyptian life that might be bracketed, and neutralized, as “culture.” But they also invite a reevaluation of the scope of Mahmood’s analysis.

In my own fieldwork I found that residents of al-‘Aziya cycle through a variety of frameworks of belonging, ranging from those of kinship, denomination, and attachment to one’s village or town. Rarely would they speak about questions of “minority” status. Indeed, it is only because those identity marks are so deeply held, I suggest, that issues of minoritization become morally charged. When people speak of the “absence of pressure” due to the lack of Muslims, they might be understood as referencing the consequences of the political formations Mahmood studies. But they do so on their own terms, and often with repertoires of belonging that are distinctly illegible to Western projects and designs. Minority status is certainly an important aspect of Coptic sociality. Yet it can also be encompassed by older, more durable sources of identity.

Study B: Horizons of Belonging

In *The Political Lives of Saints* Angie Heo examines the cult of Coptic saints in order to uncover the various ways “in which imaginaries of holy presence invoke and refurbish horizons of Christian-Muslim unity” (2018b:23). In contrast to Mahmood’s study, Heo’s work is

explicitly and intensely ethnographic. It has the virtue of transporting the reader to various sites in Egypt while retaining the intimacy of fine-grained ethnography.

It is worth noting that some productive tension exists between these two studies. Mahmood is primarily concerned with the effects of political secularism on religious difference. These effects have a long reach, extending all the way from family law to explicitly religious issues concerning literature and sacred truth. This wide range seems to intrude into the domain of the saints. Yet Heo's analysis, moving in the opposite direction, suggests that saints can disrupt such attempts at regimenting religious difference.

Relics, apparitions, and icons 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... The material aesthetics of envisioning saints, then, forge social imaginaries and political horizons of belonging and action. (21)

What makes the cult of the saints difficult to square with Mahmood's framework, in other words, is the ability of saints, vis-à-vis their "public media of holiness," to both conform to and exceed the purview of state and church. I find this tension intriguing given how saints reveal what Mahmood is reluctant to discuss; namely, the aspects of social life that lie on the other side of political secularism. As Heo might put it, the "social imaginaries and political horizons" of the saints need not conform to the transnational political formations that, as Mahmood argues, structure Coptic minority identity. They can even work against it.

The church as a building illustrates this tension. Though regulated by the state, churches can also platform these other "horizons of belonging." When the Virgin Mary appeared above

the church in the Cairene neighborhood of Zeitoun in 1968, as Heo explains, it was witnessed by Christians and Muslims. It also occurred at a politically fraught moment in history. As a result, the so-called horizons of belonging experienced by participants of this historic event are numerous, even somewhat contradictory. As Heo explains, the Zeitoun apparition pointed toward the “territorial dispossession” of Palestine in the Seven-Day War, framing this saintly presence in terms of pan-Arabism; the public nature of the apparition demands rational debate and Muslim confirmation of its veracity; the apparition itself fits within a series of other apparitions in the country; these apparitions index the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt, and so forth and so on. From one church springs a multitude of imageries and horizons.

Despite the different trajectories that Mahmood and Heo follow, it is also the case that the register of identities they invoke remains surprisingly stable. Mahmood’s approach to Copts, as we have seen, is cast largely in political terms. For Heo, Copts speak almost exclusively in terms of Coptic spirituality. Heo’s framework might not be surprising given the subject of her book, yet, as with Mahmood, similar questions can be asked: How might ethnography about Copts expand beyond the explicitly “spiritual”? Are there zones of interaction where the divide between what is saintly and what is not remains unclear? If so, what happens in these zones, and does it matter?

This line of inquiry touches upon theoretical concerns that animate this study. In Part III, I will focus on near-spiritual or near-religious objects and places. In doing so, I aim to extend, complement, and occasionally complicate Heo’s findings. The people of al-‘Aziya like to adorn their homes with sacred images. Neither icons nor non-religious art, these images constitute perhaps the most visible sign of saintly presence in Coptic communities. Yet they fit awkwardly in Heo’s framework. The same can be said of the cave at the edge of al-‘Aziya. Void of history

or miracles, the task of converting the space into a church and a monastery is perhaps more difficult, and yet, for that reason, more revealing. In these sites of the church-adjacent, place grows in importance. Instead of giving priority to the most impressive and historically important cases of saintly presence – what could compete with Zeitoun? – I look toward the liminal, which is where Copts are to be found most of the time.

In sum, this ethnography aims to offer a more complete depiction of Copts through a methodological commitment to the incomplete, arbitrary, and bounded. My hope is to complement and build upon the foundational work of Mahmood and Heo. I also seek to complicate some of the terms they incorporate into their analysis. Studies on Copts tend to focus on Orthodox Copts. Here the presence of other Christians raises a variety of challenges that must be addressed at various levels of society. Research on Copts also tends to assume the presence of the Muslim Other (a key element in Mahmood and Heo’s monographs). This absence in al-‘Aziya creates an experience of freedom that is as generative as it is troubling. By examining how Coptic residents of an exceptional town shape their landscape in light of this configuration of presence and absence, we can learn to appreciate how Christians in Egypt respond to the demands of pluralism in the modern world. The people of al-‘Aziya, while residing far from the cosmopolitan zones that loom large in the work cited above, nonetheless consider themselves part of this broader society. They belong to churches that have expansive horizons. Their social ties and moral commitments do not end at the edge of town. In lingering within the small-scale society of al-‘Aziya, we can grasp how the experience of misalignment, inscribed in space and time, sheds new light on how Christians make their home in a modern and rapidly changing world.

Outline of the Dissertation

My findings are the result of fieldwork carried out in the region around Asyut from December 2016 to June 2018. I traveled to al-‘Aziya most days while in the field, though I also took time to visit local monasteries and to interact with Coptic Christians in Asyut. For comparative purposes, I carried out several overnight trips to towns where Christians are the minority (al-Ghanaym, Abu Tig, al-Nikhayla) as well as places where Christians are the majority (Kum Buha, Dayr Abu Hinnis, Manhari).¹⁸ Occasionally I traveled to Cairo to take a break and to visit with families from al-‘Aziya who had moved north in search of better jobs. I also spent part of the summer of 2017 in the United States. Archival work at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania gave me a valuable perspective in framing the historical accounts I received from residents in the field.

This dissertation is divided into three sections, each of which addresses a different configuration of placemaking and pluralism. The first section, “Pluralism Across Space and Time,” examines denominational pluralism as it is understood and experienced within the confines of al-‘Aziya. Chapter one sets the scene by examining the way history is conceptualized and narrated by members of different denominations. Instead of focusing on differences of narrative content, my analysis draws upon Bakhtin’s language of chronotopes to examine how chronotopic configurations of space and time, especially in relation to the telling of history, structure denominational pluralism. Viewed from this perspective, a clean distinction emerges between the Orthodox Church, which has always been present, and all other churches, which, at some point, have “arrived.” This distinction is political in the sense that some families can claim to be founding families, having helped with the arrival of such churches. It is also a productive distinction since the arrival of a church typically inaugurates new spiritual events such as

apparitions, miracles, and revivals. Chapter two continues this theme of denominational pluralism from the perspective of gender. Houses and churches exist in dynamic tension in this society, and women are particularly adept at negotiating this boundary. They move easily across denominational divides. In attempting to see how the church enters the house and vice-versa, I examine two important activities in the rhythm of everyday piety: a prayer session held in a house, and a gathering of ministers held in an assembly hall next to a church. Drawing upon the work of Erving Goffman, I show how women establish interactive frameworks that create these hybrid spaces. I also look briefly at the practice of baptism, which is the way the Orthodox and Catholic churches regulate this boundary.

The second section, “Minority Life in Reverse,” looks more closely at the peculiar dynamics of this majority-Christian town. Chapter three takes up the relationship between religious authority and place. By examining the memory of a beloved priest, I examine how he created a jurisdiction in which to exercise his authority. Locating this priest within the broader spectrum of Coptic saints and holy people, I argue that the unusual character of the town renders this jurisdiction, and attendant efforts at boundary-setting, unstable. Too large to conceptualize as a church or monastery, but populated with too many Christians to be considered a typical town, al-‘Aziya fails to provide the spatial dimensions necessary for a revered man like Fr. Boulos to become an enduring source of *baraka* upon his death. Chapter four approaches the exceptional nature of al-‘Aziya from the vantage of vendettas and reconciliation sessions. Residents tended to point to an uptick in vendettas, almost all between Christian families, as evidence that something is wrong with their town. Instead of dwelling on the mechanics of these feuds, I draw attention to the tension between the world of family politics and that of ritual life in the church. The freedom Christians have in al-‘Aziya allows them to shape and order space in

ways that are unimaginable elsewhere, and I examine how this freedom is deployed in response to vendetta killings. At stake, I argue, is the question of what connects these domains of politics and church, and how they become united or detached. This approach highlights the social labor residents undertake in conceptualizing the Christian nature of their town – a project that runs parallel with the aspirations of ethnography.

The third section, “The New Coptic Landscape,” locates al-‘Aziya within a series of broader transformations in Coptic life, namely the proliferation of sacred images and the revival of monasticism in Egypt. Chapter five examines how the production of these images – what I call “Coptic imagery” – intersects with the political economy of the town. I examine how an influx of wealth has conditioned the painting of these images on certain kinds of houses. By examining how these images are produced, I explore the various ways in which images are verified, replicated, and altered. Attending to the moral issues that arise in this process, I argue, helps us identify other issues at stake, the most important being the need to anchor sacred images through verification. Chapter six uses the new monastery complex at the western edge of town as a prism through which to study the importance of monasticism in contemporary Coptic culture. In asking why this cave is only now being turned into a church, I examine how monasteries occasion an encounter with permanence for the Copts who visit them, or engage with them through various forms of media. This experience of permanence, I suggest, has grown in importance as Copts adapt to the challenges of modernity.

¹ The obstacles that Copts face in building churches are significant. The regulation the Egyptian state currently imposes on the building of churches can be traced back to the Hatt-i Humayun, an 1856 decree that stemmed from the Tanzimat. Only the Egyptian president can grant permits for building and renovating churches. According to Laure Guirguis (2017:18), Gamal Abdel Nasser authorized Pope Cyril VI to build twenty-five churches. These restrictions are often near the top of the list of Coptic grievances. In majority-Christian settings, as in al-‘Aziya, churches are often built without permits. For the political fallout of these restrictions, see Guirguis 2017:17-18. For the reaction of missionaries to this challenge, see Sharkey 2008:57-8.

² See Sedra 1999; Masters 2001; Asad 2003; Brown 2006; Mahmood 2016; Makdisi 2019.

³ This historical overview is necessarily brief and skewed toward Upper Egypt, the regional focus of this study. For a more thorough treatment of the history of Coptic-Muslim interaction, see Hasan 2003; Hamilton 2006; Armanios 2012; Mikhail 2014; Georgy 2015.

⁴ Consider, for instance, the fact that elite members of the Christian community pressured various Coptic Patriarchs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to permit polygamy among Christians (Armanios 2008:72). Christians also exploited niche markets by offering their service as accountants in the state bureaucracy. They depended in turn on Muslims to provide services that the Christian community could not supply for itself.

⁵ According to Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (2012), Copts represented roughly ten percent of the Egyptian population at the turn of the twentieth century. The Coptic population count is sometimes inflated due to the large number of Muslims who have secretly converted to Christianity. Or so I was told by some of my more confident interlocutors.

⁶ As explained in Chapter three, there are no monks who currently live in Dayr Durunka (though it is built on the site of an ancient monastery).

⁷ All translations from Arabic unless otherwise noted are mine. In transliterating Arabic words, I have opted for simplicity, and I have used diacritical marks only to indicate the ‘ayn (‘) and hamza (’). Since much of Arabic in this study is dialect, I have provided when appropriate transliteration that reflects the peculiarities of the Upper Egyptian dialect as it is spoken in and around al-‘Aziya. The most salient characteristics of this dialect can be mentioned here. Unlike the Egyptian dialect spoken in Cairo, Upper Egyptians vocalize the qaa and pronounce the jim as a soft g. In what is an important example for this study, the letter tha is sometimes pronounced as a voiced s in Egyptian dialect, turning a word like “archeological,” – *athari* in Modern Standard Arabic – into *asari*. Finally, adjectives referring to denominational identity (i.e., “Orthodox” or “Catholic”) tend to operate apart from the norms governing noun-adjective agreement. For instance, residents would often refer to the Catholic Church as *al-kinisa katulik*. As for proper nouns, I have sought to be faithful to the transliterations commonly found in English-language publications.

⁸ In this study I try to maintain distinction between place and space, with place being the meaningful outcome of the modifying or ordering of space. This distinction is not intended to be rigorous, and I use it to direct attention toward more specific actions, such as setting boundaries, creating and dismantling walls, and building homes and churches. Occasionally I will use the term “landscape,” which I understand, loosely, as place with expansive horizons. Further complicating matters is the lack of consistency in usage of these terms across authors cited in this study. Michel de Certeau, for instance, defines space as “practiced place” in the sense that places are “identified” but spaces are “actualized” (1984:118) – a point of emphasis that diverges from the aims of this study.

⁹ The Middle Eastern and broader Mediterranean world has been a productive zone for studying sacred places, especially as they are inhabited and shared across ethnic and religious lines. See Mittermaier 2008; Albera and Couroucli 2012. For more on place, dwelling, and religion in general, see Basso 1996; Tweed 2006.

¹⁰ In this study, some of the names of town residents have been changed in order to provide anonymity. The names of bishops, priests, and other historic and/or public figures remain unchanged.

¹¹ Despite the rich ethnographic work done on secularism in places like Egypt (Agrama 2012), one consequence of this theoretical interest is the framing of “religion” in terms of opposition to the secular.

¹² The Baptist church had only recently been established when I began my fieldwork and residents had little to say about it. As a result, the small Baptist community appears only in passing in these pages.

¹³ There are six Oriental Orthodox churches: the Coptic, Syriac (Jacobite), Ethiopian, Armenian, Malankara (Indian), and Eritrean Orthodox. These churches are to be distinguished from the broader collection of Orthodox churches (i.e., Greek and Russian), which accept the Confession of Chalcedon.

¹⁴ This first “wave” is distinguished from a second “Charismatic” (1960s and 70s) and a third “Neo-Charismatic” (1980s to present) wave (Nagib 2019:1). Given this study’s focus on the arrival and establishment of churches in the town of al-‘Aziya, it will only concern itself with the “Classical” Pentecostal wave.

¹⁵ The millet system is the name given to the Ottoman approach toward Christians and Jews, who were granted a certain degree of autonomy regarding internal jurisprudence, especially family law. The millet council in Egypt, which was reserved for the laity, evolved considerably in the twentieth century, both in relation to the institutional church and the state. See Sedra 2014; Mahmood 2015; Pfössl and Kymlicka 2015.

¹⁶ For other studies of denominational difference, see Tomlinson 2012; Bialecki 2014; Handman 2014.

¹⁷ See Copts Hann and Goltz 2010; van Doorn-Harder 2017; Boylston 2018; Luehrmann 2018.

¹⁸ These are only a few of the majority-Christian hamlets and towns to be found between the Upper Egyptian cities of Sohag and al-Minya. Others include Dayr al-Barsha, Etsa, and al-Bayadiya.

PART I

Pluralism across Space and Time

CHAPTER 1

At the Threshold of History

Any history written on Christian principles will be of necessity universal, providential, apocalyptic, and periodized.

R.G. Collingwood
The Idea of History

It is on a cold January afternoon that I pay my first visit to Hanna Anis. Hearing me knock, he shouts *ahlan* – welcome! – and ushers me into the sitting room of his house. Though well into his seventies, he is agile and strong. He grabs my wrist and leads me to a wooden bench. I sit down and he plops next to me. In comes his wife with warm hibiscus tea, leaving as quickly as she appeared. Hanna Anis and I have only met once before, so we exchange pleasantries and I talk about my research interests. “I want to write a book about al-‘Aziya,” I explain. “Well,” he replies, “what do you want to know?” It is early in my fieldwork and I am not sure what to say. “Maybe we could talk about the history of the town?” He gives me a pensive look. “The history of the town,” he mutters, collecting his thoughts. “There used to be faith and love in the town, but not anymore.” These are remarks I have already heard from others. Hanna Anis pulls his scarf in close as he talks. I let my attention wander. The sound of children playing drifts through the door left ajar and the daylight begins to fade.

Hanna Anis is Fr. Bishoy's uncle, his father's brother. Fr. Bishoy has arranged for my visit, and Hanna Anis is himself a Catholic. Perhaps detecting my lack of interest, he shifts course. "Do you know how the Catholic church arrived in al-'Aziya?" he asks.¹ When I tell him I do not, he leans back and begins his story.

How did the Catholic church arrive in al-'Aziya?

My brother's name is Yasa, the father of Father Bishoy, Bishoy Yasa. He was a subdeacon in the Orthodox church, something he did from the time he was young. Our house...have you seen our house next to the Orthodox church? That's our church. You walk out of the door of our house and you're stepping into the church. The church is here, the wall of our house is here.

Hanna Anis holds out his hands to demonstrate the proximity between "our house" and "our church." It is a puzzling detail. I know that Hanna Anis considers the "northern" Catholic church – the parish where Fr. Bishoy is pastor – to be his church. I wonder if he considers the Orthodox church to be the church of his childhood. As he continues, it becomes clear that he has a closer association between family and church in mind.

We grew up in the church. Of course, Yasa was older than me, and he was always at the church. When I went to school, he started to study in the church with someone called an *'arif*. The *'arif* used to memorize hymns, memorize liturgies, memorize all of the rites, memorize the psalms. He took Yasa under his wing and taught him and taught him, and Yasa learned everything. He got older, got married.

There was a bishop named Lucas. Before him was one named Antonios. Before him was Lucas, and before him another Lucas. This was in the sixties. When the bishop used to come here – he would come once a year – he would visit the church, visit the people, and so on. And Yasa showed up and the bishop said to him, "Come with me. I will ordain you a priest." And so Yasa started going to Manfalut and they taught him the hymns and liturgies. He did this for a year. The bishop returned, and he said, "I will ordain you after Christmas." So Lucas came and celebrated the Christmas liturgy, and in the middle of it, he died. Who came after that? The one after him, another one named Lucas. And to Yasa he said, "No." There were people who were designated for ordination, but he said, "If someone isn't a graduate of the Ecclesial College, I will not ordain him a priest." All the priests before them were just normal! And Yasa was a man in the prime of life and had memorized everything. But the bishop said, "Never. Spend a year in the Clerical College, and I will ordain you." And Yasa replied, "No, I'm a man occupied with my work."

Oh, we tried this and that. A group of men from the town went to the bishop and explained how Yasa was a good man, how he worked in the church, how his father was always in the church, how his house is next to the church, how he was baptized in the church. Seven or eight men from the town, including the father of the mayor. And the bishop said, “Never! End of discussion.” And they replied, “Congratulations to you and your church! We’re going to bring in the Catholic church. If you don’t ordain him, this very week there will be the Catholic church in al-‘Aziya.”

There was a man, Father Izhaq, and there was someone named ‘Azar who tricked him. ‘Azar told Father Izhaq, “You should let everyone in the church know that the family of the deceased should pay one Egyptian pound for the funeral prayers.” At that time, one Egyptian pound was a lot of money! People didn’t have much money, and so they revolted.

Hanna Anis claps his hands. He enjoys telling this story.

And when the people turned against him, Father Izhaq went to the Catholic bishop of al-Minya, who was his relative. He ordained Izhaq a Catholic priest, and he began to pray in the Catholic church. The group of men who had gone to see the Orthodox bishop then bought the house where there’s now the old Catholic church. They built the church there, and they went and brought in Father Izhaq. The people started to come and pray together, and so the Catholic church began around 1969. This is the founding of the Catholic church in al-‘Aziya.

Church Histories

People in al-‘Aziya have little to say about the history of their town but much to say about the history of their churches. These church histories are not equal. Some have clearly defined events and actors, others tend to resist ordered and dateable narration. One is not even thought to have any local history – its existence, one might say, is coterminous with the town itself. These are not different histories, but rather different kinds of histories. These different narrative frameworks, as we shall see, exist in relation to each other, and they shape the way residents talk about and understand their various churches.

It took me a long time to understand how these histories fit together. I could not pinpoint the stakes involved in these stories. In his ethnography of Arab historiography, Andrew Shryock

(1997) shows how Bedouin tribesmen recount their oral histories with keen awareness of the claims of other tribes. I expected to encounter similar kinds of contests and was disappointed when I could not find them. Indeed, Hanna Anis's story seemed the perfect kind of history to provoke a counter-narrative. In his telling, Hanna Anis not only manages to connect his family with the arrival of the Catholic church. He also emphasizes the proximity of his family's house to the Orthodox church. The way that Hanna Anis's brother, Yasa, is invited to become an Orthodox priest – and is then rejected – suggests that this proximity is both topographical and familial. The boundary between Hanna Anis's house and the church seems more notional than real, and I was certain that someone from another family would counter with a different kind of history. How could it be that Hanna Anis's family, now credited with having helped bring the Catholic church into town, could also claim this exclusive attachment to the Orthodox church?

But there was no pushback. Instead, those who I expected to oppose this account were its most enthusiastic proponents. Early in my fieldwork, a young veterinarian who served as a subdeacon at the Orthodox church invited me to have lunch at his house. We had been discussing the different Christian denominations in Egypt and he wanted to impress on me the politics that undergird the growth of non-Orthodox churches in Egypt. With this end clearly in mind, he asked, "Have you heard the story of how the Catholic church came to be in al-'Aziya?" Hanna Anis's account was still fresh in my mind, and when I shared it with him, he replied, without protest, "So you know! These churches are here only because of feuds between families." Hanna Anis had revealed in his family's connection to both churches. Yet it was this very detail that was the sharpest arrow in the quiver of those eager to question the Catholic church's legitimacy.

Eventually I also came to learn that while hardened Orthodox residents found Hanna Anis's account strangely useful, some Catholics were embarrassed by it. When I brought the

story up with two granddaughters of Fr. Izhaq – the very priest who had been duped into charging for funerals – I was sternly warned not to mention ‘Azar, the man who had orchestrated the scheme, in the presence of their father. It was a curious and telling reaction. By cautioning me to avoid the story, yet without challenging its details, these young mothers seemed to suggest that they accepted, perhaps with little enthusiasm, the authority of this church history.

That this one account might be accepted, yet interpreted in such different ways, brings us to the topic of this chapter. Church histories are less about content and more about narrative framework. The fact that the Catholic church *arrived* allows Hanna Anis to tighten the link between his family and the Catholic church – a connection that incidentally reverberates back into his family’s original proximity to the Orthodox church. This complex layering of associations is only possible because a new church was brought into town. Narratives told about the local Catholic church cast in relief the Orthodox church, which has no such narratives. As Hanna Anis himself would say, “A long time ago, before the Catholic church and other churches arrived, all of us were Orthodox.” The Orthodox Church, so rich in history in its own right, is, in this local sense, the point of stability by which the arrival of other churches is understood.

In the language of Bakhtin (1981), the history of the Catholic church in al-‘Aziya has a fundamentally different chronotopic configuration than that of the Orthodox church. Bakhtin developed the concept of “chronotope” to elucidate how space and time not only give shape to stories, but allow their structure to be compared with others – an insight that has been productive in anthropology (Lemon 2009; Wirtz 2016). It is this comparative component of the chronotope that interests me. According to Hanna Anis, one church arrived, the other did not. This division reoccurs throughout the stories I would hear about al-‘Aziya’s churches. While the content of these stories (the names of individuals, the dates of arrival, etc.) can matter, especially within the

church community itself, the main point of distinction is that of chronotope, which is to say, of the narrative structure of space and time.

Families, Houses, Churches

When Hanna Anis held out his hands to demonstrate the proximity of his family's house to the Orthodox church, he was invoking a semantic field that is unstable and easily exploited in the realm of local politics. Our "home" (*bayt*) can refer to both house and family, a material structure and a kinship group that can range from a domestic unit to a clan that includes hundreds of people – both of which are referred to as "families" (*'a'ilat*).² When I encountered Hanna Anis, he was living on the western half of town, far from the house where he grew up. Still, to him it was "our home," and Hanna Anis's clan, the Sama'an, saw that patch of earth as an enduring testimony to their intimate involvement in the town's church affairs. The word "church" (*kinisa*) also has scalable intension. It can refer to the building, and to those who join the ranks of its earthly and heavenly believers. The comparison is not exact, as anyone in al-'Aziya will tell you. But the slippage between the two buildings is enough that Hanna Anis could collapse his home into the church next door.

Hanna Anis's current house is representative of the typical al-'Aziya household, which is patrilocal and multigenerational. One of his sons lives on the second floor with his wife and young kids. Other sons have houses on either side of his, and in the afternoon the street outside is filled with the screams and laughter of children – most of them cousins – as they play in the shade of two-story homes. Most of the households of the Sama'an (there are about fifty in total) have moved to the western side of town over the course of the previous decade. Land there is cheaper, and there is more space to build. In this part of town, a clan can occupy the length of the same street, and most streets are associated with one clan or another.

Hanna Anis's story involves individuals from all the major clans in town, though it still reserves pride of place for his own family. In this sense, the story exists within a broader realm of family politics, the features of which can be fleshed out here. Families and clans, both in al-'Aziya and in Upper Egypt at large, cannot be spoken of in identical terms. There is an unequal distribution of political power – often tabulated through the size of the clan and its economic resources – across the several dozen clans in town, and this inequality influences the way families can and cannot be discussed. People were happy to talk about smaller clans. It became a running joke among my interlocutors to ponder the origins of the Ghatasin (“the divers”) or the Najjar (“the carpenters”) – small clans with strange names. This playfulness would recede when mid-sized clans like the Sama'an would come up in conversation. And no one ever wanted to talk about the largest clans, such as the Khalayla, and certainly not the Duraba. This silence was due to the widespread fear that any misinterpreted remark might result in a conflict that could turn deadly. This pattern created a curious inversion in my own research, wherein people were least willing to talk about the aspects of kinship and politics that mattered most.

Hanna Anis, like everyone else, was reluctant to talk about the Duraba or other large clans. At the same time, he would acknowledge their power by emphasizing the one part of social life where his clan, the Sama'an (which was not as wealthy or numerous), enjoyed the upper hand. “We have the greatest number of doctors in town,” Hanna Anis would occasionally remind me. Having a doctor in the family – the highest rung on the ladder of Egyptian higher education – is an object of pride for any Egyptian. In the local world of al-'Aziya, however, this status is not as easily converted into political capital. In boasting this way, Hanna Anis is trafficking in the more amorphous realm of what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) identified as symbolic capital. It is at this level that the Sama'an attachment to church history appears to operate. As I

came to spend more time with Hanna Anis and his nephew, Fr. Bishoy, I noticed how multifaceted this attachment could be. When the topic came up in conversation, both with the Sama‘an and with others, a particular narrative arc could be observed, one which intertwines Sama‘an kinship with the history of the Catholic church:

(1) Yasa Anis (Hanna Anis’s brother) is nominated to become an Orthodox priest and then is spurned. The Catholic church is brought to al-‘Aziya as a result.

(2) Bishoy Yasa (Yasa’s son) becomes a Catholic priest. Later his cousin becomes a Catholic priest as well.

(3) Fr. Bishoy’s brother becomes the head of the Parish Council for the St. George Catholic church.

(4) Fr. Bishoy returns from Canada to take over the “northern” Catholic church.

(5) Fr. Bishoy lobbies the bishop to have his cousin return to join him at his new parish.

Taken in these terms, there is a straight line to be drawn from Hanna Anis’s original story and the current state of affairs in the Catholic community in al-‘Aziya. This investment in the symbolic capital of the church, though, was not beyond reproach – evidence that it ranks below the political capital claimed by the Duraba and other major clans. When rumors spread that Fr. Bishoy was bringing his cousin to serve as his vicar – the last step in the progression cited above – there was immediate pushback from families in both Catholic parishes. Few people would ever speak up against the Duraba, but this willingness to wage a subtle campaign of resistance against Sama‘an control of the church – through rumors, gossip, switching churches – showed that prestige garnered through the church is more tenuous and has its limits.

At this point, then, there are two observations that can be made about Hanna Anis’s historical narrative. The first is that the church’s arrival – that is, the story’s distinct chronotope – is what matters most in the multi-denominational world of al-‘Aziya. It is the *arrival* of churches that allows them to serve as vehicles for symbolic capital, or to be used to unsettle claims of

authority (as the Orthodox might do in pointing out that, unlike their Church, the Catholic Church once “arrived”). The second observation is that the details of such narratives, while generally unquestioned, can still be expanded or contracted. In doing so, families can be drawn into or pulled away from stories about churches. For instance, I occasionally heard it mentioned that Fr. Bishoy had been “like a son” to Fr. Boulos al-Hermini, the legendary pastor of the St. George Catholic church who took over shortly after the church had been founded – a clear example of family history expanding into that of the church. Others mentioned, sometimes not at all favorably, that Fr. Bishoy’s brothers and sisters would “keep eyes” (*mur ‘aqib*) on the northern parish while he was away – yet another example, but one less favorable to the Sama’an. The claim that the Sama’an had helped found the church, in other words, cut both ways, and it reveals the different motivations one might have for linking “house” with “church.” While this expression of family politics might seem provincial, what I came to learn is that this politics produces the conceptual framework by which denominational pluralism is understood.

Churches whose Age is Near

In Hanna Anis’s story and others like it, “bringing” a church could also be described as “founding” a church. As we have already seen, this action invites narration that includes people who carry out this action. But it also suggests a “before” and “after” that are unequal. Through a church’s founding, something changes. In his study on spatial stories, Michel de Certeau (1984:124-5) reflects on the overlap of ritual that acts as a “foundation” that “‘provides space’ for the actions that will be undertaken” – an act that is mirrored in stories that “open a legitimate theater for practical actions.” For de Certeau, both these modes of action – ritual and narration – demarcate a place where activity can occur. Put slightly differently, they establish a temporal “before” and “after” in such a manner that a spatial field becomes delineated.

This overlap between narrative, space, and field of action is echoed in Hanna Anis's own account. As our conversations continued, Hanna Anis gave me a potted version of the histories of all the churches in town. He started by drawing a sharp distinction between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox churches. "From the moment there was a town named al-'Aziya, there was an Orthodox church." He then continued with the churches "whose age is near" (*'amruhum qarib*):

- (1) The Evangelical church, "founded by elite landowners, seventy or eighty years ago."
- (2) The Apostolic church, "founded only fifty years ago."
- (3) The Catholic church, "founded fifty years ago by us, our group, including the mayor and the shaykh of the town."
- (4) The Baptist church, "founded only ten or eleven years ago by some families in town."

Hanna could not remember who founded the Apostolic church, but he was confident someone else could provide this information. In his telling, these non-Orthodox churches are united by a chronological framework. They were founded by people, and they all occupy the same category of "church," which is itself a field of action. These are new places where new kinds of worship can occur. They can also serve as new sites of divine action in the town.

This focus on church founding can be compared to the focus on conversion narratives in the anthropology of Christianity, especially as they appear in ethnographic accounts of the "arrival" of Christianity to non-Christian societies. At the risk of overgeneralizing, these sites of missionary focus by Protestant Christians tend to restrict narrative possibility to the individual. The real rupture is personal, and the kind of history these churches promote is not that of the churches themselves, but of the self (Schieffelin 2014). What is "founded" is a new individual, and narration serves to confirm the sincerity of this conversion. As Webb Keane (2007:165) writes, the convert's narration "demand[s] public recognition of the founding character of his actions, that his move to Christianity was in some sense a powerful act that reshaped the world."

The new space created in such narratives is the world of the new believer, which also serves as his or her field of action. The church itself, as something that might be “brought” or “founded,” seems incidental.

The town of al-‘Aziya, though, is not a convert society. As Hanna Anis said, it has always had an Orthodox church. While there are Protestant Christians in the town, their conversion narratives – which they have – remain situated in a society that prioritizes church belonging. There is a limited range of options for al-‘Aziya residents to describe their religious identity, and these identities are all linked to the churches that exist in the town. The non-Orthodox churches have local histories and local founders. The Orthodox Church, even while it enjoys a robust history and litany of “founders” and church fathers (St. Mark, St. Cyril, St. Anthony), exists beyond these fluctuations. As such, there can be fluctuation and growth in this local society – churches can come and go – even while the town remains Christian, as it always has been. Put differently, it is as if the non-Orthodox churches were spokes on a wheel, each extending from an Orthodox axle that provides a shared point of contrast.³

This view of the town’s denominational plurality reflects the way Egypt’s various Christian denominations are organized at the level of the state. In political affairs that involve the state’s relationship with its Christian minority, the Orthodox Pope acts as the official representative of both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians. He is the ambassador of all Christians in Egypt. At the same time, each of the non-Orthodox churches has its own governing council and codified body of family law that is recognized by the state. On their state-issued identity cards, Christians of all denominations are simply registered as *misihi* (“Christian”), and denominational difference is established primarily through marriage, which determines the

family law that applies. There is a limited range of possibilities for being a Christian in Egypt, and each passes through the institution of a church.

This rarified world of state-church relations is not the one Hanna Anis describes. His view, which is shared by many in the town, is that the “founding” of these churches spurs new kinds of spiritual activity. In de Certeau’s sense, it creates new space for divine action. Residents often talked about the great “revivals” (*nahdat*) of the past – exceptional periods of divine wonders and miracles that overtook the town. The word itself might stem from the longstanding Protestant presence in the town, but these were events that, if connected to specific denominations, were also not limited to them.⁴ No one ever made a direct connection between a church’s founding and a revival, but there is clear overlap between the two. Recollection of these revivals centered on four particular moments:

(1) In the late 1950s, a local man known as ‘Atallah ‘Abd al-Malik performed faith healings and became renowned for having predicted his death. He belonged to the Apostolic church.

(2) In the 1960s, an American missionary from the Assemblies of God church known as Pastor Brown made frequent visits to al-‘Aziya from the nearby Lillian Trasher orphanage. Through a translator, he preached and led people to the desert at the town’s edge, where people would pray and sing as the Holy Spirit descended upon them.

(3) In the 1970s, a white light began to circle periodically around the Catholic church. Many people came to believe it was St. George, and the young pastor of the parish, Fr. Boulos al-Hermeni, performed faith healings and exorcisms during the annual celebration of the parish’s founding.

(4) In the 1980s, there was another period of time when the Holy Spirit descended upon the town and brought about miracles and healings. Unlike the other revivals, however, this one is remembered only by those associated with the Apostolic church.

These revivals are only connected to the Catholic and the Apostolic churches. These two churches were often viewed as the most vibrant churches next to the Orthodox church. (The Evangelical church was sometimes dismissed, perhaps unfairly, on account of the poor

attendance of its services, and the Baptist church's arrival was too recent to attract much attention.) All the same, these revivals belong to the town, not churches. In Hanna Anis's telling, it is only when a new church arrives or is founded that a revival occurs: a field of action that begins with a church but comes to overtake the town.

Rival Families

The most important of the revivals is the one connected to the founding of the Catholic church. Unlike other revivals, this revival is commemorated each year in the form of an annual *mazar*, or "celebration," in honor of St. George the Roman. It is no exaggeration to say that the *mazar* is the most important event in the town. "*Mazar*" is a distinctly Christian word; until fairly recently, the celebration was simply called a *mulid*, which is the celebration of a saint's birthday as practiced by Christians and Muslims throughout Egypt. The common narrative is that, in or around 1972, a bright white light (others say it was a green light in the shape of a man on horseback) circled three times around the steeples of the Catholic church. Witnesses took the light to be St. George, the patron saint of the church. The apparition occurred several more times.



Fig. 1.1 A resident holds a cloth that reveals a miraculous bloody imprint. The cloth had touched the icon of St. George during the annual *dura*.

Fr. Boulos, then a young priest, organized a *mazar* in honor of St. George, which he would oversee every year for the rest of his forty-five year tenure as pastor. Like many *mulids* elsewhere, the *mazar* lasts for two weeks. The evenings are filled with preaching, the singing of hymns and other festivities. At the end of the two weeks there is a *dura* (“procession”), during which over a thousand people will walk the boundaries of the town. These events, especially the *dura*, commemorate the founding of the Catholic church.⁵

In his study of chronotopes, Bakhtin (1981:152) describes a particular narrative device that uses the miraculous to reframe the space-time of a text: what he called “adventure-time.” This temporality, he wrote, is a “type of time [that] emerges only at points of rupture [when some hiatus opens up] in normal, real-life, ‘law-abiding’ temporal sequences.” Bakhtin developed this theory with literary texts in mind. But taken in a more general sense, this idea of “adventure-time” can help us identify the dynamic character of the *mazar* and *dura*. During these two events, miracles that had been associated with the church – the apparition of St. George and the miracle-working of Fr. Boulos – move beyond the walls of the church and expand into the streets. The Coptic tradition of the *dura* is found elsewhere in Egypt, though it almost always occurs within the confines of a monastery.⁶ It would be impossible to think of a *dura* taking over a majority-Muslim town, and the people of al-‘Aziya know this. This exceptional time of miracles and wonder therefore augments the exceptionality of the town. It ruptures the normal, producing new textures of space and time.

This miraculous afterlife of the Catholic church’s founding is not part of Hanna Anis’s founding story. In fact, he was completely uninterested in the topic. When I asked if he had himself witnessed the apparitions of St. George, he replied firmly, “Me...I didn’t see anything.” Part of Hanna Anis’s reluctance to acknowledge the apparitions and discuss the *mazar* and *dura*

was his coolness toward Fr. Boulos. I treaded lightly on this topic, though after roughly a year of fieldwork, Hanna Anis finally admitted that Fr. Boulos had “cooperated” with the Duraba. “All of them are awful,” Hanna Anis whispered, speaking of the much-feared clan. “All of them.” It was always difficult to get any straightforward comments on the Duraba, but I had heard from Hanna Anis and others that the *mazar* and *dura* were, among other things, a significant economic institution. People liked to recall how men would carry a large sheet behind the icon of St. George that would catch money thrown by those participating in the *dura*, and by women and children watching from their balconies. No one knew where that money went, though some suspected that it was shared by Fr. Boulos and members of the Duraba. This kind of talk was slanderous, as Fr. Boulos remained beloved by many. It was also dangerous, and Hanna Anis would say little else on the issue.

Nevertheless, the founding story Hanna Anis shared contains traces of Duraba involvement in the history of the town’s Catholic church. The father of the current mayor, ‘Omda Malik, was from the Duraba clan and had been part of the delegation sent to negotiate with the Orthodox bishop on behalf of Hanna Anis’s brother. Hanna Anis also acknowledged that the original structure of the Catholic church had been built on land and with money provided by the mayor and other Duraba households. This involvement on the part of the Duraba is reflected in the topography of the town. Alongside the sanctuary of the St. George church stands a much smaller building that houses the “original” (*asari*) altar where Fr. Boulos first celebrated the Divine Liturgy (his predecessor, Fr. Izhaq, had only presided at the Divine Liturgy in the homes of the faithful, and he resigned once the church was built). Immediately to the north of these buildings is a large field of two or three acres. This entire complex is positioned alongside a large brick wall, which separates the church from several large, interconnected homes that

make up the Duraba compound. There is a strong sense of continuity that runs between the church and this cluster of households. Duraba family members even have private access to the church through a private door nestled in an adjacent alleyway.

The Duraba then can also claim proximity to the church, as Hanna Anis did to me. Yet with the Duraba, this proximity extends, and is amplified, by the *mazar* and *dura*. Hanna Anis and other members of the Sama'an had sought to link their initial connection to the church's founding with the current leadership of Fr. Bishoy and other important agnates. But the Duraba essentially trumped these claims by extending their own involvement through their sponsorship of Fr. Boulos and these festivities. They also could use the founding story told by Hanna Anis, and to seemingly greater effect.

Hanna Anis's silence on these issues made it hard to sort out these competing claims. But the political scene in the town had started to change when my fieldwork began, and the dynamics of the town's family-based politics were becoming easier to see. Fr. Boulos died shortly before I arrived in al-'Aziya in late 2016. The Duraba retained much power in the town. The patriarch, 'Omda Malik, still acted as mayor, though old age and illness kept him behind closed doors most days. Occasionally, Muntasir, one of his sons who was involved in national politics, would visit from Cairo. Muntasir had held a position in the Parliament before it was dissolved after the 2011 Revolution, and he was very interested in the governance of the Catholic church in al-'Aziya. It was shortly before Fr. Boulos's death that Fr. Bishoy had returned to al-'Aziya in order to take over the "northern" parish, and word spread that Fr. Bishoy had banned Fr. Boulos from entering the new parish. Some residents saw this tension between the two priests as a reflection of the ongoing hostilities between the Sama'an and the Duraba. There were several feuds between these

two clans that had yet to be resolved, and the death of Fr. Boulos had deprived the Duraba of a faithful ally.

It was in this shifting environment that talk about the history of the Catholic church's founding was inevitably interpreted. In March 2017, there was an event held at the St. George Catholic church to commemorate the one-year anniversary of Fr. Boulos's death. The church was filled, with men and boys sitting on one side, women and children on the other, and young girls looking down from the balconies above. A woman led the church in hymns, and the pastor shared a few words about his memories of Fr. Boulos. Then 'Omda Malik and Muntasir were invited to the front, where several chairs had been placed before the curtain that veiled the altar. A young man from the parish sat alongside the two men and, speaking into a microphone, asked them lighthearted questions about Fr. Boulos. The mayor spoke at length about the early years of the Catholic church in town. His son then took the microphone and said he wanted to talk about more recent events. Before his death, Muntasir explained, Fr. Boulos had acquired land in the northern part of town, had prepared blueprints for the new parish, and had started to oversee its construction. "*We* did it," Muntasir said. It was an ambiguous pronoun that could refer to the Catholic community or, as seemed more likely, the Duraba and Fr. Boulos.

It was at this moment that a young woman stood up. I knew her as Hanna Anis's granddaughter, as well as Fr. Bishoy's niece. She interrupted Muntasir and announced that he and his family "had not founded" the "northern" Catholic church. That work had been done by her uncle, Fr. Bishoy. People murmured and shifted in their seats, and Muntasir briefly paused before continuing as if nothing had happened. Later, Hanna Anis's granddaughter told me that people in attendance had thanked her for confronting Muntasir. This intervention was one of

several signs that the linkage the Duraba had created with the original church's founding was beginning to weaken.

Rival Churches

The contests waged between the Sama'an and the Duraba largely took place within the Catholic community. But these historical narratives also shaped the Catholic church's relationship with its nearby rival, the Orthodox church. There is a history of antagonism between these two churches, some of which might be chalked up to the narcissism of small differences. Both churches make use of the same liturgies, their clergy dress and present themselves in similar ways, both claim apostolic succession, and both are targets of nearly identical Protestant polemics. True, there are points of doctrinal difference, all of which many residents in al-'Aziya could easily identify: the existence of purgatory, the filioque, the nature of Christ. But the visual and liturgical similarities of the two churches was so strong that the real tension sometimes appeared in the form of accusations of deception, with some of the Orthodox claiming that Catholics were not always forthright regarding how their church differed from the Orthodox tradition.

This suspicion animated the hostility that supposedly existed between Fr. Boulos and some of the Orthodox priests. It seems, as some of the Catholics I spoke with recalled, that Fr. Boulos was "more Orthodox than the Orthodox." Unlike the Catholic priests during my fieldwork who prayed the Divine Liturgy in Arabic, Fr. Boulos would stubbornly chant it in Coptic, as the Orthodox still do. Fr. Boulos was also sought after for baptisms and weddings by Catholics and Orthodox alike, all of which confirmed Orthodox suspicion that he was poaching members. This competition eventually became an indelible feature of the town's landscape. Every Sunday morning, residents of the old section of town would have to listen to hours of

chanting and preaching blasted from the two churches, both equipped with loudspeakers pointed directly at each other.

Residents across all denominations liked to joke about the various ways these two churches engaged in one-upmanship. Some older residents had thought that St. George was the “Catholic saint” due to his appearance over the Catholic church. In response, the second Orthodox church built in the town was given the name of St. George. The second Catholic church, in turn, took the name of St. Mary’s, the patroness of the old Orthodox church. The same kind of confessional politics emerged in other *duras* that copied the format of the one dedicated to St. George. For the Feast of the Assumption in August, the Orthodox church would process through the streets with an old icon of the Virgin. Fr. Bishoy then instituted a procession for the Virgin in the area around the “northern” church. During this day of competing *duras*, there was an agreement struck between the rival Orthodox and Catholic pastors to limit their respective celebrations to either side of the town. People kept close tabs on which procession mustered the larger crowd.

These rival churches therefore made use of a nearly-identical repertoire of practices and liturgies. Nevertheless, there is one way in which at least the Orthodox and Catholic processions are different. Unlike the rather new Orthodox procession, the Catholic *dura* for St. George draws its power from the chain of signification that begins with the church’s founding, continues with the apparitions, miracles, and work of Fr. Boulos, and extends into the present. Many people in al-‘Aziya had been alive during these developments. Like Hanna Anis, they remember a time before the Catholic church and a time after its arrival. Denominational difference, in other words, structures some of the most significant parts of the lives of people in the town – differences that get played out every year through these processions. This difference, expressed in the

dimensions of space and time, erects the boundaries of what kind of experiences residents can and cannot have – what de Certeau (1984:125) might call “the obscure thresholds of our existence.” At stake is less a difference in identity than of possible forms of action.

It was for this reason that I began to wonder whether the Orthodox church could also celebrate its own set of miracles. Did the *lack* of a founding story keep this kind of miraculous intervention from occurring? Many miracles and apparitions have obviously occurred throughout Egypt (Shenoda 2010). But in this local society, where churches are understood in close relation to each other, could the inaccessibility of what Bakhtin called “adventure time” set the threshold of what kinds of miracles might occur? I realized there was no way I could fully answer this question. But then I started to hear people talk about the icon used during the Orthodox procession, and which appeared to have a strange backstory. Several people had said the icon was very old, and the Orthodox bishop in Manfalut wanted to take it from al-‘Aziya in order to store and protect it. One person even claimed the icon had been “discovered” in the Orthodox church, almost like a miracle. But no one could give a clear account, and I could not find anyone willing to accompany me to the Orthodox church to see it.

I had almost given up pursuing the story when I found myself being hosted by a family with longstanding ties to both the Orthodox and Catholic churches. The mother came from the Khalayla clan, which tended to be Catholic, and had converted to Orthodoxy when she married. Her young adult children were Orthodox, but they both had a strong devotion to the memory of Fr. Boulos. Given how I found access to the world within the Orthodox Church to be difficult, these kinds of multi-denominational households often proved to be the most useful points of entry into the Orthodox world. I asked if they knew anything about the icon in the old Orthodox church. I relayed how one person had claimed the icon had been found in a hidden room in the

sanctuary. Christina, the teenage daughter, quickly acknowledged that there had been a miracle associated with the icon. She then turned to Jamal, her older brother, to check with him. Jamal served as an altar server (*shamas*) at the Orthodox church. He set the record straight. There was no “hidden room” where such an event could take place.

Jamal: No, Father. Those ruins are from long ago. There wasn't any “room.”

Christina: But wasn't there a room under the altar?

Jamal: No, it was smaller than that, and it took place in the small church. Every time people would renovate the church, they would expand it. At first, the church was just like this sitting room and that bedroom. This was considered a “church” long ago.

Jamal's description of the structural development of the Orthodox church reflected what others had told me. When I asked when the church itself was built, I was simply told “a long time ago!” It's beginning receded into the distant past, and these accounts of the icon's appearance also invited similar acts of deferral. Some claimed it had been brought by a bishop from a monastery, others that it had always been in the church. However it had appeared, it was thought to have deep ties to the church.

Jamal did agree with his sister that the icon had been associated with a miracle. In fact, he had witnessed it. He recalled how the old Orthodox church had undergone significant renovations during the upheaval following the Arab Spring. Along with a new sanctuary, the church had added two enormous towers, both rising over two hundred feet in the air. People had gathered in the Orthodox church to celebrate the renovations, and Jamal had been there as well. When he described the event, he noted that he had been standing next to the pastor of the church, Fr. Yaqoub. He also mentioned that it was a time of tension between the Orthodox and Catholics.

This was in the time of Father Boulos, may God have mercy on him. He came to the church. At this time, we were two sects, the Orthodox and the Catholics. We were wary of each other, each side on guard against the other. Father Yaqoub and the others said that when they [the Catholics] come and say things like “a thousand congratulations,” we

won't respond in kind. Then Father Boulos said, "Don't bother anyone who shows up. Instead say: *kyrie elaison, kyrie elaison.*"

According to Jamal, Fr. Boulos had gone to congratulate the Orthodox priests for having renovated their church, the oldest in town. He then sets the stage, describing the scaffolding that still encased the church.

Jamal: Then, three doves flew out of the scaffolding by the church tower.

Aaron: Wait, was Father Boulos there for that?

Jamal and Christina: He had just left.

Jamal: And there was a light above. I was next to Father Yaqoub, and I said, "Look, there's something lit up! Someone's up there! There's a bright light, like fire!" And Father Yaqoub said that the Virgin had brought about that light.

Jamal's story had little to do with the icon itself. The connection instead runs through the patroness of the church, the Virgin Mary, who is the subject of the icon and, through this apparition, becomes linked to the church's renovation. The apparition is also associated with Fr. Boulos, who plays a role analogous to that of a founder. It is his arrival and departure that occasion this miraculous occurrence. But there is no cohesive narrative. These elements, which are so tightly bound in the history of the Catholic church's arrival, are left fragmented and unclear.

In the end, the association of the miraculous with the founding or renovation of a church resembles the concern, elaborated in political theology, over how the eternal authority of law is to be established in time. "This founding or revolutionary moment," as Jacques Derrida (1992:36) wrote, "is, in law, an instance of non-law." Such a founding "always takes place and never takes place in a presence." Carl Schmitt (2005:27), notably, saw miracles as an example of the divine establishing sovereignty by breaking the very rules it has enacted. This insight, applied to the Orthodox church, raises questions that might have no answer. Does this renovation of the

old Orthodox produce the same effects as witnessed in the Catholic church's arrival? Do miracles flow from these occasions of rupture, made visible through the building and rebuilding of churches? Does the proximity of Catholic and Orthodox churches, both in terms of the town's topography and in terms of liturgy and tradition, produce a dialogic engagement set in the register of the miraculous? Like so many things in al-'Aziya, the rivalry of these two churches points to a greater sense of mystery.

I should note that these provocations flow in part from my own identity as a priest-ethnographer. My lack of access to the Orthodox church meant that if local historical accounts about the Orthodox church did exist, it would be hard for me to know. But boxing out an outsider like myself can also be a powerful tool for creating history in that it reorients talk of history to the scale of the Orthodox Church writ large, whose history is as old as that of Egypt. When confronting "Catholic history," I was encouraged to look at the local and the granular; when searching for "Orthodox history," I was directed toward the expansive and eternal. Yet occasionally these two directives were flipped, as is the case here. If the apparition of St. George is thought by some to give the Catholic church a foothold in the eternal, this apparition of the Virgin Mary, at least as recalled by Jamal, might allow the Orthodox church to access elements of a founding, revolutionary moment.

+++++

The people of al-'Aziya have had much longer contact with various Protestant churches than with the Catholic Church. In fact, there have been Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in the town for several generations. It seems like al-'Aziya was established in 1815 when peasants broke from the nearby town of Misra and moved to the western edge of the valley (Ramzi 1994). This development was likely precipitated by Muhammad 'Ali's abolishment of the *iltizam*

system, which shifted land ownership from a *multazim* (member of the gentry class) to the village collective (Baer 1962:1-6). Being far removed from the Nile, it was not as easily accessed by the first American Presbyterian (or “Evangelical”) missionaries, who initially relied on water transport to visit towns and attempt to win converts. Still, when the British carried out the census of 1907, nearly one-third of the village registered as Protestant, with the remainder of Christians registered as Orthodox. (There was then, as now, a small Muslim minority.) One finds a similar distribution in the 1917 census. Even taking into consideration the unreliability of British census data, this large number of Protestants is highly unusual. It is a higher percentage than one finds even today.

Two factors above all likely made al-‘Aziya attractive to Evangelical and, later, Pentecostal evangelization. The first is the town’s proximity to Asyut. The American Presbyterian missionaries who would later help create the Synod of the Nile established a permanent station in Asyut in 1865. They also opened a school that later would become Asyut College, and which came to serve as an important training ground for the native leadership of the Evangelical Church. As Heather Sharkey (2008:41) notes, the success of these missionary efforts in and around Asyut is evidenced in the campaign waged by the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Demetrius II (r. 1862-70) to counteract the spread of Protestantism in the area. As we shall see, these missionaries were particularly successful in converting Coptic members of the landowning class, and this connection provided at least a partial bridge between the Asyut mission and the rural community of al-‘Aziya.

Asyut also was important for the spread of Pentecostalism in the region and throughout Egypt. In 1907, Pentecostal missionaries established a church in Asyut in the house of a prominent Coptic family. In 1911, a young American woman named Lillian Trasher traveled to

Egypt, having felt called by God to serve the poor. She went to Asyut to assist the work of the American missionary George Brelsford, but when she was asked to care for the child of a dying Egyptian mother, she decided to open an orphanage (Meinardus 2006:113-4). The orphanage grew and later became the site of the Apostolic Theological College, which continues to train local Egyptians for ministry in the Apostolic Church. Older residents in al-‘Aziya remember a “Pastor Brown” who resided in the orphanage complex and would visit the town to preach and stage revivals.

Another reason why al-‘Aziya was attractive to missionary evangelization is its unusual demography. Like the Catholic missionaries who went before them, Protestant missionaries largely directed their evangelization efforts toward Orthodox Copts. Winning Muslim converts had always been difficult, but a series of national controversies, including the alleged forced-conversion of a Muslim orphan by American missionaries (Baron 2014), spurred national efforts to restrict this work. Naturally, communities with a larger presence of Copts tended to make for more potential converts. Throughout the governorates of al-Minya, Asyut, and Sohag, there are no less than a dozen towns of medium size where Copts form the majority. In all these locations there is a plurality of denominations.⁷

This long-standing association with missionizing forms of Protestantism in al-‘Aziya creates an interesting problem in regard to history. In the anthropology of Christianity, Pentecostalism and, to a lesser extent, other forms of Protestant Christianity have emphasized a break with the past. This reform work is typically directed toward aspects of social life thought to run contrary to the Christian life. This emphasis on rupture varies across different Christian traditions and contexts, and recent ethnographic accounts offer a refined understanding of how this work is carried out across the globe. In this regard, Egypt poses a unique challenge. How

does one create a rupture with a land and heritage that can be traced directly back to the early church, and even the Holy Family's flight into Egypt? The Evangelicals and Pentecostals I came to know in al-'Aziya all consider themselves Copts in the sense that their ancestors were the original inhabitants of Egypt. This sense of continuity does not fit easily into ethnic, religious, or nationalist categories, and it makes for a different approach toward rupture and conversion.⁸

At least in the case of the American Presbyterian missionaries, their eagerness to win converts was also tempered by a competing desire to promote reform within the Orthodox Church. These early missionaries shared in the growing European interest in Egypt as a Biblical land. Copts, in the writings of missionaries, might sometimes appear as vestiges of an ancient world in equal need of conversation and reform (Sedra 2011; Dowell 2015). They also saw Copts as living a precarious existence in a majority-Muslim country. Missionaries therefore faced criticism both from their members and from others that they were poaching the weak, and possibly jeopardizing the future of Christians in Egypt (Sharkey 2008:43-47). Some of these issues were resolved when control of the Evangelical Church was turned over to local leadership (1870). Today, the Evangelical Church fits snugly within the pluralist landscape of Egyptian Christianity (Dowell 2015).

Pentecostals present a more complicated situation. Anthropologists have noted that Pentecostals tend to resist institutionalization – the Spirit passes through individual contact (Robbins 2009), its outpouring is unpredictable (Bialecki 2017), and Pentecostals sometimes even refuse to use the language of denominational belonging, claiming instead to be born of the Spirit (Coleman 2000). Like the Evangelical Church, the Apostolic Church has institutionalized. It was incorporated into the Evangelical Millet court in the early twentieth century and therefore bears its own constitution and body of family law. At the same time, as I continually observed in

al-‘Aziya, it is easy to engage with Pentecostalism without becoming *rasuli* (“Pentecostal” or “Apostolic”). Some of the people I knew who on occasion attended the Apostolic church would have refused such a label.

This uncertain relationship to both the past and to neighboring denominations raises the question of what kind of rupture is encouraged by the Apostolic Church. How does one become a new Christian while retaining ties to one’s Coptic heritage? To draw on the work of Matthew Engelke, what might be required is *both* rupture and realignment:

The kinds of conversion that emphasize a break with the past are not only about a renunciation of one’s standing culture or tradition (as discursively defined). They are also often about aligning one’s self in relation to an extant and imagined Christian history. In other words, breaking with the past is not only the erasure of a tradition but the inscription of another. (2010:179)

Approached in this light, where history must be challenged and rearranged, the story of church founding takes on a new and complex guise. Hanna Anis had been uncertain about the histories of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. He knew there must be a founding date and a list of founders. He encouraged me to seek out elders from these various churches. And so I set off for the Apostolic church, where its pastor had agreed to meet me.

The Apostolic Church

The path from the western side of town to the old quarter is one I know well. All streets that lead to the eastern half are long and straight. They are lined with homes of identical height, made of poured concrete or white bricks. On hot days like today, mothers will sit at the doorstep, catching whatever breeze might come their way. An occasional pickup truck or motorbike passes me by, going slow due to the many potholes in the town’s roads. People see me in my black cassock and shout, “*idfadal ya abuna!*” “Welcome, father!” I smile and wave, never quite sure

what level of engagement is expected of me. The sun bears down and there is no shade – only two-story homes on either side and a long stretch of dirt road.

Finally I reach the main thoroughfare. Moving in both directions is a steady stream of large trucks hauling rocks, minibuses filled with passengers coming from Asyut, and pickup trucks transporting livestock and other goods to market. Tuk-tuks, and motorbikes appear here and there. Mothers are out running errands and schoolchildren are walking home. Residents call this road the *asfelt* (“the asphalt”), a joke that has ossified into a geographic term. Despite promises from the state, no actual asphalt has ever been laid. Shop owners toss water into the street to keep the floating dust and sand at bay. I cross the flow of traffic and enter the eastern half of town. Here the streets are narrower. Entering into the old quarter, I catch sight of the towers of the Orthodox church. Nearby is the St. George Catholic church. This area is the commercial hub of al-‘Aziya, and there are several clothing stores that have a colorful assortment of blouses and shirts hanging from racks attached to their open doors. As I come to a crossroads, I turn south and pass a variety of barber shops, dry grocers, pharmacies, jewelry stores, photography studios, and hardware and farm-supply stores. There is little motor traffic, though the streets are filled with shoppers and with children playing. Due to its central location and proximity to the commercial area, this sector is where real estate is most expensive. Residents explain that they like living near churches.

At the periphery of the old quarter stands the Apostolic church. It is actually one of three in town – though the other two are still under construction and do not offer regular services. Like all other churches, the Apostolic church has a gated entrance that leads into a courtyard. There is a building with offices, classrooms, and a diwan for hosting. The church sanctuary has four sections of wooden pews, all of which face an elevated platform that is rigged with a podium and

several television screens. The exterior of the sanctuary is painted salmon pink, and the church has a steeple that closely resembles those from the nearby St. George church. The entire structure contains elements that make it legible as a church: the recessed windows, the columns and dome at the top of the steeple, and the illuminated cross. On its western side, above another entrance, is a large inscription that reads: “The Apostolic Church of the Evangelical Copts of al-‘Aziya, founded in the year of Our Lord 1932.”

As I enter the church’s courtyard, a few of the youth who are sitting on a bench come to welcome me. I explain that I am here to visit their pastor and they escort me into a large office where four men are gathered, sipping tea. Pastor Mamdouh is in the middle of a conversation. He sees me and gestures toward an empty seat. After finishing his business with the other guests, he turns to me. Everyone remains in place. I ask some questions about the church, then ask how he ended up as pastor. Finally I get to how the Apostolic church first arrived. He seems perplexed by this line of questioning. Turning around in his seat, he grabs a tattered book from the bookshelf. Handing it to me, he says, “You will find everything you need here.” It is a directory and general history of the Apostolic Church in Egypt. I flip to the page for al-‘Aziya and read aloud the first couple of lines.

The First Apostolic Church of al-‘Aziya

(State Resolution number 375, year 2007)

1. The year of the founding: It was founded in 1932.
2. The story of its founding: It was the brother ‘Atallah ‘Abd al-Milak Yaqoub after its renovation who had the biggest role in the founding of the Apostolic church of al-‘Aziya. He was often used in the healing of the sick and the exorcism of demons, which were witnessed by all. Also, the brother Wadi‘a ‘Atallah al-‘Azawi who afterwards became an Apostolic minister and who founded the Apostolic church in Samalut in 1956 during which he was the pastor of the Apostolic church in Teba.

Those who also shared in the founding [of the church] in al-‘Aziya are:

Brother Yousef Raziq Salih – Brother Yousef Jadallah – Brother Rizq Jadallah – Brother Anton ‘Atallah – Brother Wahib Sa‘d Hanna. The gathering began in one of the homes.

3. The buildings: The brethren bought the land on which the current church is built and then built the church “provisionally” with green and red brick. In 2007 the church was demolished and it was widened and the new enlarged building was built with three stories and was opened on April 10, 2009. The members of the church council and the youth council at that time had a big role in carrying out this great task, and they are...

Pastor Mamdouh is clearly busy and a few other people have now appeared at the door. “Would you like to speak with one of the church elders?” he asks. “He would know more about history than I do.” The men in the room laugh, and I chuckle, not quite getting who or what is the object of the joke. Phone numbers are exchanged and I return to my rounds of visits.

Ruptures and Realignments

The book provided by Pastor Mamdouh, Hilmi Adham Jaballah’s 2013 *The Apostolic Church in Egypt 1907-2013*, is an interesting example of what Engelke described as the inscription of another past. It presents itself as a history of the Apostolic Church in Egypt, and it begins with Egypt in the Bible – the word “Egypt,” it notes, is mentioned 280 times in scripture – and continues with the flight of the Holy Family and the arrival of St. Mark. There is even a lengthy and celebratory description of the various Orthodox popes throughout Egypt’s history, along with an account of the Reformation in Europe and the eventual arrival of Protestants into Egypt. Then there is a list of all the “Evangelical churches” in Egypt, with a note that they are bound by two commitments: the singular importance of the Bible in the life of faith (as opposed to tradition and the writings on the Church Fathers) and the joint representation in the Evangelical Council (*majlis al-injili*) before the Egyptian state.⁹ Finally, the origins of the Apostolic Church are traced to the day of Pentecost, where, as the writer notes, Egyptians had been present and had spoken in tongues. This experience marks “the founding of the true mother church, the church of the New Testament” (55).

One way of reading this account is as a historical and theological genealogy of the Apostolic Church. It is worth pointing out that the ruptures that occur tend to be displaced. The Reformation is a European affair that was brought to Egypt. The Apostolic Church itself, however, can establish a direct link between its existence and the beginnings of Christianity in Egypt. Breaking with the past is therefore also a recovery of the past, an embrace of history as a means of understanding the longevity of the institution. During my fieldwork, I would occasionally meet with some of the college students who took classes at the Apostolic Theological College in Asyut, which like the Apostolic Church, is affiliated with the Assemblies of God. I was always impressed, and somewhat surprised, to learn how seriously these students approach church history. I had expected classes to be focused on the Bible, but I was told that all students study some Ancient Greek, several modules of church history, a survey of the Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries, and several other classes that reminded me of my own seminary training. Considering how Egypt had been at the center of much of early church history, this academic work could never be squared with a simple renunciation of one's culture or heritage. It embraced the ancient past, as well as its location within the broader domain of Christianity writ large.

This elevated view of church history was not shared by some of the less-educated members of the Apostolic Church. The entry on al-'Aziya that I started to read in Pastor Mamdouh's office reveals the presence of another, perhaps more familiar, idiom of historical continuity. In this passage, which was submitted by a member of the al-'Aziya church, 'Atallah 'Abd al-Malik plays the pivotal role of not only founding the church in al-'Aziya, but also, through the work of the brother Wadi'a 'Atallah, of founding another Apostolic church elsewhere. It is a peculiar way of telling history, one that emphasizes the role of individuals in a

series of events that resemble a chain reaction. In one of the final pages of *The Apostolic Church in Egypt*, an account of “the founding of the churches” is based entirely on the idea that the Holy Spirit is transferred from town to town by the movement of individuals who have received the Spirit. Such are the “various and wondrous ways” that the Holy Spirit has spread throughout Egypt (193). In my conversations with many people in al-‘Aziya, this genealogical language was the way they expressed both rupture and continuity.

Pastor Mamdouh eventually put me in touch with Elia, a church minister who then accompanied me to the house of ‘Atif, an elderly man who had been alive during the time of the miraculous work of ‘Atallah ‘Abd al-Malik. ‘Atif was pleased to host me, and he handed me an Arabic Bible that had been distributed at that propitious time. With some help from Elia, I tried to steer the conversation toward the history of the Apostolic church.

Aaron: I’d like to hear about the history of the Apostolic church in al-‘Aziya.

‘Atif: In al-‘Aziya, there have been thirteen pastors who have served us.

Aaron: And when was the church built?

‘Atif: In 1932. But there was a church here before that, named the “Pentecostal” [*al-khamsiniya*] church. It’s one and the same. The only difference is the name. It was abandoned and the group of elders went on to build a new one, people such as Shaykh ‘Atallah and others like him.

This answer echoes the account found in *The Apostolic Church in Egypt*. But ‘Atif adds a layer of genealogical language. There has been a succession of pastors, and one senses that the spirit has been passed down through them. I was curious how far this logic could be extended, so I asked ‘Atif about his own ancestors. Given how they had lived before the arrival of the Apostolic church, had they been “true Christians”? ‘Atif smiled and simply said, “Every generation has its witnesses.” The open-ended quality of this answer, couched in the language of kinship, captures

the elasticity of church belonging as imagined by ‘Atif and others from the Apostolic church: a pairing of rupture and continuity.

As we saw in the previous section, the founding of the Catholic church involved churches interfacing with homes. With the *dura*, the church also seemed to expand into the town. All of this activity depends in the end on a clear sense of the church’s stability: of something built, worshiped in, and distinguished from its surroundings. Accounts of the founding of the Apostolic church blur these lines even further. As the account about al-‘Aziya in *The Apostolic Church in Egypt* notes, the church building itself has gone through several renovations and was not really “founded” until the 1950s, even though a structure had been in place since 1932 (or even before that, according to ‘Atif). One might be tempted to say that the true church is the spiritual genealogy – the way that ‘Atallah ‘Abd al-Malik had received the Spirit from elsewhere and brought it to al-‘Aziya, and from where the brother Wadi‘a ‘Atallah carried it on to another town. This flowering of the Spirit is itself an experience of rupture, but the continuity, like genealogy, can stretch as far as one is willing to imagine.

The way that ‘Atif recalled the miracles of ‘Atallah ‘Abd al-Malik reveals this fluidity between church, place, and believers. ‘Atif recounted how the revival was marked by “singing *taranim* in the streets” and gathering “in the cemetery and the western hills” to pray and experience healings and exorcisms. These are not activities that occurred in the church; if anything, they are more awe-inspiring because they encompass the entire town. ‘Atif was not the only one who spoke this way. Even Hanna Anis, who had refused to recognize the apparition of St. George, confirmed that there had been miracles during this early revival. These accounts, one might say, are less about the founding of a church than the transformation of a town and its landscape. Those who attended the Apostolic church tended to believe that another revival could

happen at any moment. But in the meantime, one could say they have the physical infrastructure of the church. Something of a placeholder, it locates, but does not limit, the Apostolic community within the broader world of Christianity in Egypt.

This merging of the history of the Apostolic church with the history and landscape of the town might explain why the Apostolic church is less subject than the Catholic church to family politics or inter-ecclesial politics. With the Catholic church, there was a clear moment when it “arrived.” There is a clear group of founders, and there is a celebration of this founding. All are components that have structured these familial and ecclesial politics. But with the Apostolic church, the founding is displaced. Even with the many names listed in the historical account, I encountered little interest among members of the church in elaborating on the date and specifics of the church’s founding.

In the end, the founding of the original Apostolic church, and the new churches that followed in its wake, might be described more as being in a state of perpetual becoming. The town of al-‘Aziya was rapidly expanding throughout the time of my fieldwork. Construction of two new Apostolic churches on the northern and western edges of town had started. With the exception of a steeple and an illuminated cross, neither had the trappings of a church. Nobody spoke of these churches as having been “founded” or having “arrived,” and there was no consensus over whether they were even open. Some even suspected that this growth was due more to graduates of the nearby Apostolic Theological College looking for employment than any pastoral need in the town. “I heard,” a young Catholic man told me, “that this new northern Apostolic church is being built because a preacher from here wanted his own church.” There might have been some truth to this statement – I met five such churchless preachers during my time in al-‘Aziya. They were young sons of various families in town, and they were easy to

identify by their choice of clothing: always a sports jacket and tie, with a Bible tucked under the arm. As for the new Apostolic churches, it was hard to find anyone who actually attended them. Occasionally I would hear some singing or preaching coming from the church loudspeakers, but for the most part these churches existed in a liminal state of being under construction, with their pastors in search of a congregation. In a landscape where the Catholic church had been founded, and the Orthodox church has always been, these Apostolic churches exist in a state of flux.

+ + + + + + + + + +

I backtrack from the Apostolic church, weaving through the narrow streets lined with shops and filled with foot traffic. I head in the direction of the Catholic church and soon arrive at a brick wall crowned with barbed wire. Citrus trees rise from the other side. Within this enclosed garden is an old villa. It is what everyone calls the *siraya*, a word that evokes a bygone era when wealthy landowning families controlled the agricultural production of the region. It is like no other building in al-‘Aziya, and it currently sits empty. Fr. Boulos had lived there for most of his time as pastor, and the Catholic diocese still owns the land. But the rusty gates have remained shut in the wake of his death, their handles firmly secured by a locked iron chain. From the north side of the *siraya* complex, I can see the rising towers and front façade of the Evangelical church. It is the largest church in al-‘Aziya, both in terms of square footage and the land on which it sits. Farther away but still within sight is the more modest St. George Catholic church. Between the two are the interconnected homes of the Duraba. Still, the Evangelical church seems to stand apart.

I walk the short distance from the *siraya* to the front entrance of the Evangelical church. Before me is a five-story building, its façade adorned with an enormous cross made of glass cubes. I always feel welcome at this church. As I walk through the gate and hear the greetings of

those gathered, I pass by a large plaque hanging in the foyer. It announces when the church was founded (2011) and by whom. Like so much about this church, looks are deceiving.



Fig. 1.2 (above) A view of the Evangelical church from the veranda of the *siraya*.



Fig. 1.3 (right) The memorial of the founding of the Evangelical church, located in a wall of the church's foyer.

A Forgotten History

While the *siraya* has passed through the hands of various owners, its original inhabitants were members of the Wissa family. At around the turn of the twentieth century, the Wissa family was one of the wealthiest Coptic families in Egypt (Sorial 1984:144). Compared to their vast empire of land holdings in the area surrounding Asyut, this *siraya* and the 130 acre 'abza on which it once sat are relatively insignificant.¹⁰ The Wissa family acquired its wealth through the successful business ventures of two brothers, Hanna Boctor Wissa and Wissa Boctor Wissa. Like other Copts at the time, these brothers found their Coptic identity to be attractive to European merchants, who were keen to exploit the privileges afforded to Christians by Egypt's Mixed Courts. At the time, Asyut was becoming an important hub for commerce and agriculture, and

Hanna Boctor and Wissa Boctor began to convert their newly acquired capital into land holdings. As the historians Rauf Abbas and Assem el-Dessouky (2011:75) note, Wissa Boctor had soon acquired roughly 28,000 acres of the best land around Asyut. The Wissa brothers were early converts to the American Presbyterian mission that would eventually become the Evangelical Church. Their conversions proved to be pivotal to the establishment of the mission's presence in Asyut. They financed the building of the mission school, and they supplied the mission with valuable political and social access to the surrounding region.

Changes in the Orthodox Church might have played a factor in their conversions. As Egypt was modernizing its economy and establishing new trade relations with the West, the Orthodox Church was undergoing its own transformations. Over the previous century, elite members of the Coptic laity (*arakhna*) had come to play an important role in the governance of the Orthodox Church alongside the clergy – a position of prominence reflected even as late as the 1911 Coptic Conference of Asyut, at which members of the Wissa family were present. At the same time, the authority of the *arakhna* was eventually eclipsed by the clergy and, in particular, the Pope, who became the primary representatives of the Evangelical Church (and all other Christians) before the state.¹¹ The American missionaries had great success in converting members of the *arakhna*, who perhaps found that their declining status in the Orthodox Church, and the growing trade opportunities with the West, made the Evangelical Church a more attractive religious community.

The grandson of Hanna Boctor, Hanna Fahmy Wissa, provides an account of his grandfather's conversion as recorded by the American missionary Dr. Andrew Watson (Wissa 2004. See Appendix, fig. 8.2). Given its cast of characters and narrative arc, it is a story that could easily have been told by Hanna Anis. We learn that a bull issued by the Bishop of Asyut in

1865 had singled out two Coptic families of carpenters who, alongside the Wissa brothers, had started to attend missionary-led worship services. Hanna Boctor, the more outspoken of the two, responded to the bishop by saying they would stop attending these meetings if the bishop explicitly forbade the consumption of alcohol and supported the kind of scripture study the American missionaries had been promoting. The bishop refused, and so the brothers left the Orthodox Church and started to build up the Evangelical community in the region. The legacy of this conversion, as Hanna F. Wissa is eager to show, lasted several generations. Gindy Wissa, the son of Hanna Boctor, became Councilor of Italy. His son, Alfred Bey Wissa (r. 1950-56), served as the head (*waqil*) of the Protestant Community Council, which represented all Protestants before the Egyptian state. He was the last of several Wissa family members to hold this prominent position (Meinardus 2006).

Gindy Wissa had inherited the *'azba* in al-'Aziya from his father, and by the 1950s it was overseen by two of his children, Rosa and Leon. Rosa had much affection for al-'Aziya. According to missionary correspondence, she even considered it her home.¹² Along with another brother, Alfred, she also appears to have been an enthusiastic supporter of the Evangelical mission in Asyut. Her husband, Habib Bey Doss, was a senator and a member of another powerful Coptic family. After the war, the American missionaries faced numerous challenges. Perhaps the most pressing were the new restrictions issued by the Egyptian state on missionary educational institutions. In short, missionaries were now required to provide Islamic instruction to any Muslim students – a requirement they were unwilling to meet (Sharkey 2008:183-5). A new missionary by the name of Edwin Bailey, fresh from graduate school at Harvard, was charged with developing new village missions that might be aimed exclusively at Copts. It was this project that brought Rosa in contact with Bailey. She offered to make the *'azba* available for

the mission's use, and Bailey drew up plans to open an agricultural workshop and village school in the town. Another missionary was tasked with coordinating the transfer of American Jersey cows to the site. Bailey gushed that, because al-'Aziya was nearly all Christian, he had found the ideal solution to the mission's problems.

In the end the plan fell through. The well water in al-'Aziya was too brackish to be of use, and Rosa's brother proved reluctant to support his sister's project. Bailey had to look elsewhere, and then the 1952 Revolution and the agricultural reforms that followed made future arrangements with families like the Wissa impossible. The landholdings of the Upper Egyptian elite were dismantled, and families like Rosa's left for the cosmopolitan hubs of Egypt and, more often, Europe and the United States. In doing research on the Wissa family, I learned that Habib and Rosa had a daughter who had trained as a classical pianist, and later became an accomplished scholar and a teacher. I was writing in Berkeley, California at the time, and I discovered that this daughter had recently died of old age in the same city, only blocks from where I was staying. The Wissa family, once so integral to the town of al-'Aziya and to the region, had become coeval with me.

None of these people are mentioned in the plaque hanging in the foyer of the Evangelical church. In fact, few people in al-'Aziya could remember anything specific about the Wissa family. Hanna had told me, with a hint of disdain, that "the elite" (*al-khawagat*) had founded the Evangelical church – a word often playfully recycled in Egyptian discourse, but which points back to a previous era of class difference. When I asked him about Rosa, he acknowledged that he knew the name. But he had little more to say. The history just recited, most of which is drawn from the archives of the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, seemed lost to the people of the town.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from the silence surrounding this seemingly forgotten chapter of history. Did people have political or moral reservations over recalling what occurred in the wake of the agricultural reforms? Was it the case that the Wissa family had never been involved in the town to begin with – that Rosa’s interest in the town never ran deep? It is hard to imagine why Gindy Wissa – such a prominent figure in the history of the Evangelical Church – might be ignored in the local histories people tell about their churches. But every time I raised the issue, I would usually be met with laughter. “Father Aaron,” I would hear, “you know more about our history than we do!” What people did remember were the events that followed the reforms. It is common knowledge that the *siraya* and *‘azba* had been left to a man named Youssef Suleiman. He had been in charge of the agricultural operations at the *‘azba*, and while not from al-‘Aziya itself, he had belonged to the Khalayla clan, one of the largest in the town. He had divided the Wissa land holdings and distributed them to various families in town. It is on one of those plots of land that the Evangelical church now stands.

When I asked about Youssef Suleiman, people directed me toward his nephew, Suleiman ‘Issa. A Catholic, he liked to talk to me about church doctrine. When I asked him about his uncle, he said,

He was the wealthiest man in al-‘Aziya. He used to farm three hundred and seventy feddan [one feddan is roughly one acre], and he had joint ownership of fourteen pieces of farming machinery. And after that, the government parceled out the farmland and left him with one hundred feddan. After that, he sold off the land next to the *siraya*, and so it was cut down to eighty-four feddan. He divided the eighty-four and left it to his three sons: Karam, Suleiman, and Milad. But he was an adherent of the Evangelical Church.

This recitation of oddly specific details is what I had come to expect from older men like Suleiman ‘Issa and Hanna Anis, who both had an exceptional ability to recall such things. So it was all the more baffling that they had little to say about the town before the agricultural reforms. I asked Suleiman ‘Issa if his uncle had been an Evangelical because of the Wissa

family. “Wissa? Father Wissa?” he replied (one of the Orthodox priests in town also happened to be named “Wissa”). His wife intervened. “Wissa Basha, of the *siraya!*” she shouted. “Wissa Basha?” Suleiman responded, still confused. This exchange happened several more times, and finally Suleiman shrugged his shoulders and said, “I don’t know.” It was curious that the wife would have to correct her husband. How could she be more aware than he was of the *siraya*’s past? Yet even her knowledge was limited. When I directed questions her way, she made it clear she knew about the Wissa family in a general sense. But she could offer nothing about specific individuals or their histories. The names of Rosa, Leon, and Gindy Wissa were lost on her.

There is something about this lacunae that defies explanation. Had Suleiman ‘Issa cultivated a selective memory because of questions over land distribution after the agricultural reforms? Perhaps, though the Wissa *‘azba* in al-‘Aziya was not very large, and the stakes surrounding the land distribution, at least in hindsight, seem relatively low. Might I have missed other sources in town who could have provided a more robust account of the Wissa family’s connection to the town? Perhaps, though Hanna Anis was always eager to direct me to others who might know more about the town’s history. Even the significance of the church’s plaque was not entirely clear. Given that the new Evangelical church had been built in 2011, the church leadership might have felt no need to display any names or dates regarding the previous church structure. These observations serve as a word of caution. There could be a number of reasons why the Evangelical history as told by town residents is presented in this curious form. Nevertheless, the pattern of emphasizing particular details and obscuring others – especially the role of the Wissa family – is evident, and tantalizing.

Conclusion

How do the residents of al-‘Aziya think about pluralism? The answer this chapter offers is that denominational pluralism is structured through particular chronotopic configurations. Churches that “arrived” have histories and founders, which lead to miracles and the structuring of collective memory. Residents in al-‘Aziya never called this “pluralism” (*al-t‘adud*) per se. In fact, I never heard them use the word. Rather, they would speak in the language of churches, families, and homes. This idiom is distinctly local, and it excludes historical accounts that exceed the horizons of the town’s history, as seen with the Wissa family. At the same time, it can work at scale. The book that the pastor from the Apostolic church gave me is filled with dozens of similar accounts of other towns in Upper Egypt, all of which have an Apostolic church founded by particular families from the town. In other words, these arrival stories are local, but they use a format that could just as easily work in another Upper Egyptian town.

It is also important to note that not all churches are equal in this world of different denominations. The Orthodox church is singular in that it is the church to which all other churches are compared. It existed from the moment the town took shape; the others arrived. At a time when scholars and historians are trying to give texture to historical accounts of the Coptic Orthodox Church, it is good to remember that, for Copts like those in al-‘Aziya, the Orthodox church occupies a different, somewhat privileged position in regard to history. Its robust history exists at the same level as that of Egypt, and it is the point of stability that conditions the possibility of other churches arriving. In this sense, the Orthodox Church’s relation to history provides the key feature of denominational pluralism as embraced by Copts.

Finally, it is worth noting that church history becomes more granular and specific the more one moves away from Orthodox and Catholic accounts. The Pentecostals in al-‘Aziya, and

perhaps in the broader region, have a detailed understanding of their history, even if historical accounts are less important to their theology and style of worship. They have dates, names, texts, and repositories of knowledge. The people who were most fluent in the history of Christianity, I found, were Pentecostal students studying at the Apostolic Theological College. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Pentecostals also stand on the opposite side of the Orthodox church when it comes to other modes of identification and expression. In this regard, history can signal a cascading list of other points of difference. But it also reflects the inescapable centrality of the Orthodox church, against which all other churches – churches whose age is near – are compared.

¹ In this study I have tried to be consistent in terms of capitalization, with “Church” referring to the institutional church, and “church” referring to the local parish or church building. However, there are times when this distinction is not straightforward. When Hanna Anis spoke of the arrival of the Catholic Church, for instance, it is not entirely clear which of the two he had in mind. In such cases I will opt for the lowercase “church.”

² The overlap of kinship and houses is richly developed in both the anthropology of the Middle East (Bourdieu 1977a; Shryock 2004b) and in the discipline at large (Lévi-Strauss 1991; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Keane 1995; Mueggler 2001). Less developed is the connection between church, house, and family, though see Cannell 2013.

³ This distinction between churches within and beyond history can be compared to Courtney Handman’s study of denominationalism in Papua New Guinea. She observes that “the past was an ever-present topic of conversation in the Waria Valley. For any person asking, ‘when did that change happen,’ the answer was always ‘when the Word of God arrived.’” The temporal succession of various denominations results in “elaborate frameworks of afterness” that lead Christians to always define themselves in terms of what form of Christianity preceded them (2014:16).

⁴ The word *nahda* is also used to refer to the “Islamic revival,” which is discussed in the Introduction.

⁵ The date of the *dura*, September 5, is the cause of some confusion for visitors. In the Coptic tradition, the feast of St. George is celebrated on May 1, with another festival on November 17 held in honor of the first church dedicated to him. The latter date is associated with the large *mazar* at the Monastery of St. George in Rizeigat, a small town located near Luxor in Upper Egypt.

⁶ In her study of the Coptic Catholic Church in Upper Egypt, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (2019:318-9) notes that Catholics had been the first to introduce such processions in Egypt, having imported the custom from Europe. The Orthodox then developed their own practice in response. For a sophisticated study of Christian processions in Damascus, see Bandak 2014.

⁷ Etsa, a majority-Christian town near al-Minya, is a regional hub for the Evangelical church. For more on the movement of American missionaries, see Sharkey 2008:77.

⁸ The little work done on Evangelicals in Egypt has stressed the connection converts retain with their Coptic heritage and history. See Dowell 2015. For broader treatment of time, rupture, and continuity in the anthropology of Christianity, see Meyer 1998 and Robbins 2007.

⁹ There are Christian churches that exist outside this legal framework, most notably the Seventh Day Adventists (Meinardus 2006). For more on the challenges faced by religious communities not recognized by the Egyptian state, see Mahmood 2015.

¹⁰ Presbyterian Historical Society RG 209-2-5: E.M. Bailey Papers, Bailey to Reed, al-Minya, Feb. 9, 1949.

¹¹ This tension between disenfranchised Coptic lay elite and the clergy is one Protestant missionaries were keen to exploit (Hasan 2003:71-3; Sharkey 2008:43-7).

¹² Presbyterian Historical Society RG 209-2-5: E.M. Bailey Papers, Bailey to Reed, al-Minya, Feb. 9, 1949.

CHAPTER 2

The Domestic and the Sacred

Through open doors we caught glimpses of women bent over primers. In one house the one literate was a woman; she began teaching a sister-in-law. Before long the men of the house as well as other women were learning. At the end of that third week two of the women were well through the first book of the Life of Christ. Our observation of teaching, then, took the form of pausing anywhere in the street to hear someone read, or to enter an open door quite unexpectedly and ask the woman studying to read aloud to us. What we heard and saw was most heartening.

Davida Finney, American Missionary
“Adult Literacy Campaign at Hirz.” January 3, 1953.
Presbyterian Mission Society

Churches can appear as extensions of homes in al-‘Aziya. Hanna Anis liked to emphasize the close proximity of his childhood home to the old Orthodox church. The Duraba compound was attached to the Catholic church, and the land for the Evangelical church had once been part of the Wissa ‘azba. These examples of homes encroaching on churches are part of a broader history. In a landscape where it is difficult to build churches, and where both state and church authorities have been eager to regulate religious activities by corralling them within the walls of the church, the home emerges as an alternate space where activities otherwise held in the church might be replicated and reconfigured. As this chapter shows, in the world of Coptic Christianity, churches and homes exist in dynamic tension.

Doing church-like things in the home raises the question of gender. Men do not have to greatly modify their behavior as they move from the confines of the house to their public engagements. Women do. When the church merges with the home, women, through their behavior, speech, and movement, help determine how public or private this activity is.¹ Bringing religion into the sphere of the domestic – and therefore of the hidden, of the inaccessible – has in other contexts raised moral anxieties over the distinction between religion and magic (Bourdieu 1977). In contemporary Egypt, such anxieties have more to do with the political risks Christians face when blurring the public-private divide. In Upper Egyptian towns where sectarian tension runs high, mob violence has occurred when it is suspected that Christians are working around the state regulation of church construction and usage by holding services in homes (Nikolov 2008; Heo 2018b). Studies of sectarianism have often discussed the way that the domestic becomes politicized. Saba Mahmood (2103), to name the most prominent example, focuses on the role of family law in drawing otherwise private domestic relations into the public realm of sectarianism. But this abstract depiction overlooks the longstanding and complex relationship Copts have developed between churches and homes. In this sense, the domestic has always had a touch of the sacred, and the spaces within and around churches retain echoes of the domestic.

This connection between church and house has played an important role in the historical evolution of denominational pluralism. In one sense, houses of new converts offered an initial foothold. This trend is particularly apparent in Upper Egypt, where foreign missionaries and native proponents of non-Orthodox churches began to introduce new denominations throughout the towns and villages where Copts reside. The institutional Orthodox Church has often resisted this expansion of non-Orthodox churches, which has politicized the overlap of church and house within the world of Egyptian Christianity. Even in a place like al-‘Aziya, where most residents

look favorably on the plurality of their Christian community, there are constant attempts by various clerics to challenge and regulate activities in the house that might otherwise belong in a church.

In their dense bundling of public and private activity, prescribed gender roles, material and social reality, and symbolic structure, houses can be thought to have an elective affinity to churches. Both are physical shelters as well as ideational structures. These two characteristics play off each other. “The sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter,” observed Gaston Bachelard (1964:5). It is the experience and memory of being sheltered that gives meaning to the material framework “in its reality and its virtuality” (5). What Bachelard draws our attention to is the interactional framework that defines the house. It is a space that is created and experienced, and therefore can be transposed elsewhere. As we shall see, churches have para-ecclesial spaces as well – places where activity and speech can be sheltered from view. The thread that runs through all these sites, caught between churches and homes, are the permutations in gender roles occasioned by these hybrid spaces. What Bourdieu (1977:153) observed among the Kabyle is true of Upper Egypt: “The orientation of the house is fundamentally defined from outside, from the standpoint of men.” The control women exercise over the domestic space is encompassed by the male control of the world beyond the house. When churches merge with homes, however, this divide is reconfigured.

A Church in the Home

Older residents of al-‘Aziya still remember a time when the church was not fully separate from the home. Important occasions in the life of a family would be marked by rites that are now either celebrated in the church or have been banned by the clergy. For most, these antiquated practices are a source of mild embarrassment. As one middle-aged man recalled, when a death

occurred, a priest would come and recite prayers while incensing different rooms of the house. “This was to make sure his spirit did not return,” he explained, letting me know that people now are “not as ignorant.” These days funerals are held in the church, and the clergy militate against lingering practices that involve mourning in the home. The same is true of weddings. In the era when a groom might not even see the face of his bride until the wedding day, some weddings would take place within the privacy of the home. Residents frame these practices as “customs and traditions,” a topic they assumed would interest me. But these traditions now reflect how, in fact, clergy of all denominations have effectively consolidated this ritual activity within the walls of their churches.

The exception that proves the rule is the *sebou‘*, the distinctly Egyptian celebration that occurs seven days after birth. Occasionally Fr. Bishoy would go to perform this rite in the home of a parishioner. When I accompanied him once, he instructed the family to rearrange the sitting room to prepare it for the rite. The father of the household placed a table in the center of the room and covered it with a tablecloth decorated with flowers. He then put a simple plastic wash tub filled with water in the center of the table, two small bowls of olive oil and salt on either side, and then two other bowls filled with grains of wheat and topped with candles in front. Fr. Bishoy busied himself with the audio equipment. A loudspeaker had been rigged to the balcony outside the second floor sitting room, and the rite would be broadcast to the neighbors. Fr. Bishoy then conducted the rite, singing hymns, sprinkling the salt and oil into the water, and ceremoniously washing the child in the tub. Afterward, the water was thrown out, and the salt and oil returned to the kitchen. No one I spoke with could explain the significance of the *sebou‘*. People just said it was a practice that goes back to the time of the pharaohs. Yet none of the priests, least of all Fr. Bishoy, were concerned about there being any confusion between the *sebou‘* and the practice of



Fig. 2.1 The “ancient” or “original” (*asari*) Catholic Church in the Upper Egyptian town of Kom Bouha. This space remains attached to a local family’s house. Notice the baptismry that has been added in the corner of the room.

baptism, despite obvious similarities. This rite was safely disassociated or “purified” (Latour 1993) from the sacramental world of the church. The water, salt, oil, and grain remain distinct from the explicitly Christian practices relegated to the church.

The memory of homes that once served as churches is particularly important for Catholics and Protestants, the churches that “arrived” and therefore began in homes. When I would travel to different towns in the Asyut region, I would inevitably be taken to the site where the Catholic liturgy was first celebrated. These “ancient” or “original” (*asari*) churches are often still attached to a family home (see fig. 2.1). These places are often crumbling and unkempt, and with a proper church now established, they tend to serve as a meeting place and site of private

prayer. The *asari* church of St. George in al-‘Aziya is located immediately next to the current sanctuary, and it contains the relics of St. George along with the original altar. When it is not closed under lock and key, people will move through it, pray with the relics, and then pass by the brick structure around the *asari* altar – where they can rest their hands in prayer. The divine liturgy is rarely if ever celebrated in these places. These altars had been informally downgraded, with the word *asari* suggesting that the importance of the site is relegated to the past it memorializes. By comparison, the Orthodox, from what I could tell, had no such homes that had preceded the churches.

Protestants have less inclination to preserve the homes that once served as churches. But the historical importance of house-churches still looms large in the region. This well-established connection proved to be useful for the various missionaries that moved through the region of Asyut at the turn of the twentieth century. George Brelsford instigated his evangelization in 1909 by holding gatherings in the large al-Nahal family complex in Asyut (Jaballah 2013; Nagib 2019). Building off of kin networks, these gatherings spread to other homes in the region. This early reliance on homes also might have created more opportunities for the female missionaries who played a significant role in the early growth of Pentecostalism in the region. At roughly the same time, the American Presbyterian missionaries likewise depended on the resources and real estate of wealthy landowning families. The Presbyterian missionaries even outfitted themselves with a houseboat, *The Ibis*, which they used to move up and down the Nile. They would host Bible studies and worship services on the deck of *The Ibis*, which allowed them to bypass the need of finding a place on land to support their work. This houseboat – a house and a church on the water – was the mission’s most iconic image, and it appears throughout the promotional literature the mission sent to church members in the United States.

In the 1950s and 1960s, American Presbyterian missionaries were hosted by Youssef Suleiman in the *siraya* in al-‘Aziya. These missionaries would hold prayer meetings, give magic lantern shows, and conduct literacy classes in the courtyard just beyond the veranda. While Bailey’s plan never came to pass, another mission colleague – Davida Finney – found success both in al-‘Aziya and in other Upper Egyptian towns, most of which also have Christian majorities.² A daughter of missionaries and a lifelong promoter of literacy and learning, Finney sought ways to improve literacy among Copts. Her project – launched in the 1930s, but which continued for several decades – was based on the simple idea that literacy is best advanced person-to-person, such that someone who learns to read is immediately recruited to be a teacher.³ Like Bailey’s idea of focusing on broader social issues, this literacy campaign sought to alleviate poverty and the lack of educational opportunities among women (Sharkey 2008:141). As with other social service programs run by the mission, it was carried out with funding from sources like the Ford Foundation. This “Lit-Lit” campaign clearly was inspired by the desire to make scripture more accessible to Christians, but the main thrust was simply to bring literacy to rural Upper Egypt.

The gender dynamics of conservative Upper Egypt complicated this project. “Many of the villages think women cannot leave their homes to reach the illiterate,” Finney observed in 1953.⁴ As she explains in the chapter epigraph, the answer was to be found in the web of relationships women cultivate by virtue of their domestic setting. Her experience of hearing the sound of instruction drifting into the street is one I had as well. Throughout my fieldwork, I would see women gathered in homes, sometimes learning to read with primers similar to what Finney had used. At other times, it might be a group singing *taranim*, clapping in unison as if they were in the Apostolic church. On occasion, it might even be the harsh sounds of *‘adid* – the

mortuary hymns regularly condemned by the clergy. I could not locate any direct relationship between Finney's efforts and these gatherings of women in al-'Aziya. But they all relied on the same logic of – in Bachelard's formulation – being “sheltered” from view yet open to the public. Moreover, like the literacy groups of old, the gatherings I was able to observe attracted women from households associated with various denominations. While these domestic gatherings often involved singing, reading scripture, and other forms of worship, they could not be claimed exclusively by any particular church.

These gatherings did not foreclose the more obvious ways that women could practice their faith. The liturgies and services of all the churches always seemed to have more women present than men. But the church itself is a patriarchal space, and the denominations relied on exclusively male clergy. Only at the peripheral spaces around the church itself, such as the meeting hall, could women speak and even lead in ways that would be difficult or impossible in more public settings. In fact, my journey toward understanding the house gathering of women began at the meetings held by the ministers (*khudam*) of the St. George Catholic church. I was impressed by the way women, often educated and unmarried, would address the group. After meeting some of the young women, I found myself being invited to these house gatherings, and to gatherings in other churches. Being a priest helped facilitate this movement. Women, especially those who are not yet married, are extremely careful about avoiding situations that might attract suspicion or slander, such as lingering in the presence of an unrelated man. Yet priests transcended this rule, and I was often reminded that I would not be able to sit in the presence of women if not for my clerical identity. In one of the great ironies of my fieldwork, it was only as a priest, grounded firmly in one particular denomination, that I was able to learn how women move between churches and create alternate zones of religious practice.

Women, Marriage, Pluralism

It was at one such meeting of ministers that I first met Miriam, a single 23-year old minister and recent college graduate. The meeting was being held in its usual spot – the meeting hall located on the ground floor of the three story building where the parish’s two priests have their apartments. There were roughly two-dozen youth present, and Miriam approached me with a friend. It was rare for me to interact with young unmarried women in public, but in the context of these meetings, behind closed doors, everything was more relaxed. Miriam had brought me a bottle of soda and, as most introductory conversations went, asked me what I thought about al-‘Aziya. She was wearing loose blue jeans and a beige blouse, an outfit that distinguished her from the younger girls who preferred knock-off fashion t-shirts and other kinds of stylish clothing. I had come to learn that ministers like Miriam were some of the best interlocutors in the town, and when she invited me to her family’s house for lunch the following week, I immediately agreed.

The meal I had at the house of Miriam’s family was a prime example of the generous hospitality residents were eager to extend to priests. The house itself was undergoing a thorough renovation, and the front porch was littered with bags of concrete mix and construction tools. Miriam’s father and older brothers all work in “trade” (*tajara*), which in their case involves traveling to day markets in nearby towns to sell cheap clothing, plastic mats, small pieces of furniture, and whatever else they can fit into their trucks. Miriam’s father greeted me, and I was immediately ushered into their sitting room, the one room in the house that remained untouched. He and I sat together on a wooden bench, and then Miriam walked through the door with a bowl of rice. Two other women arrived with other plates of food. Chicken, turkey, and cuts of beef were all served. Two of Miriam’s brothers also came in and sat down. Once the women

retreated, I joined the men in eating. There was little talking, and Miriam's father occasionally fingered through the offering of meat to find the most succulent slice, which he would then put on my plate. "Eat, father!" The meal continued this way until I stood up and asked if I could wash my hands. My hosts first protested, but then called for his daughters to show me the bathroom and to bring a towel and fresh soap.

After our lunch, I sat with Miriam's father on plastic chairs on their unfinished porch. Eventually Miriam showed up along with her sister, Sahar, who is slightly younger and was still in college. Their sister-in-law appeared with tea for everyone, wearing a flowing abaya, and then returned to the kitchen. Conversation turned to the Catholic Church, and Miriam's father explained how their family has been Catholic ever since the church first arrived. He then asked me a few loaded questions about the Orthodox – the kind of conversation topics that often arose in my interactions with men. After finishing his tea, he excused himself, leaving me with Miriam and Sahar.

Such a performance of hospitality makes visible the domestic division of labor. Women prepare the food and drink for guests, men serve as hosts. At the same time, there is a distinction between female agnates and affines. Miriam and Sahar reemerge after the main theatrics of the meal are complete, as was always the case with the mother of the household and her daughters. The daughter-in-law, however, is seen but not heard. When a newly-wed moves into the household of her husband's father, she tends to be extremely reserved when interacting with guests. Even when the other women of the household, like Miriam and Sahar, gather to entertain, the daughter-in-law will serve tea, help in the kitchen, or otherwise sit in the corner of the room and remain quiet. In my many visits with families, it was usually clear who, if any, were the daughters of the household. Even after marriage, these women will return to their parents'

household to visit. They often come on Sundays and Wednesdays, the two days when cattle are slaughtered and meat can be purchased and served. I would often see new faces – usually recently married daughters of the family – burst through the front door and take over conversations, all while their sisters-in-law continued with household chores.

Married women have different comportment depending on the domestic space they tend to occupy. Moreover, in this society, every woman currently is or aspires to become a wife, as being an unmarried woman is highly stigmatized. These factors all encourage women, especially those who are recently married or are pursuing marriage, to cultivate a kind of social flexibility. This point is particularly salient in terms of denominational affiliation. Marriage comes about through an elaborate set of interactions between the suitor and the young woman's father. Sometimes the two are allowed to meet in the presence of a family member, who acts as a chaperon. At other times, the church or school can be a place where young men and women interact, and some might meet a future spouse. Denominational affiliation is only one of several factors that are considered in marriage, and it is rarely the most important. Rather, the widespread preference for endogamy in the Arab world is framed as marrying those whose families one knows well, which could be neighbors, other families from church, or one's own kin.⁵ In short, most single women in this society must be prepared to marry outside their church.

It is hard to know how many families in a place like al-'Aziya, or even in Upper Egypt, are multi-denominational. Part of this uncertainty is due to a lack of sound statistics. More importantly, it is not always clear how to register someone's denominational identity in a pluralist society – a point to which I will soon turn. But what can be said is that women face structural pressures in terms of denominational affiliation that do not apply to men. Mothers are expected to raise their children in the church of their husband, which is likely to be the church of

his own parents. They do not have to forgo the church of their upbringing. It is merely kept private, as is much of the daughter-in-law's life for the first part of marriage. Conversely, it can also be the case that clergy might try to win a mother back to the church of her childhood once she and her husband live under their own roof. It was never clear to me how frequent these attempts were. What matters is that women faced these pressures, not men.

Miriam and Sahar were not married, at least not yet. They had chosen to study and pursue a career before marriage. This choice is not common, yet not completely foreign in rural Upper Egypt. These women had made Muslim and Christian friends at Asyut University from very similar backgrounds, and they enjoyed some relative freedom of movement. They could travel to university, meet up with friends in coffeehouses in Asyut, and attend different church services. This situation is very different from most young women in al-'Aziya, who are likely to be engaged by fifteen or sixteen, and married at eighteen, the legal age of marriage in Egypt. These girls will attend the local trade school at the most. Once a woman marries, she is expected to give birth relatively soon, typically within one or two years (Clarke 2009). Being pregnant and raising young children tends to restrict her movement, and going to church can become difficult. Miriam and Sahar are the same age as their sister-in-law and live under the same roof. But their lives follow very different trajectories.

This divide is further exacerbated by the strong economy in al-'Aziya. Unlike elsewhere in Egypt, and the Arab world at large, there is no "marriage crisis" in al-'Aziya (Singerman 1995). Rather, it is easy for young men to find work in town, and they do not have to wait long to save enough money to be able to cover the necessary expenses. Parents can start to worry about whether their daughter might "miss the train," that is, be passed over by potential suitors. And they can also see their daughters as a liability in protecting the family's honor. Marriage becomes

a way of keeping girls, and their families, safe. Some parents even find the state-mandated age limit to be a burden, and they are constantly looking for clergy who might circumvent the law. Fr. Bishoy had to announce from the pulpit after one Sunday liturgy that people should stop asking him to perform such weddings. On two occasions, I was even recruited to do these weddings myself (I declined).

In sum, young, educated, unmarried women like Miriam and Sahar are primed for movement across different parts of society, including churches. And young married women are primed for moving across churches in the context of their marriage. I started to appreciate the possibilities inherent in this movement when I asked Miriam about her work as a minister in the Catholic church. She explained that she is actually “half Catholic, half Evangelical.” She likes the Catholic Church for the sacraments, but she also likes the educational offerings of the Evangelical Church. Intrigued, I asked Sahar which church she goes to. Her response: “The Apostolic church and the Evangelical church.” At first I thought these two sisters might be outliers. Yet neither seemed to think their answers needed any further explanation. Nor were their parents bothered. Over time I began to notice similar cases, none of which was met with criticism or resistance. The only case which merited pushback was with Fr. Bishoy’s niece, who worked as a catechist in the Catholic church. She liked the Orthodox Church and preferred its doctrine to the Catholic Church. But even though she was herself unmarried and highly educated, she could not attend the Orthodox church. “God forbid a relative of a Catholic priest do that,” she complained, rolling her eyes. Having clergy in the family, however, did not define the lives of most young women.

In a patriarchal society with sharply delineated gender roles and heavy focus on marriage and reproduction, women are largely encompassed by the world of men. To move outside such a

domain, as Luce Irigaray (1984:53) puts it, would be to occupy a place “between past and future, future and past, place in place...invisible.” This phrasing, as elusive as it may sound, actually captures well the slippery place women occupy in the region’s patrilineal kinship structure. For instance, despite the value his clan places in their involvement in church affairs, Hanna Anis waited months before mentioning that his paternal grandmother’s father had been the first Orthodox priest from al-‘Aziya. More broadly, people might signal a connection to another denomination through their mother’s side of the family by using the phrase *min ‘asl*, such as, “I am from Catholic stock” (*ana min ‘asl katulik*). This phrase would probably not come up much in conversation, but I heard it repeatedly during my fieldwork for the sole reason that Orthodox men and women would say it in a friendly attempt to establish common ground with me, a Catholic priest. This shadow kinship is mirrored in the spaces that young women occupy. Miriam and Sahar move between churches, belonging to them yet not encompassed by them. Their sister-in-law likewise lives in a house where she does not entirely belong, moving back and forth between her husband’s household and the one where she was raised. In this sense, women forge routes between and across churches and homes – a pattern reminiscent of anthropology’s early interest in alliance theory, but with the cosmopolitan veneer of denominational pluralism.

Hybrid Spaces

After several visits with these two sisters, I came to learn that Sahar had only recently become involved in the Apostolic church. She had started to attend meetings in the house of a neighbor. She called them “prayer meetings” (*ijtim ‘a al-sala*). I took out my notepad and started to ask more questions, and she stopped me. “Let me take you to the woman who runs the meeting I attend.” Sahar and I left Miriam and walked down the street, turned the corner and walked back up the block on the other side. Many of these homes were either new or in the

process of being renovated. We stopped in front of one with unpainted concrete walls and a large metal door. Sahar gently knocked, and a middle-aged woman answered the door. Sahar greeted her, and then introduced me to her. “This is Umm Hani.”

We recognized each other immediately. The previous year, when I had come to al-‘Aziya for preliminary fieldwork, I had met her during a visit to a family’s house on the other side of town. She had come there to direct a literacy class, and she had invited me to join the group and even lead them in prayer. Umm Hani had been very welcoming and had encouraged me to attend other sessions as well. But I had lost touch with her and had moved on to other concerns. She was delighted to see me again and insisted we come inside and have something to drink. Umm Hani was already hosting a neighbor, and so Sahar and I joined the two of them in the sitting room. She had questions for me, especially about my research. Like many, she understood my interests in terms of “customs and traditions,” and she explained that the worst part of life in al-‘Aziya is early marriage. She had been engaged young, married at the age of sixteen, and gave birth to her first child at eighteen. She explained that she is grateful to have a good husband, yet she had been too young to be a mother at that age. She did not learn to read in school, and it was only in attending the literacy classes aimed at young mothers like herself that she became literate. Now she leads these sessions, along with the prayer meetings that Sahar attends.

From my conversation with Umm Hani, and from my own experience in the town, I came to learn there are three occasions when various women will gather in a home. These events are mostly exclusive women and children, and can be broadly understood as the following:

(1) Literacy classes. Youth from the Evangelical church would hold periodic reading classes for women in the old mission schoolhouse next to St. Mary’s Orthodox church. These classes would attract around twenty women. Far more popular and effective were the in-home sessions run by women like Umm Hani. These sessions were loosely affiliated with the Apostolic church, which would sell the workbooks for reduced rates.

Each lesson would focus on a particular scripture verse. The women in attendance would practice reading it aloud, and then the leader would invite them to share how they understand the verse.

(2) Prayer meetings. These gatherings were also known as “instruction in the spirit” or just “meetings.” Like the Pentecostal literacy classes, these meetings were held in houses and were attended by women, especially young mothers, from the neighboring homes. I was able to attend three of these meetings, and they all followed a similar structure of group prayer, preaching, and singing.

(3) Family events. Women from kin groups and neighboring homes would occasionally gather in the house to mark major life events, such as the birth of a child, a wedding, or a death in the family. The rituals that accompany these events – singing ‘*adid*, henna for weddings – are not considered “Coptic” or “Christian,” and can even be criticized by members of the clergy.

These activities are not always easily separated. For instance, Umm Hani would merge her literacy instruction with prayer and testimony, and some women would counter the singing of ‘*adid* with *taranim*, which can make a mourning session feel like a prayer meeting. What unites these events is the fact that while they take place in the home, they are also somewhat public. With the possible exception of family events, there is no invitation needed to attend. Women come to learn of these prayer meetings by word of mouth, and noise from these gatherings often spills into the streets. The demands of hospitality – normally a constitutive feature of interacting with guests in the domestic space – are suspended, and the women of the household become indistinguishable from the participants. In broad terms, it is as if the house has been turned into a church.

These gatherings can be contrasted alongside the gatherings that occur on church grounds, but are not part of the rhythm of worship. It was at such a meeting that I first met Miriam, and I often attended these events in the town’s various churches. Whereas church liturgy is inherently public, these events are somewhat restrictive. People must know about them, and they are aimed at particular sectors of society. Gestures of hospitality start to appear. Food and drink are sometimes served. Simple door prizes, such as plastic containers or cookware, are

given out. Some churches, like the St. George Catholic church, even had a meeting hall set aside for these meetings. Generally put, they are:

(1) Meeting of the ministers. All churches had a group of ministers that would gather once a month to listen to a talk, engage in some form of prayer, and conduct business.

(2) Meetings for the youth/women/families. All churches also would hold these gatherings in the afternoon or evening once a week. They tended to be well attended, and the gathering for families (*ijtim 'a al- 'amm*) is the most important event apart from Sunday worship. These meetings always involved a guest speaker, singing, a message from the pastor, and some kind of gift or door prize.

(3) Festivals. For the Orthodox and Catholics, these festivals occurred either around the feast days of saints or on a national holiday (e.g., New Year's). They take place either in the church or in the nearby courtyard, and they involve lots of children's choirs, recitation of poetry, and theater.

The ambiguous distinction between public and private in these events entails further distinctions about how people can interact, and what can and cannot be said. These events are obviously not restricted to women, though I did find that women like Miriam could speak and interact in these settings in ways that would be difficult elsewhere. They afford the shelter and protection one might expect in the domestic setting: church space, turned into a home.

Miriam and Sahar are among those who would attend these kinds of gatherings at multiple churches. The weekly women's meetings held in churches are attended by an older crowd, and some of these women spend their days moving from one church to another – a circuit incentivized no doubt by the promise of a simple gift after each meeting. There are also youth who occasionally go to other churches for their youth meetings – a young man who attended the Catholic church, for instance, would accompany me to the youth meetings at the Evangelical church. This movement is facilitated by a shared compartment, or “body hexus” (Bourdieu 1977). Men and women sit on opposite sides of the church. Personal prayer is performed while seated, with the upper body bent forward and head buried in one's hands. The *taranim* that is sung is drawn from what sometimes seemed like a common catalogue, often shared across

denominations.⁶ These spaces are built to be accessible to the general public, but they also demand a certain kind of behavior, as if one must act as a guest in this space.

In his fieldwork with American Pentecostals, Jon Bialecki (2017) reflects on the importance of para-ecclesial spaces, which are called “living room seminars.” These seminars are dedicated to helping church members learn how to hear God; in this sense, they are essentially pedagogical. Part of hearing God involves being surprised, which raises a challenge for those who lead these sessions. “Hearing from God,” Bialecki notes, “is not surprising when one is conducting an exercise in hearing from God” (119). In this sense, the location of the seminar becomes important for the “recalibration of thresholds.”

The relative and situational nature of surprise is also facilitated by what might be called a recalibration of thresholds. Controlling the environment, setting aside a particular moment for the exercise, and purposefully encouraging watchfulness mean that aspects of the sensorium that would not normally come to conscious attention are given psychic space and allowed to appear and participate in the series of syntheses that clear the way for the miraculous scission. (119)

Not gathering in a church, it seems, creates the opportunity to learn how to hear God in everyday life. But this domestic environment must still be controlled, and expectations tempered, so that the miraculous might break through the ordinary.

In the following pages, I will examine in closer detail how domestic and church spaces are used in this hybrid format. Like Bialecki’s observation, there is a recalibration of thresholds at work in both instances. Certain things can be said that would be impossible elsewhere; familial and denominational identities start to blur. Moreover, women in these scenarios can assume novel forms of authority. They emerge as central voices in these spaces.

Study A: Prayer Meeting

It is around three in the afternoon – the heat of the day. I am being hosted by a family. We have just finished lunch, and the husband and I are drinking tea. His wife excuses herself and begins to sweep the large sitting area of their house. The floor is made of poured concrete, and after she has cleared the sand and the dust, she starts to lay down a dozen cheap plastic mats. The husband and I continue to talk, but out of the corner of my eye I see a few women walk through the open front door. One or two have a young child in their hands; all are wearing the flowing robes that are popular among housewives. They find a seat on the floor and whisper among themselves. The husband excuses himself, and I see that Umm Hani has arrived. We had planned to have this rendezvous. When we first met, I had explained that I was interested in seeing how such a prayer meeting might be conducted. She invited me to attend.

There are now about twelve women, all seated in the center of the room and facing the same direction. The only light in the room is coming from the open door and the windows near the top of the wall. The ceiling fan is turned on high, though it does little to cool the air. The mother of the household brings over a chair for me to sit in, and Umm Hani asks if I would like to “pray for us” and “preach.” By this point, I am used to these requests, and so I open with the prayer and brief sermon I deliver in other churches. As always, I sense that it is too short for the occasion. I also feel self-conscious about disrupting the very interaction I want to observe. Umm Hani thanks me, and she stands up while I take my seat. She walks in front of the gathered women and says, “For the true believer, everything is a test” (*lil mu'min al-haqiqi, kulla shay ikhtibar*). She then starts to tell a story about a particular “test” she experienced. The test began two days after her husband had bought their current house. They had signed the contract, but before the deal was finished a stranger had spoken ill of them to the man who was selling the

house. I did not fully understand the narrative Umm Hani was telling, and I wondered if she was being strategically vague.

The homeowner was apparently persuaded by this stranger, and he went to the police department to file a complaint against Umm Hani and her husband. But something strange happened. Before going to the police station, he heard a voice that said that “those people are good, don’t complain.” He turns around and gets a phone call. Umm Hani is a masterful storyteller, and she vocalizes the different characters. “He answered a phone call. Someone asked him, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I returned.’ The person said, ‘Go there!’” She then pauses, looks around, and asks, “You see, who’s voice is that?” “Jesus?” a young mother responds. “Satan!” Umm Hani snaps back. She then deepens her voice, seeming to vocalize Satan: “Go there, file the complaint!”

The story takes a few more strange turns. The police department rules against the homeowner, and he comes back to Umm Hani apologetic and urging her and her husband to forget the whole episode. “Look, it came back and went against him!” she continues. “See how when Satan wants to scheme and put his hoof upon the believer, the deed is done against him?” This statement is delivered emphatically, and at first seems to be the point of the story. But Umm Hani continues by showing how people, including herself, could not believe the situation had been resolved. Her husband and her siblings talked about what kind of response this man’s actions deserved, and Umm Hani had to plead with them to wait, telling them, “When He gives his word, everything will resolve itself.” Finally, everyone came to agree that the situation had come under control.

Umm Hani pauses for dramatic effect. Her voice lowers, reflecting the calm she started to feel at the turn of events. “Look, see the reality before you, the peace of the Lord that guides

you.” This is a curious turn in the narration in that she is inviting us to view this reality through her own inability to see it. She explained that she had given in and told her husband to file a complaint. He did not, yet the man was nevertheless arrested. This turn of events is somewhat opaque, but it sets up another point of emphasis. Umm Hani recounts hearing about the man’s arrest.

They asked, “Have you heard?” And I said, “Yes, I know.” Our Lord said what? He said, “I send you out as lambs among wolves.” The wolves, they kidnap, they kill. But he said, “Don’t fear.”

Umm Hani’s narration shifts toward the resolution of the story. The man’s wife came to see Umm Hani to ask for forgiveness, and the pastor of the Apostolic church visited and encouraged them to trust that the Lord will resolve the problem. Having reached the end of the story, she stops and shifts to a slower cadence.

This is the believer; there are always trials. See the hand of the Lord, how he frees us from difficult circumstances. The world around us, it traps you in your problems. But our Lord does what? He frees you from it.

Her reflection is over. Umm Hani intones a hymn and the women immediately join in. Some clap along, and there is gentle swaying to the rhythm. After about ten minutes of singing, Umm Hani ends with a brief prayer and the women start to disperse. The whole meeting takes less than forty minutes.

From a formal perspective, Umm Hani’s discourse displays traits that are characteristic of broader trends in Protestant Christianity. Her shifting use of pronouns, which move between “you” and “us,” have the effect of drawing the listener into the moral universe being described (Harding 1987). There is the rich interplay between scripture – “lambs among wolves” (Luke 10:3) – and personal narration that tends to animate Protestant preaching (Bielo 2009). In its confessional stance, with the speaker accounting for her moments of doubt and insight, the

discourse aims to register as authentic (Keane 2007). One can even detect an intense investment of voice and vocalization as an important way of animating spiritual narratives (Harkness 2014).

Yet viewed from the context in which it is delivered – what Erving Goffman identified as situational analysis – this discourse acquires another layer of significance. Speech, of course, is more than the transference of information from speaker to hearer, and one of Goffman’s (1981) great insights was to introduce the idea of participation roles to demonstrate how speech presents a certain kind of speaker, one that is shaped by and responds to a perceived audience (Levinson 1988). For instance, there are moments of reported speech in Umm Hani’s discourse where she acts as the “animator” of words spoken by a different “author” – a trope she uses to great effect at the beginning when she voices the mysterious words of Satan, which one listener mistakes for Jesus. Similar kinds of participant roles can be assigned to the audience. It goes without saying that the women gathered are the intended audience, or the “addressed recipients.” Umm Hani has agreed to be included in my research, so I might be called an “unaddressed recipient,” as can the reader as well. At the same time, there could be “unratified” listeners – people who might be eavesdropping or overhearing this talk. Given the relatively restricted setting, it is unlikely that there would be anyone who fits this category, though Umm Hani certainly would be aware of the possibility.

By breaking down this interaction into various participant roles, two observations can be made. First, one important distinction between church and house as zones of interaction is that in church liturgy, there are no “unratified” listeners. In making use of sound systems that broadcast the Sunday liturgies and services to the surrounding neighborhood, the churches in al-‘Aziya have extended their sonic footprint beyond the church walls. People in town have mixed feelings about these broadcasts. Some find the noise to be grating, and see it only as the result of

competition among churches. Others enjoy listening to sermons and praying along with the liturgy from the comfort of their home. The template for this kind of blanket broadcast is the *adhan*, or call to prayer. As we shall see in the following chapter, the first speakers to be rigged to a church steeple in al-‘Aziya came from a mosque. But this stance is also in line with the inherently transparent nature of worship, which can be attended by anyone. In fact, preaching, singing, chanting the rite, and other forms of vocalization are amplified with the idea that every listener is a potential worshiper, and therefore part of the intended audience.

The home provides a neat counterpoint as there is a clear division between ratified and unratified listeners. People in al-‘Aziya were often wary about who might be listening lest something they say lead to conflict. Umm Hani’s discourse in fact takes up a potentially controversial topic. She is suggesting that the man who had agreed to sell the house, and then backed out, essentially did the devil’s bidding. But with the exception of myself, the ratified audience is a non-discrete group of women. I could not tell if Umm Hani knew everyone present, though had I asked her she certainly would have said yes. Residents took it as a matter of pride that they all know each other, even while this was not always the case in practice. Nevertheless, the audience is addressed in the second person masculine singular – a colloquial way in which many homilies and sermons are delivered. This misalignment of addressed and ratified recipients suggests that Umm Hani has reframed a personal narrative, delivered in full awareness of the protective space of the home, as a discourse capable of speaking to anyone.

Second, Umm Hani is speaking to women from a variety of denominational backgrounds. As I learned from subsequent conversations with Umm Hani, Miriam, and Sahar, most of those who attend are neighbors who do not necessarily consider themselves “Pentecostals.” Some might otherwise attend Orthodox or Catholic churches – denominational identity is not a zero-

sum game. Almost all are young mothers, many of whom are functionally illiterate. It is from this angle that the actual topic of Umm Hani's address can be best appreciated. "For the true believer, everything is a test," she begins. "The true believer," though, is a shifting category. In the end, there are only a few characters in Umm Hani's story whose moral status is unambiguous. Her brother is "far from the Lord." Her pastor is close to the Lord. And the man's wife seems to act as the Lord's agent. But the central characters – namely, Umm Hani, her husband, and the man who has filed the complaint – are complicated by the involvement of both the Lord and Satan in their lives. Whether or not they are "true believers" is a question continuously being worked out through the narration. The thrust of this story then is not that the protagonists are "lambs among wolves." The story is rather about her coming to see this truth, with the aim of helping others – both within the story, and those listening to it – to see it as well. It is a subtle message that steers clear of any strong denominational association.

The idea that anyone might be, or might not be, a "true believer" is a trope I often heard in al-'Aziya. As one woman who attends such meetings told me, "The most important thing is the heart. Only the heart. The person whose heart heeds our Lord, that's all that matters. They know the Lord, even if they don't come and go to church." This appeal to a fundamental distinction between believers and non-believers is the language of the local pluralism in the town. It works both because it is bounded (Muslims, being themselves "unbelievers," are not part of this schema) and because it is unstable. Since the Lord knows the heart, and no one else, these considerations avoid the politics of the town. And since church attendance in this framework is only tangential to the state of a person's heart, what is hidden from view – the state of one's heart – is "the most important thing."

The residents I knew did not find anything strange or threatening about these meetings. But there were moments when institutional churches sought to encompass them. There was a Pentecostal pastor who lives in al-‘Aziya but has a church in a different town. He had invited me for lunch, and afterwards groups of women started to arrive for one of these meetings. His wife hurried to prepare the space, and the pastor ordered his daughter to prepare tea for the ladies, which only confused the daughter (no tea was served). It was the only time I had seen a man get involved in such gatherings, leading me to wonder if he was looking to establish a church in town. At another moment, Sahar reported that she and some other young women from the Apostolic church had been walking past one of the Orthodox churches on the way to a prayer meeting when the pastor, having spotted them, announced from the loudspeaker: “Beware! There are people here coming to take the children of the church.” It was rumored that the Orthodox priests in particular are worried that if women attend these gatherings, they will stop coming to church. Given the way that these meetings reflected church activity, it was not an unreasonable concern.

Study B: Meeting of the Ministers

Miriam has tipped me off that the upcoming meeting of the ministers at the St. George Catholic church is one I should not miss. When I arrive at the meeting hall, I see that there are more ministers present, about forty, than would usually be in attendance. The ministers are the volunteers who help run the parish, and who sometimes see themselves as the administrators of the parish community. The mood is light, and those present are talking and laughing. But I have heard that tension among different factions within the ministers has come to a head. As some parishioners had whispered to me, members of the Duraba are upset that the pastor and vicar of the parish have blocked efforts by one prominent Duraba man to join the parish council. In

response, four ministers from the Duraba clan have sent a letter of protest to the two priests, and it is widely understood that they want the priests to leave the church and town.

Normally only the ministers would be present. But today the associate pastor is seated in the front of the hall. He begins the meeting and invites everyone to listen and reflect on a scripture passage he has selected. It is a long passage, taken from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians (2:1-18). He reads it slowly: "Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind...do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God." After he finishes the passage, he asks everyone to remain silent and to reflect for several minutes. The hall becomes very quiet. Then the priest speaks in very broad terms about the "fellowship" (*al-ikhwa*) of the ministers, how they work for one goal, and how there should be no division among them. He continues in this vein; at some point, someone cracks a joke and everyone laughs.

However, after about ten minutes, one of the ministers – a young man from the Duraba – interjects. He starts by saying how he has much respect for the priest and how he agrees with everything that has been said. But he says that it is important that "the people understand" that the reason why all ministers come to the church and these meetings is to serve, and not for "other reasons." These remarks shift the interaction and hint at the immediate source of conflict which, to this point, no one has mentioned directly. The priest responds, and it begins to seem that he is laying the blame on "some of the ministers" who have been indiscreet in Facebook posts, which invites this kind of talk "among the people." These words are met with shouts from several directions. The brother of the young man who had been speaking joins in. A young woman also yells something. I understand little of what is actually being said.

At this point, a young mother – one of the few married ministers – shouts for everyone to be quiet. Amazingly, the room grows quiet. Once she is satisfied that everyone is listening, she says,

It's obvious that there's a disagreement between some in the church and the priests. A disagreement that's clear, that involves some of the ministers and the priests, not the people outside, the Catholic people, the people of al-'Aziya. That's clear.

There is some shouting, and the mother pleads for people to listen to her. Someone from the Duraba interjects, "That's not the reason for the problem!" Unfazed, she continues,

And if there's any disagreement between us, over any particular ministry, or over money, over anything that disturbs us, then let one or two or whoever seeks a solution but doesn't know how, let them sit with Father. So I call us to see the need, before the light, to pause and have these people sit with Father and meet with who? With the other people.

It is not clear to me who "the other people" (*al-nas al-tany*) are, but it appears to be a reference to the ongoing conflict. She adds that meeting with "Father" will allow everyone to discuss the issue in the light of day. At this point, two male ministers from the Duraba shout at her, and she yells back. They stop, and she turns to address the priest.

One more thing. Everyone who is in charge has more responsibility and you're the Father. You ask about them, they don't ask about you.

A second point. When we handle an issue, we don't talk about someone, we don't make it something personal. It should stay about the church. No personal issues, no words about this and that.

On that note, she stops, and no one tries to interject. The meeting continues with few other disruptions.

There are few places in this society where priests can be told what they can and cannot do, much less in front of a large audience in such a public way. Within the church itself, priests command and people obey. Within the households of those he visits, the priest is a guest and is treated with the highest degree of respect. Some men in town might boast that they will speak

frankly to priests, no matter the setting. But I rarely witnessed such brazen talk. When it did occur, it was perceived as extreme and to be ignored. The only place where this kind of critique or instruction could be leveled was in the setting immediately adjacent to the church – places like the meeting hall that are part of the church’s domain, but outside of the site of ritual activity. It is not coincidental that the ministers claim to control this space. As with the domestic space previously considered, the meeting hall is a strange amalgamation of public and private, of both church and domestic space. Moreover, this is a place where females can enter into public conversations with political overtones.

This young mother makes use of a distinctive rhetorical strategy. Her claims are rooted in neutral observation. In Goffman’s (1981:144) phrasing, she is the animator, the “sounding box,” for the principal, or “someone whose beliefs have been told.” She names what “is obvious,” and when she addresses the priest, she speaks on behalf of the first person plural, which suggests the church community at large. Of course, this “we” is an “inchoate pronoun” (Fernandez 1986; Kapchan 1996:65-6), and it can be read in different ways. For a male speaker, the “we” might be traditionally understood as encompassing one’s family or house. The Duraba speaker at the beginning of the account appears to adhere to this paradigm. He speaks about “the people” and “the ministers” in the third person, thus aligning himself with the other Duraba in opposition to everyone else. But when the mother picks up this theme, she speaks for an ever-expanding group of people: “The Catholic people, the people of al-‘Aziya.” The ease by which this mother achieves this footing illustrates in another way the “placelessness” (Irigaray 1984:52) of women in this local society. It is hard to imagine a male minister speaking in such a way. His intervention would dovetail with the broader political arena in which men interact in public.

No one ever compared these meetings, or the meeting hall, to the domestic space. Yet the intervention of this young mother illuminates a conceptual link between the two. To again channel Bourdieu, the Upper Egyptian house has a male at its head from the outside, but it is the domain of females from within. The relative shelter of this meeting, shielded from view from the outside, invites a similar inversion wherein a woman can tell both a priest and a member of a feared clan who they are, and what they should do. It is easy to understand why women such as Miriam liked to attend these meetings, and to be in this space in general. Perhaps it is to improve their marriage prospects, or because of genuine investment in the church. But there is a freedom afforded to women in these church-adjacent sites that is unlike any other, with the exception of the home.

This case study also illustrates the limitations of this liminal space. After this meeting, I debriefed with Miriam. She and another female minister confirmed what I had suspected. With the help of this young mother and several other ministers, the Duraba had been deterred from forcing out the two parish priests. At the same time, these young women refused to go into any more detail, emphasizing instead the unity of the ministers on this issue. This reluctance to engage with local politics beyond the walls of the house or the church meeting hall was indicative of the broader restraints the ministers as a group faced. While the Duraba had not succeeded in the short term, the two priests were removed from al-‘Aziya shortly after I concluded my fieldwork. Local rumors suggest that the campaign had finally succeeded. This difficult political landscape casts a different light on the interaction within the meeting hall. This interactional space provides a degree of protection from these political melees. It is a shelter where men and women feel welcome, and where the broader world is held at bay.

+++++

The interplay between church and house can also be viewed from the perspective of the sacraments. The “sacraments” (*al-asrar*) usually refer to the seven sacraments practiced by the Orthodox and Catholic churches.⁷ They are now almost always celebrated in the church by the clergy. There are obvious ways that the sacraments imitate domestic activities. The eucharist is a meal, and the loaves that are used in the Divine Liturgy are baked the evening before in an oven next to the church. Leftover loaves are distributed to the faithful after the liturgy, and they are taken home and eaten as one might eat any other kind of bread. Weddings and baptism all traffic in ideas of reproduction that also touch upon the household. At the level of ritual and structure, the two are linked together. This arrangement places the gendered domestic division of labor in relation to the ritual domain of the church. In their interactions beyond the church walls, priests are expected to act like men – a point that was forcefully made to me when I once made the mistake of crossing my legs. But within the liturgy itself, there are feminine elements. Priests prepare the altar, they handle sacred oils, they can sit alone with women in the confessional. The most sacred activities a priest performs occur behind the altar “screen” (*hijab*) that, when closed, hides the altar from view. These overlapping traits contrast with the very public and visible role men occupy elsewhere.

What excited residents in al-‘Aziya, however, were the political dimensions of the sacraments, especially baptism. In May 2017, Pope Francis traveled to Cairo and was greeted by Pope Tawadros II, the Pope of the Orthodox Church. Catholics in Egypt had long complained about the Orthodox practice of rebaptizing Catholics who marry in the Orthodox Church, and the two Popes came to a historic agreement to mutually recognize the baptisms of each other’s church. Discussion about baptism and the relationship between the two churches appeared often on Coptic media, especially across social media platforms. The discourse reached a high point

when, in November of the same year, one of the Orthodox bishops of al-Minya, Anba Makarios, drew an association between Orthodox rebaptism and the foreign origin of the Catholic and Protestant churches. The result was that baptism often came up when well-informed Catholics would talk about the Orthodox Church. The more educated members of the Orthodox Church would likewise defend their church's position on the matter.

Engagement with this broader discourse on baptism and church relations nevertheless acquired its own local character. Baptism and marriage are the two sacraments that touch upon and structure domestic life. They are an extension of the church into the household. But in a related way, these two sacraments also inform the town's pluralism. The verse from scripture that residents love to recite most is what they refer to as "Ephesians four": "There is...one Lord, one faith, one baptism."⁸ In the eyes of most residents, this verse is evidence of the unifying aspect of baptism, which feeds into the broader language of pluralism previously discussed. At the same time, this verse can be read the opposite way. As Anba Makarios himself stated in his remarks, baptism reflects the faith of a church. Why should the Orthodox Church recognize the baptism of another denomination, I was sometimes asked, if that baptism was performed "upon a non-Orthodox faith?" The national discourse on baptism, in other words, provided a powerful template for local residents to interpret their own differences.

This discussion is important in that baptism is a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. Catholics would complain that they could not receive the eucharist while visiting various Orthodox monasteries, as some monks, aware that there might be non-Orthodox people in the congregation, make the point of announcing that only those baptized in the Orthodox Church should present themselves for communion. Catholic priests, on the other hand, would distribute communion to anyone who presents themselves. And baptism also becomes a wedge issue

through the sacrament of marriage, since to be married in the Orthodox Church, both husband and wife must be baptized, or rebaptized, “Orthodox.”

This final note on marriage is important because it shows how gender cuts across the world of sacraments and Christian pluralism. Theoretically the Orthodox insistence on rebaptizing non-Orthodox spouses could apply to either man or woman. In practice, it is usually the bride. Such is true throughout Upper Egypt, where wives take on the denomination of their husbands. The need to rebaptize might not be pressing in towns where only the Orthodox Church is present. But in al-‘Aziya, where Fr. Boulos, the beloved longstanding Catholic pastor, baptized many children from families that otherwise were not Catholic, the question is very much alive. Residents remember a time when Orthodox priests, recruited from another town, went door-to-door seeing if any spouses needed to be rebaptized – which, again, would most likely be the wife. But baptism in this plural society also affords movement across churches, which, as Miriam and Sahar demonstrate, is a practice that young, unmarried, educated women are drawn toward. With women more than men, baptism appears alternately as an expression of ecclesial control and of freedom from it, of the church’s extension into the home and the means by which one moves between churches.

Baptism in the Plural

Once again I am with Miriam and Sahar. I have learned to avoid scheduling meals at their house. I hate the idea of having them spend so much time and money preparing food on my behalf. Now I try to come in the evening, when we can have a soda, sit on the porch, and watch some Evangelical shows on Miriam’s beat-up laptop – a favorite pastime of theirs. The visit of Pope Francis is the talk of the town, and we discuss it as well. I then ask the two sisters about the Catholic Church and the other churches. How do they get along? “The Catholic Church is a

refuge for all” (*hiyya malja li-kullu*), replies Miriam. She does not find herself exceptional at all – there are others who also receive sacraments in the Catholic Church and attend Evangelical or Pentecostal services. This particular “circuit” is a mirror image of the “churches whose age is near” that Hanna Anis had described. The proximity of these churches has little to do with doctrine and everything to do with this oppositional position to the Orthodox Church. By this point in my fieldwork, Miriam’s description makes perfect sense, for I have followed this same circuit as well. Whenever I would visit the Evangelical or Apostolic church, I would be ushered to a pew in the front, or even a seat on stage. Even when the Evangelical church celebrated the five-hundred year anniversary of the Reformation, I joined other Catholic priests to participate in the service. For the most part, the Orthodox priests do not engage in this kind of inter-ecclesial diplomacy. Catholics, on the other hand, are masters of it. Protestant ministers, who perhaps sense the global reach of the Catholic Church, have always been my most hospitable and helpful interlocutors in the field.

It bears repeating that Miriam and Sahar do not see themselves as doing anything exceptional in moving between churches. They can belong to several churches at once; denominational identity is not zero-sum. At the same time, this theological openness still rests on certain ideas about what is compatible and what is not. Miriam’s views on the Catholic Church, for instance, cannot be transferred to the Orthodox Church, which is far more restrictive in its view of the sacraments. A similar kind of pairing occurs when the conversation turns to Sahar. She appears to have a cooler view of the Catholic Church, and I ask her to explain her relation to the town’s churches over time. Perhaps since we have already been discussing baptism, she starts by recounting her own.

I was baptized “Orthodox” along with my brother at the monastery of ‘Abd al-Masih. And since I was young, I’ve been going to the Evangelical church, and I took instruction in the Spirit. It’s a prayer meeting, which we attend in homes. They’ll say, “there’s a prayer meeting on Wednesday, four o’clock,” and people go, so I went. The lady was baptizing, and I said to her “I want to be baptized,” and she said, “you must do something...you must consecrate it.” So I did the consecration the following week and I got baptized.

There appears to be an obvious contradiction in Sahar’s account, and I press her on it. I ask, “So was the baptism in the house your second baptism?” I know full well that this question might be provocative. Sahar pushes back immediately. “No, Father. There’s only one baptism!” She then explains that the baptism of the house was done “by one’s will” (*bi-irada*) and “not by hand.” Placed in the context of the Pentecostal tradition, Sahar can be understood as talking about baptism in the Spirit – an ecstatic state that is emphasized in the Holiness movement that arrived in Asyut and marks the beginning of Pentecostalism in Egypt.⁹ At the same time, she does not reject her Orthodox baptism. In a sense, they build off each other, the second experience encompassing but not voiding the first.

This ability to fuse two baptisms into one reflects something both about the compatibility of these different churches, as well as the various ways churches overlap with homes. Both Orthodox and Catholic parents will sometimes baptize their children at an Orthodox monastery in order to fulfill a vow (*nadr*), as did Sahar’s Catholic parents. Monasteries are sacred in part because of their historical association with the Egyptian landscape, and this connection is amplified in the baptismal rite itself, in which thirty-six parts of the body are anointed with the Holy Myron, the sacred oil that is distributed from Wadi Natrun to all the dioceses throughout the country.¹⁰ These monastery baptisms in a sense are the standard by which baptisms in local churches are judged. There is competition between the Orthodox and Catholic churches when it comes to baptisms. But the rite is virtually the same, and it draws deeply upon idioms of place.

Likewise, the baptized child is given a new name that embeds him or her in narratives that stem from the monastery or church of baptism. For instance, a mother in al-‘Aziya gave her son the baptismal name Girgis – Coptic for “George” – after having received instruction in a dream from Fr. Boulos to do so in honor of St. George the Roman. Fr. Boulos was known to have a strong devotion to St. George, and Fr. Boulos was also much beloved by this particular family – all narrative threads that are woven together in the baptismal name of this newborn son.

The chronotopic configuration of Orthodox and Catholic baptism therefore highlights place, and draws upon a temporal trajectory that pulls in the lives of multiple generations. The baptism in the Spirit that Sahar underwent, on the other hand, moves in an opposite direction. As Bambi Schieffelin (2014) has observed among Pentecostals elsewhere, ritual space in this chronotope tends to be condensed into a “flat” set of relations where the self, as opposed to place, serves as the primary object of focus. Sahar’s baptism in a house is a perfect example. Its nondescript location, intelligible only by a set of kinship relations that appear nowhere in her account, returns the focus to Sahar herself and her new life in Christ. The Protestant churches follow this theme as well. For baptisms that occur in the Apostolic church, there is a trap door on the floor of the stage in front of the sanctuary that reveals a large tub. The Evangelical church keeps a metallic bowl in its kitchen for its own baptisms. If the Orthodox practice is to be viewed as embedding the child in a broader web of spatial and temporal relations, the Protestant practice, in erasing any suggestion of a sacred place, is focused on creating a new individual self.

These two templates for baptism that Sahar embraces do not conflict; rather, they follow different spatial and temporal logics. Sahar does not even reject her Orthodox baptism. Nor did I ever hear anyone else do so, despite the likelihood that most people who attended the Protestant churches had been baptized as infants. It was never put this way, but the chronotope of Orthodox

and Catholic baptism merges church association with ethnic and kinship identity in such a way that makes it extremely difficult to renounce. Put differently, this template of baptism merges the church with the home. But the Protestant churches do not, in the end, claim any particular space as theirs. The focus is on the individual. Sahar had started attending the prayer meetings at Umm Hani's invitation, and it was through these meetings that she was baptized in the Spirit. And yet, in Sahar's words, this act did not make her more "Pentecostal" or less "Orthodox" or "Catholic." She became "a new person," (*insan jadid*) as she explained. It is a phrase that reflects the ecumenical language of the women who attend these meetings, and which can coexist alongside the denominational divides of the town.

Rebaptism and Reproduction

The complementarity between the Catholic and Protestant churches that Miriam and Sahar forged can be contrasted with the open conflict waged between the Orthodox and Catholic churches over baptism. Miriam and Sahar laughed about the tension between the two denominations. But their father had a more typical reaction, at least for Catholic men. "The Orthodox, they're all stubborn!" he protested when he heard us talking about baptism. In fact, there were many ways that Catholics, especially Catholic men, could publicly push back against Orthodox attempts at rebaptism, be they real or perceived. When I would occasionally accompany Fr. Bishoy in his house visits, I would sometimes see him warn a young Catholic fiancée engaged to an Orthodox man not to let the Orthodox priest who would celebrate the wedding sprinkle any water over her head. Fr. Bishoy was convinced that Orthodox priests try to carry out such covert baptism. Others in town seemed less sure. Some felt like these rebaptisms took place in monasteries, far away from the sight of anyone in town. The only thing everyone

agreed on was the gravity of the issue. Rebaptism either seemed a theological imperative or an affront to Christian unity. There were few neutral bystanders.

Sometimes after church events I would run into a few of the young men who also served as ministers at the St. George Catholic church. These young men were not always college educated, but most seemed well versed on the theological debates of the moment. When I would spend time with them, usually standing outside the front gates of the church, they would joke about the Orthodox, and rebaptism would inevitably come up. There were several humorous stories that they would tell, usually with the insistence that these things really happened (see Appendix, fig. 8.3). One went like this:

There was a Catholic girl betrothed to an Orthodox man. The Orthodox priest said, "You've got to marry 'Orthodox.'" They agreed. He then said to the bride, "You've got to be baptized 'Orthodox.'" They agreed. And he knew her parents weren't married 'Orthodox,' so he said, "They must be married 'Orthodox.'" The Orthodox priest said that her mother and father must be married as well. But they replied, "There's a problem: her father died." And the priest said, "There's no problem. We can pray over anything that belonged to him." So they grabbed his jacket and propped it up, and the priest married it to her mother!

All of these jokes involved a "stubborn" Orthodox priest who is determined to adhere to the narrowest interpretation of the law. As seen here, the view that Catholic baptism is invalid can suggest that anyone married to a baptized Catholic is not married in a way the Orthodox Church would recognize. People would laugh at these jokes because this logic is obviously not valid. If a marriage were indeed *batl* ("invalid"), then offspring from the marriage would be illegitimate, and the wife herself would be viewed as having relations outside of marriage. But no one thinks this way except the priest, who makes for the butt of the joke.

At first I thought these jokes were just part of the everyday banter of these young men. But then I heard Fr. Agnatius tell the same story at the end of a homily during a Sunday liturgy.

Everyone in the church roared with laughter, and Fr. Agnatius had the same response I had witnessed with the young ministers. “Really! This really happened! Can’t you believe it!” Like all the talk I heard about rebaptism, I had a tough time discerning how credible anyone found these reports. If anything, such a joke is easy to make because the unnamed priest who generates the laughter exists beyond the intensely local world of al-‘Aziya. There is no risk of causing actual division, which would occur along familial lines, not confessional. The logic of baptismal identity, in other words, is ultimately separate from that of kinship.

Still, baptism traffics in the language of kinship, and especially reproduction. In the Orthodox and Catholic rites, considerable attention is directed toward moving the mother from a state of ritual impurity to purity. The timing of the ritual is done in accordance with her puerperium. She also has to stand in the stead of her child during the renunciation of Satan. And more broadly, this ritual focuses on birth, and the mother reflects the potent image of baptism “as birth into new life” as found in scripture (John 3:5). At a more abstract level, we can also say that baptism is the way that churches reproduce their members. The people I spoke with did not make this connection directly, but older residents can still recall a time when most Orthodox and Catholic baptisms occurred on Baptism Sunday, one week before Palm Sunday. During this festive weekend, all eyes would be on the women with children, clad in white, who would be going to one church or the other. These parades toward each church’s baptistry took on the airs of a competition, and was viewed as an annual indicator of the strength of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Baptism, in this view, reflects the promise of the next generation, and the growing or decreasing size of an ecclesial family.

But baptism is also not reproduction, as everyone knows. Ritual, in Jonathan Z. Smith’s phrasing, “provides the means for demonstrating that we know what ought to have been done,

what ought to have taken place. Nonetheless, by the very fact that it is ritual action rather than everyday action, ritual demonstrates that we know ‘what is the case’” (Smith 1987:109). Baptism can be understood as a radical reorientation of kinship, of one becoming a child of God. But it is also a ritual, a designation that means that, beyond the baptistry, one still remains a child of man and woman.

In the telling of a certain kind of vintage anthropology of the Middle East, women can be seen “as the source from which impurity and dishonor threaten to enter the lineage” (Bourdieu 1977:44). In the context of this pluralist Coptic society, the threat that women face can also come in the form of church overreach, or so these stories and jokes told by Catholics appear to suggest. These Catholic polemics tap into this language of impurity and dishonor when raising the specter of Orthodox rebaptism. At least in Upper Egypt, where the denominational “outsider” in any given household is likely to be an affine, this threat dovetails with the broader ambiguity of where such women exactly belong, both in terms of kinship structure and denominational identity. The same uncertainty that generates this anxiety over rebaptism, and denominational polemics, also structures the movement across churches embraced by Miriam and Sahar. In overlapping and important ways, women and the shared idiom of baptism stand at, and help define, the boundary between church and home.

Conclusion

These first two chapters have sought to examine denominational pluralism as it is lived and understood in al-‘Aziya, and Upper Egypt in general. The first chapter introduced the idea of “churches whose age is near” as a divide between churches with and without history. In this chapter the distinction unfolds across space, both in terms of house-churches as well as the movement across churches as structured by a shared sacramental imagination. This spatial

arrangement is also necessarily gendered. Women emerge as central figures both in terms of ability to generate unique church-adjacent spaces, as well as to symbolize the threshold between the church and the house. At the heart of this interplay between church and house are the ideas of shelter – what is public and private – as well as scripted views pertaining to gender and reproduction. What we have seen is that between the church and the house, these elements become reconfigured and contested, which is to say, politicized. These are privileged spaces in the production of a local expression of denominational pluralism.

While much of this chapter has been devoted to the relationship between these hybrid spaces and the lives of women, it might be asked: what about men? We have already seen that churches themselves are the domain of the clergy, and men gather in the dusty open-air coffee shops and garages that face the *asfelt*. However, one instance where men oversee the interface between church and home is through the mortuary rituals that follow the church funeral. The funeral itself is usually a quick affair, and burial occurs the day of death. A procession will move from the church to the cemetery, with men leading the way and women in tow. Once the casket is placed in the family's mausoleum, many of the men in attendance will head to the household of the deceased, where a large tent has usually been erected in the street in front of the house. Kin of the deceased will find a seat in one of the main chairs lined up under the tent. Others will sit on the chairs and benches set up elsewhere in the street.

This period of mourning is governed by some clearly defined codes of behavior. When Fr. Bishoy invited me to attend one of these sessions, he made sure that we approached the gathering together. As is the case when any man greets those mourning, we raised our right hand and said a scripted phrase expressing our condolences, and the others outside the tent we bypassed. We then took two of the seats that are reserved for visiting clergy. A young man

seated next to us stood up and took hold of a microphone attached to a set of large speakers. He began to preach about how one needs faith to be saved. From his dress and excited speech, I could tell immediately that he was one of the several Pentecostal ministers who occasionally appeared throughout the town. I knew both the deceased and his only daughter. Both were devout Catholics, and most of the kin present were members of Fr. Bishoy's church. But it is the practice in al-'Aziya, and in other towns with multiple denominations, to have clergy from different churches preach. After about five minutes, the Pentecostal minister finished and Fr. Bishoy stood up and delivered his own brief sermon. Once he was done, a man stood up and thanked him, and then passed the microphone on to me so that I might offer my own sermon. Fr. Bishoy stopped him, and then turned and asked if I wanted to say anything. I said no, and then Fr. Bishoy and I sat together in silence along with the forty or fifty other men under the tent. Later, some of the Orthodox priests also came to offer their condolences and to deliver their own brief sermons.

In many ways, this space resembles an extension of the church. There is preaching directed both toward those present, and it is amplified so that neighbors in the area might listen in and participate. It is a male space, and clergy have pride of place. At the same time, these visits by different clergy are governed primarily by a sense of diplomacy. During my fieldwork, the Catholic priests made an agreement to divide these visits so that only one priest would have to attend any given funeral gathering. This duty to attend, the lack of any kind of hospitality (there might be some eating, or someone might offer a soda, but only with utmost subtlety), the utter lack of privacy, and the scripted roles, suggested that it had little to do with the house as a domestic space. It is rather the interface of the church and the house "defined from the outside, from the standpoint of men" (Bourdieu 1977:153).

After about ten minutes of sitting in silence, Fr. Bishoy nudged me and suggested we leave. We slowly stood up, raised our right hands as a greeting to all the men under the tent, and then headed out into the open air. Fr. Bishoy paused for a moment, and then said, “Wait, come with me.” He slipped into the narrow passage between the tent and the house of the deceased. I had to turn sideways to follow him – I barely fit between the mudbrick wall and the flapping tarp. From the other side of the wall, I could hear the sound of women’s voices. We got to the wooden door and Fr. Bishoy knocked while opening it at the same time. “Come in,” he said to me, and I followed him into the sitting area, where at least twenty women were gathered. All were barefoot, clad in black, and seated on the floor. They were kin and neighbors; some were in the kitchen preparing food, others were attending the adult daughter of the deceased, who had retired to her bed due to her grief and exhaustion. These women were mourning as well, and through the wall they could hear the preaching of the various clergy. But they had also been singing their own hymns – the *‘adid* that lodge passionate complaints against God for the loss of a loved one’s life. “Be aware!” shouted Fr. Bishoy. “Those hymns are of Satan and should not be sung.” The women looked at each other sheepishly. If the tent outside had been converted into a church-like space, this domestic enclosure was itself church-adjacent. A woman stood up, kissed my hand, and led me to the daughter. Fr. Bishoy yelled for someone to bring food for her – she had refused to eat. There was much bustling in the kitchen. Glasses of tea were being prepared. With their own ritual disrupted, this gathering space reverted back into a home.

¹ The topic of female-exclusive space as a site of social innovation – and ethnographic insight – is a reoccurring theme in the anthropology of the Middle East (Boddy 1989; Mahmood 2005). These studies tend to be positioned against universalizing western views about Arab and/or Muslim women (Deeb 2006).

² Presbyterian Historical Society RG 209-2-54: Davida Finney Papers, “Adult Literacy Campaign at Hirz,” January 3, 1953. This report, quoted in the chapter epigraph, concerns Nazelet el-Hirz, another majority-Christian town in Upper Egypt. Davida Finney would herself focus her efforts on Deir al-Barsha, which is similar to al-‘Aziya in size and multid denominational character. Finney’s assistant, Marjorie Dye, is still remembered for her own work in the campaign by residents of al-‘Aziya.

³ This method comes from the pedagogy of the American missionary Frank Laubach (1884-1970), which reinforced learning by pairing the shape of letters with pictorial representations of words that begin with the letter. Decades later, this method was the aspect of the American Evangelical mission that older al-‘Aziya residents remembered most vividly.

⁴ Presbyterian Historical Society RG 209-2-54: Davida Finney Papers, “Adult Literacy Campaign at Hirz,” January 3, 1953.

⁵ Parallel cousin marriage had been common among the older generation. It is less common now. The Catholic Church requires an indult for first cousin marriages. When I visited Fr Boulos’s office in the *siraya* (Chapter 3), the floor was littered with dozens of such indults, all printed and signed on small white pieces of paper.

⁶ For two excellent ethnographic studies of *taranim*, see Caroline Ramzy 2014, 2017.

⁷ The seven being baptism, anointing with myron (“confirmation”), the eucharist, confession, the anointing of the sick, marriage, and holy orders. Although sacraments are an important part of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, and are woven into the Reform tradition in various ways, the anthropology of Christianity has been slow to subject them to rigorous study. For background on baptism and its connection to *patronazgo*, see Pitt-Rivers 1968. For more on baptismal names in the Orthodox tradition, see Luehrmann 2016. For more on baptism in the Coptic tradition, see Abdelsayed 2014 and Michka 2021.

⁸ This verse, as with others in this study, is taken from the New Revised Standard Version translation.

⁹ For background on the theology of “baptism in the Spirit” and its connection to the origins of Pentecostalism in Egypt, see Nagib 2020.

¹⁰ Wadi Natrun, located 62 miles out of Cairo, is the site of several important Coptic Orthodox monasteries. The Holy Myron, or chrism oil, is made from materials gathered by monks, and is produced only once every couple of decades. The oil is then distributed to Coptic Orthodox churches throughout Egypt and the diaspora.

PART II
Minority Life in Reverse

CHAPTER 3

The Empty Tomb of Father Boulos

Finally, Diocletian decided to put an end to the humiliation that befell him, so he ordered to cut off the head of St. George, and he received the crown of martyrdom. A Christian took the body, wrapped it in expensive shrouds, and took it to the city of Lydda, his home town, and they built a great church there in his name.

The Martyrdom of St. George, Prince of the Martyrs
Coptic Synaxarium

What can be learned from an exception? This question will be addressed in different ways in these next two chapters. In this chapter I will take up the topic of religious authority. In the following chapter, I will examine vendettas and reconciliations. At first glance, these topics might seem straightforward, even mundane. There is even a hint of classical anthropology to them, with echoes of Evans-Pritchard and 1950s British ethnography. However, when held up against the prism of this majority-Christian town, these lines of inquiry reveal something surprising and unexpected about Coptic life in contemporary Upper Egypt. In short, the freedom that Christians experience in an exceptional place like al-‘Aziya creates conceptual problems. These problems, I argue, are worked out through the ordering of space. Religious authority, for instance, is defined in part by the jurisdiction in which it is exercised. Vendettas in this unique space are resolved through innovative rituals and, in one case, the construction of a church. By

approaching this town as an exception, I hope to shed light on the social labor – the making of boundaries, the drawing of distinctions – that would likely be obscured in a majority-Muslim setting.

This chapter focuses on Fr. Boulos al-Hermeni, the Catholic priest who served as pastor of the St. George church for forty-five years. Fr. Boulos is the most important figure in the history of the town. People were eager to discuss his life with me, and it seemed important to them that I make him central to my research. After some time, I also saw that, in talking about Fr. Boulos, they were talking about their town. In talking about their town, moreover, they were talking about the difference between al-‘Aziya and most other places in Upper Egypt. Fr. Boulos, in other words, serves as a window through which a broader world is perceived. Taking a cue from my interlocutors, I have structured this chapter in terms of Fr. Boulos’s life, death, and afterlife. In examining his memory and legacy, we will learn about the ways religious authority is strengthened, exercised, and lost in a place like al-‘Aziya.

This chapter is therefore about priests as well. Like Copts throughout Upper Egypt, the people in al-‘Aziya are fascinated by priests. When I asked someone why priests are always highly sought as guests, I was told, “That man, he is a blessing.” *Baraka* (“blessing”) is not something that need be accessed through priests. *Baraka* can be mediated through a variety of persons, objects, or images, as anthropologists working on both Christians and Muslims in the Middle East have shown (Westermarck 1968[1926]; Heo 2018b). But priests are mediators of *baraka* in an intensely personal way. They visit homes, baptize children, learn their secrets, and can even become leaders of the community. Because of their connection to divine blessing and grace, they are removed from society. But because they live among those they serve, they are enmeshed in its politics. From this rather basic tension flow many consequences.

The Life of Father Boulos

It is a short walk from the front of the St. George Catholic church to Nabeel's house. The street that leads from one to the other is lined with homes, each sharing a wall with the next. I have heard that some of these homes were once owned by local Muslim families who left when the *mazar* grew in popularity in the 1980s. Local Coptic families moved in, and the property value grew. Several of these homes double as shopfronts. One has an open window, and children run up and ask for bottles of soda to serve guests. Nabeel, I have been told, wrote a pamphlet to commemorate the life of Fr. Boulos. If I want to learn about the priest, I should go and visit him.

Nabeel considers himself a man of letters. There are a few books on a bookshelf in the living room (his son, he would later tell me, is a noted journalist). Hanging on the wall is a picture of Fr. Izhaq, the first pastor of the town's Catholic community (and also Nabeel's father). Nabeel and his brothers are fiercely loyal to the memory of their father. But there are only a few stories about Fr. Izhaq. Even his grandchildren, such as Nabeel's children, recall only how he was weak and manipulated by people in the town. Fr. Boulos, on the other hand, is universally celebrated. Unlike Fr. Izhaq, he was strong, and he rose above the factions of the town. He is the one remembered as a leader of both church and town.

After some introductory chatter, Nabeel retrieves a copy of the thin booklet he composed. He flips it open to the section describing how Fr. Boulos arrived. He reads aloud to me,

The Archpriest Izhaq bought land and built the church in just a few days – given the many complaints to the security forces, requesting that the building of the church cease. The number of complaints reached 132. Finally, Anba Yohanna Nuir agreed to appoint a pastor for the young parish and he chose the priest Boulos al-Hermini, pastor of the Coptic Catholic church in Naj'a Rizq, to serve alongside the Archpriest Izhaq. The Archpriest Izhaq had been dealing with exhaustion due to the complaints and requests made of him and Father Boulos to report to many government departments such as the offices of state security and the office of security in Asyut and the Police station and

others government departments like that. In the end the Lord called Father Izhaq home, and it was the Lord's strong will that he fight the good fight and finish his journey and safeguard the faith until the very last breath.

This account helps me understand why Fr. Izhaq is often described as having been “tired”

(*t'aban*). In Nabeel's oddly exact account, it had been the resistance his father faced from

the security state that wore him down. Fr. Izhaq's weakness sets the stage for Fr.

Boulos's displays of strength. Nabeel continues,

The priest Boulos al-Hermini completed the task and occupied himself with the complaints that had been sent to the Departments of Security, and it was the situation of the Departments of Security that encouraged the completion of work and the building of the church. The construction of the new church started and work continued for some years until it was finished in year 1971. In year 1972 miracles appeared in the church of Saint George in al-'Aziya in the healing of those sickened and wounded by evil spirits, and from this event the *mazar* took its place in the church, starting on August 22 and going until September 5. Visitors from all corners would come to it, seeking blessing and healing from illnesses.

Much of this is familiar to me. I thank Nabeel and tell him I will read the rest on my own. He

gives me a copy to keep. Nabeel has a box full of these booklets. They had been made to

commemorate the forty-day anniversary of Fr. Boulos's death. Many people from the town had

been in attendance for that memorial liturgy, as had church and state dignitaries from Asyut and

other nearby towns. This short biography – a hybrid account of piety, local lore, and bureaucratic

jargon – is written with a broad audience in mind.

We continue to talk, and Nabeel brings up the story of the “raising of the loudspeakers.”

It is not included in the booklet, but it is the one story that people are most eager to share about

Fr. Boulos. Nabeel tells me to get a notepad and write the story down. It belongs in my research.

Early in Father Boulos's time, on or around 1969, he rented a set of speakers from the Jahdam mosque and rigged them at the top of the church steeple. The occasion was a feast day, either Christmas or the celebration of Saint George. Father Boulos broadcast the service and the Orthodox priests in town called the police to complain. An officer arrived to consult with Shaykh Raf'at, who called for Father Izhaq to come over to mediate the situation. Father Izhaq says that the loudspeakers can't be turned off because

Father Boulos is a man of al-‘Aziya and is doing prayer [*zikir*]. The mayor was then brought over, who cursed the Orthodox priests for having registered the complaint. A delegation was formed to approach Father Boulos.

I know from other Catholics that the conflict over the loudspeakers began with Orthodox complaints. But I have never heard such a concise telling of the story. It inhabits another style of narration, one that reflects the tension between Catholics and Orthodox, as well as the support the Duraba mayor gave to Fr. Boulos early on. These topics continue to animate local politics. Yet a story like this, though widely known, is unfit for print.

Nabeel continues by recounting an encounter between Fr. Boulos and the policeman who climbed the steeple to retrieve the loudspeakers. Fr. Boulos, Nabeel says, taunted the policeman.

“Go on ahead, go inside!”

So the policeman went up; he was a pathetic man.

“Go up, you. Go inside!”

The ladder fell down, and he was taken out. He cried, wept. That policeman, he had faith in [*kan biyashaffa fi*] Saint George. The man who tried to take down the loudspeakers trusted in him! He said, “forgive me, Saint George!”

Nabeel gauges my reaction. He is smiling, and I smile back. “No way,” I respond. It seems this kind of encounter, where a policeman is overpowered by St. George – who is himself doing Fr. Boulos’s bidding – would be tough to print as well. But Nabeel knows I am interested in studying his town. I should know this story.

Nabeel returns to the booklet. He shows me the copy of a photograph that had been included in its pages. It is an image of Fr. Boulos seated next to several members of what Nabeel had referred to as “the Departments of Security.” Others have mentioned this photograph to me. “Have you seen the picture of Fr. Boulos with the police officers?” It seems this picture is visible proof of Fr. Boulos’s dominance over members of the security state. In it Fr. Boulos speaks, the others listen. When Nabeel points out the picture, I am disappointed. I had expected a



Fig. 3.1 Father Boulos, dressed in black, seated with officers from state security agencies.

more dramatic scene. What I see is instead a rather mundane gathering. The men are not cowed by Fr. Boulos. They are just staring off in the distance. When I look at Fr. Boulos, I perceive the strength for which he is known. When I look at the men around him, it is like he is not even there.

Inscribed into the structure of these histories, and into the photograph itself, are boundaries. The textual history is packaged for general consumption, but the oral history reflects the lines residents draw between their town and those beyond. These boundaries are important because they intersect with Fr. Boulos's persona, his memory, and his charisma. To recognize the significance of the loudspeaker story is to recognize these boundaries, and to see oneself as standing on one side, not the other. Over time I would return to this photograph, and over time I began to see things I did not appreciate before: the poise of his body, the commanding motion of

his arm, his intense gaze. In showing me this picture, Nabeel was trying to integrate me into his world.

The people of al-‘Aziya are not the only ones invested in boundaries and frontiers. As with all places in Egypt, the security state has great interest in defining and securing perimeters – especially when it comes to protecting and monitoring the country’s Coptic minority. It is not a coincidence that men from the security state are captured in this picture. They represent not only the world beyond the town. They are competitors in a contest over how the limits of the town might be defined, and who is able to exercise authority within them. The photograph is evidence of who is superior.

Stories about Fr. Boulos overlap with stories of the church founding. It had been hard for me to recognize this connection since the two kinds of narratives are not told at the same time. Hanna Anis, for instance, had little to say about Fr. Boulos, and Nabeel was not eager to talk about his father – so important to the Catholic church’s arrival – when discussing Fr. Boulos. But the difference between these two kinds of narrative is not just one of personalities and local politics. The founding of churches, as we have seen, involves the creation of a field of action, “a legitimate *theater* for practical *actions*” (de Certeau 1984:125). It is within this social arena that churches arrive, interact, and produce miracles. Even the Apostolic church, which through a history of revivals made its spatial footprint consummate with the town, is still contained within the town itself. The denominational pluralism found in al-‘Aziya is shaped by its local enclosure.

With these stories of Fr. Boulos, the world beyond al-‘Aziya breaks through. The complaints issued by the security state cause Fr. Izhaq to step down and Fr. Boulos to become pastor. It is the rental of loudspeakers from a mosque in a neighboring town that instigates the conflict between Fr. Boulos and an Orthodox priest in town. This conflict in turn sets the stage

for the encounter with St. George. In writing about the apparitions of the Virgin at Zeitoun, Angie Heo (2018b:123) shows how, at least on the national stage, Muslim eyewitnesses provide a valued source of objectivity for Copts seeking to demonstrate a miracle's veracity. A similar dynamic might be at work here. Nabeel's account makes the peculiar claim that the policeman "had faith" (*kan biyashaffa fi*) in St. George, a phrase that presents the policeman as a hopeful recipient of St. George's intercession. Nevertheless, the theatrics of this encounter are not those of Zeitoun. We can note that St. George is never actually seen – it is the policeman's reaction that indicates his presence. More importantly, the focus of the story is Fr. Boulos, who despite objections both within and beyond the town, has managed to rig the church steeple with loudspeakers. This miracle establishes the jurisdiction of Fr. Boulos and St. George, the two united in a tight bond. It is a kind of "spiritual genealogy" that is common among saints and holy people in the Coptic tradition, and which echoes similar forms of "sacred lineages" in Islam (Geertz 1968:49).¹ Often in these stories of Fr. Boulos, there is a sense of shared agency with St. George. In al-'Aziya, one cannot be understood apart from the other.

Later I was told I should transcribe another story about Fr. Boulos. It also trafficked in the miraculous, but it was one I had never heard before. It was told to me by a middle-aged man of the Duraba clan, and it was about his father. The man recounted that his father had been very upset over Fr. Boulos's arrival into town. At that time, many of the Duraba were still Orthodox, and this man's father had resolved to put an end to the upstart Catholic community. One evening he saw Fr. Boulos walking alone on the outskirts of town. He took out his pistol and shot Fr. Boulos several times. To his amazement, Fr. Boulos kept walking down the dark alley. My host explained that this experience had made his father join the Catholic church, and other Duraba households became Catholic thereafter. The Duraba are confident in their superiority over other

clans in town, so it makes sense that they might tell a story no other clan could possibly tell, much less celebrate. In both this story and the story of the loudspeakers, the miraculous and the violent occur side-by-side. Both establish the dominance of Fr. Boulos and St. George, and both occur in conspicuous places: one in the heart of town, the other at its periphery. These are founding stories of a different sort.

These stories that bind Fr. Boulos to the town through the violent and the miraculous provide a framework to interpret his moral character. When people in al-‘Aziya describe Fr. Boulos, they alternate between these two points of view. I would hear that Fr. Boulos was “forceful” (*shadid*) and “strong” (*qawi*). He also had “strong faith” (*iman qawi*), and it was “by his faith” (*bi-imanu*) that he performed miracles. For some there was no tension in these two assemblages of moral character.

For others, though, the two did not go easily together. Fr. Boulos was known to carry a walking stick wherever he went, and he would hit children if they misbehaved. There was even talk that Fr. Boulos kept a revolver holstered under his black cassock. Fr. Boulos would smoke behind closed doors; men even offered me cigarettes despite knowing full well that, at least in Upper Egypt, priests should never smoke. The same was true with alcohol. Fr. Boulos’s swagger fits with the patriarchal culture of Upper Egypt, even if it is strangely embodied in a priest. Still, no one, including other priests, ever called Fr. Boulos a hypocrite. I puzzled over this fact. The hypocrisy of the clergy is a topic that does come up in conversation, especially among priests themselves. Yet I never heard an ill word spoken of Fr. Boulos.

If Fr. Boulos embodied the virtues of an Upper Egyptian male, he also displayed the power of faith. The miracles I heard about always took place during the *mazar* for St. George, and especially the procession, or *dura*, on the last day. During this great celebration, he would

patrol the crowd, using his walking stick to keep people in line. Some would seek him out for prayers of healing. One miracle involved Fr. Boulos commanding a crippled woman from another town to get up and walk – a story with uncanny, even suspicious parallels to several miracle accounts in the Gospels. Prayer cards that hang in local houses bear his image alongside the title “Fr. Boulos, lion of the priesthood, shaykh of the priests,” and the *mazar* and *dura* capture the height of both his strength and the power of his faith. Significantly, these events demarcate the town. In the early days of the *dura*, residents would walk the town’s perimeter, singing and carrying the icon of St. George. It was an activity that manifested the power of Fr. Boulos and St. George. In the procession, carried out each year, an area was also mapped out within which the priest and the saint held dominion, be it over state officials, rival churches, or feuding families.

The creation of this field of action or jurisdiction, it is important to note, is only possible because the town is almost entirely Christian. As previously noted, these processions occur elsewhere within the walls of churches or monasteries, and saintly apparitions tend to be witnessed above or within churches or homes. In moving the *dura* out of the church, and in bringing Muslim policemen into an encounter with the miraculous, Fr. Boulos helped blur the boundary between church and town. In doing so, he also embraced a hybrid set of moral attributes, one associated with Upper Egyptian masculinity, the other with a man of faith.

Center, Periphery, Charisma

Because of his powerful faith and ability to work miracles, Fr. Boulos can be placed alongside other holy men and women who populate the Coptic imagination.² A major theme in the cult of such figures is the pursuit of humility, typically framed as a struggle against “vainglory” (*majd al-batl*). For people who work miracles, this desire to remain humble presents

a challenge, as the power of faith that flows from their humility itself generates fame and recognition. These saintly people have to present themselves to others in ways that do not augment their visibility or stature. Angie Heo calls this dynamic “mystical publicity.” It is “a communicative genre” characterized by a paradox: “To be visible, holiness must be invisible; to be revealed, holiness must be hidden” (2018b:212).

Heo develops this idea of “mystical publicity” through the framework of face-to-face interaction, drawing heavily on the work of Erving Goffman (1974[1955]). This approach respects the association of holiness with detachment from worldly things as found throughout Coptic Christianity. It also flows from the sectarian politics of contemporary Egypt, where public displays of Christian piety require discretion. The case of Fr. Boulos complicates this framework. Heo has in mind a rather select group of saints and holy people, none of whom combine the “strength” and “power of faith” found in Fr. Boulos. More importantly, Fr. Boulos’s relationship to the town of al-‘Aziya raises a question that Heo does not fully address, but which remains critical for the study of religious authority. In a world of saints defined by “mystical publicity,” where does a holy man like Fr. Boulos belong? If “mystical publicity” is about both presence and absence, how does one understand the relationship between religious authority and place? How does the disruptive example of Fr. Boulos help us think through these models of holiness and religious power?

At this point, I would like to ask the reader’s patience as I go on a slight digression. In order to better understand the place of Fr. Boulos within this Coptic world of saints and holy people, I want to draw a comparison between two saintly men that are well-known and revered by Copts in Upper Egypt. This comparison is necessarily simple, and will draw partially on the rich ethnographic work Angie Heo has undertaken on the Coptic cult of saints. What I aim to do

is tease out a thread that she leaves relatively undeveloped: the relationship between saint, place, and charisma.

The first of the two men is ‘Abd al-Masih (1892-1963), a twentieth-century monk and miracle worker who lived in a “cave” behind an Orthodox church in the Upper Egyptian village of Manahra. Heo presents ‘Abd al-Masih as the paragon of a holy man who struggled against vainglory. One of her Coptic interlocutors explains his detachment from the world in these terms: “After ‘Abd al-Masih died, everything appeared. In that way, he went to heaven which was what he aimed to do. But the world, and the earth, he didn’t want any of it” (210). Given that some of his miracles were performed for Muslims from the surrounding area, Heo argues that this desire to remain unnoticed stems in part from “Christian and Muslim contests over religious authority in the villages” (210). In fact, ‘Abd al-Masih seemed to pursue his own invisibility, what Heo calls “dissimulative behavior” (211). The place that ‘Abd al-Masih inhabited, in other words, reflected his broader struggle to break free from vainglory and the world.

‘Abd al-Masih’s unusual dwelling – his “cave” – was in actuality a small room made of packed earth. It is now a pilgrimage site, and hanging nearby are his clothes and other possessions. ‘Abd al-Masih had left his monastery in search of a more austere lifestyle, one that might replicate the asceticism of Egypt’s early desert fathers. What he created, then, reflects this desire to inhabit as little space as possible: a “non-place,” if you will. In an essay on the “madmen of Christ” – holy men and women who have eschewed both secular and monastic life – de Certeau labors in his writing “to circumscribe the vanishing point through which [these men and women] turn us toward an absolute” (1992:32). In doing so, de Certeau draws a connection between the body of the holy “madman,” the place where he dwells, and the crowd that surrounds him. What aligns these different elements is a form of ascetical “hospitality” where

In the prodigality of his body and time, lost among the markets or the kitchen, he takes upon himself what the other lacks...He offers a space within himself to that plural, invading, and silent Other. His body is thus turned inside out and disseminated by the exercise that makes him into a silent abode and a transferential guarantor for the unanalyzable and insane side of the other. (46-7)

This evocative passage may not explain much about ‘Abd al-Masih’s life or the cult that has formed around him after his death. But it does raise the question of how, if at all, his earthly abode relates to the “abode” of his body. Put more simply, de Certeau helps us ask whether, in the pursuit of “non-place,” one’s abode collapses into one’s body. Do the two become the same?

One might even extend this line of thought one step further. ‘Abd al-Masih’s “cave” is not just a non-place, but an imitation of a non-place. It is a man-made cave, not a natural one, just as his tattered garments are imitations of nudity, but not the same thing. These assemblages are as close as one might get to non-place before one simply ceases to exist. However, such material signs of absence are, as de Certeau notes, in dialogue with a “plural, invading, and silent Other.” He might have existed at the periphery of society, but this dwelling is accessible to the crowd. ‘Abd al-Masih employed creative means to both minister and hide, and a similar rhythm is at work after his death.³ Although pilgrims can visit his cave and take *baraka* from his clothing, his remains are located elsewhere.

I would like to compare the cult of ‘Abd al-Masih to another highly revered figure in the modern Orthodox Church, someone whose memory is more proximate to al-‘Aziya. Anba Mikhail (1921-2014) was the Orthodox Metropolitan of Asyut for sixty-eight years.⁴ People would speak of him often during my fieldwork. When people would talk about Anba Mikhail, they tended to mention his strong, even stubborn style of leadership, and his pastoral care of the Christians in Asyut. There were stories about him confronting the Muslim mayor of Asyut. Later I would come to learn that Anba Mikhail had run afoul of Pope Shenouda III, who had labeled

Anba Mikhail a traitor for once sending President Sadat a telegram of support. It is even alleged the Pope, in retaliation, made sure Anba Mikhail remained in Asyut for the rest of his career (Hasan 2003:114). Over time he became known for having the gift of clairvoyance, and at the onset of 2013, he declared it a “year of the Lord.”⁵ Several months later, the Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi would be deposed by the military. People occasionally referred to him as the “lion of Asyut,” a sobriquet that calls to mind Fr. Boulos. I also noticed that the two men shared a peculiar physical resemblance. Both had even sported the same kind of tinted eyeglass.

Being a Metropolitan, it is hard to speak in any straightforward way about the places Anba Mikhail inhabited. The diocese of Asyut was the domain over which he exercised his ecclesial authority. Yet the place that most clearly bears his legacy is the monastery complex at Durunka, which we first encountered in the opening pages of this study. More formally known as The Convent of the Holy Virgin, the site had been poorly preserved when Anba Mikhail first assumed office. Over time he transformed the collection of ruins into one of the largest Coptic pilgrimage sites in Egypt. Roughly two and a half million pilgrims now travel to Asyut every August to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Virgin. Like at the *mazar* for St. George, the focal point of the celebration at Durunka is a procession that takes place during the final day.⁶ Anba Mikhail’s association with Durunka and the Virgin Mary was further cemented when the Virgin appeared over various churches in the Asyut diocese from 2000 to 2006. Upon his death, the great Metropolitan was buried in a large wooden tomb in the cave church at Durunka, a stone’s throw away from the shrine of the Virgin’s house.

When I visited Durunka one cool November morning, there were only a few people moving in and out of the church. I had traveled with several Missionaries of Charity, the order founded by Mother Theresa of Calcutta that has several houses in Egypt, including Asyut. When

we approached Anba Mikhail's tomb, one of the sisters – a young Polish woman with a sharp wit – explained to me in a low voice that the Metropolitan had been a thorn in the side of Catholics, though he had softened in his later years. “You can pray *to* him,” she whispered to me, “or you can pray *for* him.” As she said this, I watched an Egyptian from their order, one who had been raised Orthodox, go forward, close her eyes, and place her hand on the plastic sheet that covers the tomb. Several other people were doing the same. All around the tomb were display cases that held the regalia the Metropolitan had used during his ministry.

Upon leaving the monastery complex, our driver – himself a devout Orthodox Copt – impressed upon me the scope of the operation at Durunka. Through its many guest rooms, he explained, the monastery generates eighty million Egyptian pounds in revenue annually (a little more than 5.1 million dollars). There is also a revenue stream from the thousand acres of agricultural land the monastery owns in New Asyut, a recently constructed satellite city to the east of Asyut. These monies go into a general fund, which the bishop can use for construction projects, aid to the poor, and funding for the hospital and clinics the Orthodox Church supports throughout the diocese. He added that there is a drug rehab program where the men in recovery work in the fields, attend the Divine Liturgy, and receive support from the clergy. Given how there are no monks who live permanently at Durunka (there are only a few nuns who help care for the place), the complex is less a monastery than an economic, political, and spiritual powerhouse.

In holding up ‘Abd al-Masih alongside Anba Mikhail, I should emphasize that this comparison is abstract, the juxtaposition perhaps a little too neat. Still, they both reveal something important about the way Coptic holy men and women use place to cultivate and exercise religious authority. At the risk of stating the obvious, ‘Abd al-Masih practiced a lifestyle

of self-abnegation, inhabiting the most minimal of places, whereas Anba Mikhail created a Coptic domain that could push back both against the Orthodox Pope and the Egyptian state. This inversion carried over into death as well. People can take *baraka* from Anba Mikhail's tomb, but 'Abd al-Masih's cave does not contain his body. At the same time, there is a common thread running between these two cults and their respective sites of pilgrimage. Both occupied spaces at the periphery of society: 'Abd al-Masih in a spiritual sense, and Anba Mikhail in a geographical sense. In a world where Copts struggle to claim space and make it their own, these two men present what might be the only two viable solutions: the abnegation of self and dwelling, and the creation of a peripheral domain that reflects – yet remains distinct from – the broader society it borders.

The religious authority these men exercised drew upon power that extended beyond their clerical status. They could heal, see the future, converse with other saints, and do other extraordinary things. Charisma is one way of accounting for this kind of ecstatic, norms-breaking style of religious authority. In Max Weber's (1978) famous account, charisma is decidedly anti-institutional in character. It has disruptive potential, and, in a theoretical sense, it is peripheral to core religious institutions. But can it accumulate in place, as in the case of these two holy men? Edward Shils (1972:93), in an idiosyncratic reading of Weber, mapped an idea of charisma onto a spatial "center," something he describes as "a phenomenon of the realm of values and beliefs" and a zone that "partakes of the nature of the sacred." As Martin Riesebrodt (1999:4) shows in a helpful essay on the subject, Shils develops this framework by also drawing upon Durkheim's understanding of the sacred.⁷ Such a hybrid view of spatialized charisma does not easily accommodate a case like Egyptian Christians, since, at least in terms of Shils's framework, religious minorities will have a complicated relationship to a social center where charisma is

thought to accumulate. For people like Copts, the gathering of charisma would likely have to occur at the peripheries, in “centers” that are minority-controlled at the edge of society. Framed in such a way, the cave of ‘Abd al-Masih and the monastery complex of Anba Mikhail demonstrate similar properties. In staging the exercise of religious authority of holy men during their lives, and providing a shrine for their memory in their death, these places are hubs of *baraka*, yet ones that exist at the social and geographical peripheries of everyday life.

+ + + + + + + + + +

Through this extended digression, I have tried to establish a framework for thinking about the relationship between place, religious authority, and charisma. The examples of ‘Abd al-Masih and Anba Mikhail show how two routes might lead to the same end, that the abnegation of place and the creation of a large complex might both platform the exercise of charismatic authority and serve as a source of *baraka* upon the death of a holy man or woman.⁸ They also clarify why an exceptional place like al-‘Aziya, as well as the life of Fr. Boulos, might scramble this distinction. Consider again the world in which Fr. Boulos lived and performed his miracles. Like Anba Mikhail, Fr. Boulos oversaw the formation of a site of pilgrimage, which became an important economic institution for the town. He engaged forcefully with the political forces around him, both in terms of the police and the Duraba. Like ‘Abd al-Masih, his miracles were executed through the power of St. George, such that the most celebrated miracle – the confrontation over the loudspeakers – occurred without the direct intervention of Fr. Boulos, and in a place impossible to witness. What is different is that Anba Mikhail and ‘Abd al-Masih, in their own entirely different ways, still lived, ministered, and performed their mighty deeds in majority-Muslim settings. Although their “centers” existed on the periphery of Egyptian society, to use Shils’s framework, they exercised their authority and charisma within the broader world.

This reversal might be an important step in this complex dance, one that moves between a hub that accumulates charisma, and a world beyond where, in de Certeau's phrase, "the crowd" awaits and with whom these holy men engage.

It is a simple distinction, to be sure, but one that clarifies the unusual situation of al-'Aziya and its own holy man, Fr. Boulos. Here centers and peripheries are harder to distinguish. What is the center to which al-'Aziya is the periphery? Not a majority-Muslim town, nor a monastery, it is caught somewhere in-between. More than a parish priest but less than a bishop, Fr. Boulos also defies easy categorization. Where is his center, and who is the crowd to whom he goes out? This peculiar arrangement it seems should lead to new kinds of religious imaginaries, even fresh expressions of religious authority. And there is evidence that it does.

Consider the cult of St. George as it is practiced and interpreted in al-'Aziya. St. George is widely celebrated by Copts as the "prince of the martyrs," and he is a favorite saint of Muslims and Christians in many contexts throughout the Middle East (Wissa 2012; Couroucli 2012). St. George is typically held up as an example of holy perseverance in the face of suffering and death. A soldier in the Roman army, he had been decapitated for his Christian faith. He is always depicted on horseback, slaying a dragon often associated with Diocletian, the Roman Emperor who had ordered his death. Despite the violent imagery inherent in his icon, he is remembered principally as a martyr, not a warrior. Prayer cards with his image that were distributed in al-'Aziya during my fieldwork bore a quotation from the Book of Revelation (2:10): "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Yet this canonical framing occasionally took on a more violent and aggressive form when people in the town spoke of St. George. Talk about miracles was often lively, layered with boastful claims and moments of hesitation. To give a sense of how a saint like St. George might

be discussed, I have reproduced a few paragraphs from my fieldnotes, taken in March 2017, several months into my fieldwork. As usual, I am in the sitting room of a family's home. Having heard my voice, several neighbors, both men and women, have come over to visit with me. After about fifteen minutes,

We got on the topic of miracles. Umm Sabri was more animated. I could tell Umm Mina's husband harbored some skepticism. Several miracles were discussed.

First, the miracle of 2002. There was unrest at this time because of the Iraq war. Muslims, who were already *muda'iq* – “annoyed” – because in Jahdam (the town next door) Christians were now half the town...well, there was some kind of attack, this, importantly, happened on all four sides (which Umm Sabri indicated with her hands, waving in each direction, something I saw repeated when I spoke with Umm Zahir on the same topic later that day). What happened was that Saint George appeared in each corner with a sword (Umm Sabri described it as a “weapon”). This protected the town from attack. Umm Mina was silent during this description and she brushed it off by saying she had been very young when it happened. I asked Umm Sabri if she had seen Saint George. Yes, she said, we all saw him. She then hedged by saying that the priests had said they'd seen it, and then everyone in the town came to agree they had seen it as well. The only priest who she mentioned by name was Fr. Boulos.

Second, I mentioned that people see Saint George *yaliff al-balad* – “circumscribe the town” – every August, and Umm Sabri agreed. I asked if people see him, and he hedged. He said that “people sense his presence,” that they feel it “when they are in his homes.” Mina interrupted and showed me a picture on his cell phone. It was of a cloud with a red circle making a formation that resembled a man on a horse. While both Umm Sabir and Umm Sabri are believers in these miracles; Umm Mina once again stayed silent.

The combative posture of St. George is clear. He appears not primarily as a martyr, but as a warrior, ready to defend the town with violence. I had heard other stories like this. I chalked them up to old wives' tales, and younger men and women would joke about these sorts of visions. But there was a consistent logic to these narrations. St. George defends the town and marks out its perimeter. He is not only surprisingly violent. He is territorial.

The fact that this depiction of St. George is not above questioning actually makes it richer and more interesting. In these notes, there is disagreement over which interpretative template should be used to understand this alleged miracle. Should it be set in regional terms, such as the

tension over the Gulf War? Or is this about local priests, and the work of Fr. Boulos? Or an illustration of the objective authority of mass-mediated representations? Moving at different scales, these frameworks suggest the different boundaries that St. George represents and perhaps defends. Such is the issue of defining frontiers; what de Certeau (1984:127) calls “a middle place, composed of interactions and inter-views.” To mark a frontier is to indicate both what it contains, and what lies beyond, and this multitude of perspectives hints at how St. George, as an object of shared devotion, helps channel discussion over how such frontiers should be understood.

These themes are also found in the story of “the raising of the loudspeakers.” In knocking down the policeman, St. George defends the integrity of the town. Or so it seems. At closer look, other perspectives seem possible. This aggression occurred at the Catholic church while the Orthodox looked on. The town shaykhs and heads of families were present, as was Shaykh Raf‘at, the local Muslim cleric. Whatever they witnessed, they are now part of the story, with this saint providing a unifying point of reference. This transcendence of local difference, achieved both by St. George and by Fr. Boulos, legitimated the priest’s leadership and established the domain in which he moved, worked miracles, and built up the Catholic church. But it is a strange domain, one that defies the kinds of places inhabited and built up by other saintly men and women. The aggression and boundary patrolling associated with St. George is part of the story. There is a certain innocence to these movements, and they reflect a time when threats of violence, and concerns over the police, were not as immediate. Much would change after Fr. Boulos’s death.

The Death of Father Boulos

During my preliminary fieldwork, I met with Fr. Boulos. Fr. Bishoy had invited me to join him on a visit to see Fr. Boulos, so we set off together for the *siraya*. We passed through the iron gate upon arrival, walked up the wooden stairs, and sat alongside Fr. Boulos on the veranda, where he was smoking a cigarette and talking loudly on phone. When Fr. Bishoy introduced me, Fr. Boulos nodded and grunted *ahlan!* Otherwise he took little interest in me. Fr. Bishoy had come to discuss business. I sat quietly and enjoyed the cool breeze as they carried on at length about something I did not understand.

Fr. Boulos and Fr. Bishoy had a complicated relationship. Even at these early stages I could sense the tension. When we left the *siraya*, I asked Fr. Bishoy about it. “Fr. Boulos is getting old,” he replied. He then complained that there was no oversight of the finances of major parish activities like the *mazar*. “There’s a lot of money that comes in during the *mazar*,” he continued. “No one knows where it all goes.” Fr. Bishoy also objected to Fr. Boulos’s conservatism. Fr. Bishoy had loved his time in Canada. He was eager to practice his English with me, and he explained that he had returned to Egypt after eleven years a new man. “Had I not gone to Canada,” he told me, “I would still be stubborn like these other priests.” Fr. Bishoy was a reformer and a modernizer. While Fr. Boulos chanted the Divine Liturgy in Coptic, Fr. Bishoy did so in Arabic. He had great plans for the Catholic community in his hometown.

In the seventeen month interlude before I returned to al-‘Aziya, Fr. Boulos passed away. Photo montages and videos were posted on Facebook accounts, and the funeral and the memorial “forty-day” liturgy were celebrated, all of which I tracked online. When I returned to al-‘Aziya, people urged me to watch the footage of the actual funeral. Images of Fr. Boulos seemed everywhere. There was a life-size cardboard image of him in the meeting hall next to the St.

George church. The calendars and prayer cards that had been distributed at his “forty-day” liturgy were on the walls of many homes. One clip that some of the young men from the parish were eager to show me was that of a poem that Shaykh Raf‘at had recited. For these young men from the parish, many who appreciated poetry and liked to recite it themselves, Shaykh Raf‘at was a legendary figure. A leader from one of the town’s Muslim families, Shaykh Raf‘at served the town’s only mosque, which is tucked away behind the courtyard of the St. George church. His skill in the Arabic language was the basis for his renown. He was the most eloquent speaker in town. The young poets insisted that I listen to him and absorb the power of his verse.

The video of the shaykh’s funeral oratory was grainy, having been shot with a cellphone. The scene is the town’s heavily populated Christian cemetery (the relatively open Muslim cemetery being in another part of town). Against the backdrop of tombs, several dozen men are gathered around a wooden casket resting on the ground. The Catholic bishop of Asyut is standing over the casket, and next to him is the shaykh. Donning the distinctive red and white cap of an al-‘Azhar graduate, and holding a small piece of white paper in one hand, the shaykh speaks loudly, his other hand rising and falling in accord with the rhythm of his voice.

How often your voice sang out “Glory to God in the Highest”
daily you opened the closed gates of heaven,
and the saints clamored for you.

Now they are with you, and repentance is yours, O Godly one,
O archpriest, O faithful archpriest.
Your name and picture are in all the homes of al-‘Aziya,
yet in the hearts of the fathers, al-‘Aziya weeps without end.

O righteous archpriest, when you would break for us the body,
your journey would be turned back by heaven.

Nonetheless, the Lord has now prepared for you a small tomb
yet great is your honor, for the day you entered it, you entered it like heaven.

The shaykh barely makes it to the end. He collapses into tears, and shouts of *Allah!* and *ya rabb!* (“oh Lord!”) mark the end of his oration.

No one was particularly interested in discussing the content of the shaykh’s discourse. It was held simply as a masterclass in rhetoric, a stirring homage from one great man to another. At the same time, the structure of the oratory reflects the framework by which so much of the town and its landscape is discussed. At the center is Fr. Boulos, but he has also been rhetorically divided and distributed, like the eucharist, throughout the community. The opening strophe invokes the Divine Liturgy, which, being amplified by the church loudspeakers, the shaykh could easily hear from his house. The church is linked to the voices of the saints in heaven, who answer his cries. This connection between Fr. Boulos and the divine is extended to the homes of the faithful. His name and picture is distributed throughout the town – only a partial solace for the sorrow felt by all. In the third strophe, the shaykh speaks of “the body” (*al-jasad*). Perhaps this is a reference to the eucharistic prayer and the breaking of the host, but it could also refer to the breaking of Fr. Boulos’s own body. And finally, there is mention of Fr. Boulos’s tomb, which seems to exist both on earth and in heaven.

The oratory not only distributes and merges Fr. Boulos with the town. It also makes use of the trope of collapsing borders and frontiers. In his development of “topo-analysis,” Bachelard (1964:215-6) reminds us that “inside and outside...can no longer be taken in the simple reciprocity,” adding, “at the slightest touch, asymmetry appears.” Similar asymmetry cuts through the shaykh’s imagery. The barriers that separate hearts, homes, and the realm of the saint from that which is beyond are collapsed or reversed. The interior of the home is exteriorized through a comparison with the weeping of men’s hearts. Heaven, separated by closed gates, is entered through the interior of the tomb. Shaykh Raf‘at knew Fr. Boulos as well as anyone in the

town. By all accounts they were close friends; his weeping, at least on film, seems genuine. This description of shifting across frontiers, of defining limits while also transcending them, also recall the stories told of St. George, of which the shaykh is familiar. In fact, he was even present at the confrontation over the loudspeaker. Fr. Boulos's voice, broadcast to the edge of town, had the effect of setting a frontier as well: a soundscape that encompassed the entire town.

Could anyone among the Catholic clergy have given a similar oratory? Both the Catholic bishop and the other priests spoke at Fr. Boulos's funeral, but the videotape had been edited to only include the shaykh's speech. When I posed this question to my poetry-loving friends, they told me very clearly: "No." No one can speak as "eloquently" as Shaykh Raf'at. Still, I wondered if the shaykh, in standing outside the Coptic tradition, could speak in ways unavailable to the others. In merging Fr. Boulos with the town he served, the shaykh also anchored Fr. Boulos to this particular place, raising the possibility of a cult starting in his memory. Coptic Catholic and Orthodox priests are typically buried in family mausoleums. Only important prelates such as Anba Mikhail or Pope Shenouda III take steps to prepare tombs for themselves. But Fr. Boulos had also prepared a tomb for himself, and it is toward this monument that the shaykh's oration builds. Fr. Boulos's tomb is made of poured concrete. It occupies a space next to the old altar in the *asari* church of St. George. This is the room that also holds relics of several saints, including those of St. George. This would inevitably become a site where Fr. Boulos could be remembered and called upon for intercession. There is no way of knowing if the shaykh intended to promote this cult. But it is hard to imagine the bishop or priests in the town encouraging such an idea.

Although I had visited the *asari* church many times, I did not learn about the tomb until I spoke with a young pharmacist in the town. He and his wife had invited me to their house for lunch. Though both had helped found the new Baptist community, the pharmacist's wife

remained very close with Fr. Boulos. He had baptized her and had helped cover some of her living expenses when she was at university. When she left to wash the dishes, her husband leaned forward and told me he had a topic for me to research. “Why did Fr. Boulos’s family take his body away?” He raised his eyebrows. “He built a tomb, he wanted to be buried here, and the people of al-‘Aziya wanted it...why was his body taken?” When I asked various residents this question, I got the same answer. After Fr. Boulos’s death, I would hear, relatives from his hometown had come and taken his body away. It was upsetting – “we were very angry” (*ehna za’alna*) – but there was nothing the people of al-‘Aziya could do.

It was only from some Catholic priests I knew that my questions about Fr. Boulos’s tomb were met with interest and speculation. Fr. Agnatius, who delighted in helping me with such puzzles, answered my inquiries with a story of his own. He told me that after Fr. Boulos had died, two priests – both from the same family, but from a different town – moved into the *siraya*. Fr. Agnatius harbored a deep-seated suspicion for bishops and priests in power, and one of these priests was well connected. Fr. Agnatius claimed that both had stripped the place clean of valuables, leaving everything else behind. He added that Fr. Boulos had amassed considerable wealth, a view shared by others as well. Some residents, in a different spin on the same kind of story, believed that it had been robbers who broke in and stole the money gathered from the *mazar*, along with souvenirs from abroad and pharaonic antiquities.

The place, then, was the object of much speculation. Although the *siraya* remained property of the Catholic diocese, it took over a year for me to gain access. My attempts at asking the priests who had replaced Fr. Boulos to show me the *siraya* were always met with a *bi-izan allah* (“with God’s permission”) and little else. Others cautioned that, were I to get access, I should not go alone. Finally I asked a young man from the Duraba to intercede on my behalf, and

he gave a forceful argument to the pastor on why such a visit would be critical for my research. In no time he had the key, and we walked over to the front gate together.

When we entered the complex, I could see empty bottles and plastic-and-foil containers for Tramadol tablets scattered throughout the small garden.⁹ The stairs up to the veranda were in severe disrepair – far worse than I remembered them. The interior of the house was covered in a thick layer of sand and dust. Papers were scattered everywhere, and some drawers had been pulled out and overturned. “The robbers,” my guide remarked. We went room by room. When I flipped through some books containing financial ledgers, he smiled as said, “the *mazar*.” In the bedroom, he picked up Fr. Boulos’s cassock, with its many buttons and distinctive red pluming. He brushed off the dust, held it for a second, then returned it to the dresser. In the bedroom were Fr. Boulos’s iconic eyeglasses, his prayer books and rosary, and his clerical cap. My guide told me to leave everything as is.

An empty tomb, an abandoned house full of potential objects of devotion – the priests in the St. George Catholic church faced a dilemma with no easy answers. To honor Fr. Boulos’s memory by displaying his possessions would only create the kind of shrine established at Durunka. To remove everything from the *siraya* and use it as a guest house would likely upset the people of the town. These were goods that, in short, had been removed from circulation. Still, they had not achieved the status of treasure (Shryock 2019b). No one, including my guide, had attempted to make off with Fr. Boulos’s goods. The real treasure had already disappeared, being now in the hands of priests, or robbers, or both. The day after I visited the *siraya*, I was asked by a family who had hosted Fr. Boulos every day for breakfast, coffee, and a morning cigarette. “What did you find there?” they asked, eagerly. “Lots of his things, all covered in dust.” The

mother and father had little to say in reply. They looked disappointed, as if they had hoped I would say something different. What that would have been, I do not know.

Shifting Boundaries

While Fr. Bishoy had been working in Canada, he had his brothers build him a house on the western edge of town. Everyone referred to it as his “villa,” just as Fr. Boulos had lived in the *siraya*, not a “house.” This distinction is not trivial. The villa and *siraya* are not attached to families. They are not built, like other homes, to have floors added above. They belong to priests and contain a logic of their own – one that Fr. Bishoy had copied from Fr. Boulos’s *siraya*.¹⁰ Both buildings have long hallways that lead to guest rooms. Fr. Bishoy’s villa, like the *siraya*, has a modified veranda. Both have gardens in front, with high walls that enclose the complex and keep it hidden from view.

With Fr. Boulos, everyone had a sense of what occurred on the other side of the *siraya* walls. Snuggled among various homes, some of which have balconies that look over into the garden below, there would have been constant observation of who was coming and going. Fr. Bishoy’s villa did not permit the same kind of observation. Isolated from other homes, he had no neighbors and actually lived off the grid. He kept a generator, and his brothers would come every couple of days to deliver water. Fr. Bishoy knew the town was growing westward, and he wanted a foothold in what, in five or ten years, would be the heart of a large neighborhood. But for the moment it was a remote place, somewhat dangerous, and ripe for speculation.

The problem was not just that Fr. Bishoy’s villa was exposed to thieves, though it was. I have already mentioned that a thief broke into his house my first day in the field. There were other break-ins, and people started to talk. Some suspected that Fr. Bishoy had been foolish in

using his villa as an office, allowing people to enter into the privacy of his domestic space. “Why would you bring people in your own home like that?” one man asked me, visibly confused. He was convinced that some of these guests had been scoping out the place. The seclusion also led to more sordid speculation, which assumed that the remote location was intended to keep certain indiscretions out of view.

This strange house was folded into rumors about money as well. Fr. Bishoy often spoke to me and others in the town about his ambitious plans for the Catholic church in al-‘Aziya. He wanted to build a clinic, establish a convent, and even open a new parish. Everyone knew that he needed a considerable amount of cash to execute these projects, and people would speculate – or declare outright – where the money was coming from. It was assumed that money was flowing in from Canada; it was also assumed, though not always announced in my presence, that I was helping deliver it. There was also talk about money coming from within the local economy, which raised the question of whether profits made in dubious industries were helping fund church projects. All of this talk cast any peripheral movements by Fr. Bishoy in a negative light. “Did you hear about the foreigner donors Fr. Bishoy brought to town?” Fr. Agnatius asked me. “He took them to look at the church at eleven at night so the construction workers would not see them.” For Fr. Agnatius, the revelation of how much money Fr. Bishoy was actually bringing in as opposed to what he reported – and gave to those who worked for him – would result in revolt.

This talk about money also signaled anxieties over the control of boundaries and frontiers. Because of the *dura*, Fr. Boulos had handled considerable amounts of money. But he worked within a closed economy. Money thrown onto the large sheet carried behind the St. George icon was visible to all, and was circulated, albeit mysteriously, within the church and among its families. The established frontiers of the town were, in this sense, both moral and

economic. Fr. Bishoy, however, was plugged into networks of exchange that extended to the horizon of the known world, and anything given him in al-‘Aziya could, theoretically, end up “there.” Many people were convinced that Fr. Bishoy took pictures of the poor and sent them to donors in Canada. I came to appreciate the reach of his connections when, after my things were stolen under his roof, Fr. Bishoy managed to locate the thief and negotiate a price for me to buy some things back. I politely declined.

Access to these broader worlds can be a source of prestige when accompanied by largesse – a way of converting wealth into a local source of blessing. Wealthy families will slaughter a water buffalo or a cow before a wedding and distribute the meat to the poor. When I asked someone why this is done, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “*baraka*.” Church tithing seems to work the same way. Fr. Agnatius, who often took the most cynical position on whatever topic we discussed, told me that families are very generous to the church. “It’s for *baraka*.” Without such displays, this access to broader worlds generates suspicion; it can even trigger attempts at seizing hoarded treasure. After a long series of attempted and successful burglaries, Fr. Bishoy abandoned his villa and moved in with his brother.

There were other ways in which Fr. Bishoy was unable to emulate the authority commanded by Fr. Boulos. A series of bombings and attacks against Copts in 2016 and 2017 resulted in more investment by the security apparatus in guarding churches and places like the Catholic bishopric in Asyut. During Christian holidays, men from al-‘Aziya even set up a perimeter, standing guard with old bolt-action rifles and keeping watch over traffic that moved along the *asfelt*. There were also plain clothed agents who had a curious codependent relationship with priests in the town. Fr. Agnatius explained that it is expected for him to answer their questions and give them a little money. That way they can “inform” him of anything he

needs to know: a vague statement I was at a loss to interpret. Fr. Bishoy seemed more connected with the security state. He coached me on what to say if I were ever questioned in the street (“I am studying culture and custom, and nothing else”). He also asked me to provide him with a list of all the visits I would make, which he claimed was asked of him by someone from the Egyptian Intelligence Service (*mukhabarat*). Fr. Bishoy might not have had a choice in whether to cooperate with the security state. But his approach was visibly different than that of Fr. Boulos, at least as told in the “loudspeaker” story.

The growing gap between the demands of boundary protection and the comportment of Fr. Boulos’s successors was made apparent on Easter Sunday 2017. Only one week earlier, bombs had gone off in two Coptic Orthodox cathedrals, one in Alexandria and the other in Tanta. The entire nation was reeling. That afternoon some of the Catholic youth had discovered two young men milling around the sanctuary of the St. George church. The youth accosted them and, in searching their wallets, discovered that they were students at al-Azhar. The youth pulled the two strangers into the street and started to beat them. The violence only stopped when the priests assigned to the St. George parish heard the commotion, rushed outside, and pulled the two Muslims into the safety of the rectory. The priests called the police, who arrived and carried the men away. Fr. Bishoy quickly issued a warning on Facebook for people not to spread rumors about what had happened, cautioning everyone to trust in the work of the police and to remain calm.

This incident happened in the exact spot where, almost fifty years earlier, the “loudspeaker” story took place. It lends itself to a revealing comparison between Fr. Boulos and Fr. Bishoy. These acts of protecting the church and engaging with the police are not only about displays of power. They are also about representation and aesthetic formations. The stories and

pictures of Fr. Boulos both reveal and hide. The actual appearance of St. George before the policeman, we might recall, was hidden from view. It was violent, but of a kind that had to be imagined. Fr. Boulos was also passive since it was St. George who protected the church. In her study of the production of performance and representation of Roma and non-Roma (“gazhje”), Alaina Lemon (2000:204) draws a distinction between the lived interaction of the two groups – of course, one that is filled with complexities and contradictions – and “an *aesthetic* of separation” that presents in film, or other forms of media, the expected style of interaction. The crossing of thresholds is a particular critical juncture at which this aesthetic should be performed and one’s identity made clear (205). The “loudspeaker” story respects certain conventions in that it demonstrates the superiority of St. George and Fr. Boulos while not laying claim to the world of actual violence (for how could a Christian claim *that* kind of superiority over a policeman?). It is superiority reassembled in a spiritual register. But with Fr. Bishoy, the violence is now real, and the stakes are higher. In this encounter, the image of Christians actually beating two Muslim youth in the street is a violation of this aesthetic that must be fixed. Yet Fr. Bishoy’s attempt at doing so – his pleas for people to trust the police, not to spread rumors, and to let the state handle this affair – allows him no room to claim spiritual superiority. He appears as having taken the side of the police in this encounter: a framing that would encompass other priests in the town as well.

The Afterlife of Father Boulos

When I attended the *mazar* and *dura* in 2017, major Coptic sites were either closed to visitors or were protected by secure perimeters. To enter Dayr Durunka, for instance, one had to produce an ID card to prove one’s Christian identity. Muslims were not allowed entrance. These state security agents would linger at the monastery gates, but they tended not to go inside the

monastery walls. A small police detail had been sent to al-‘Aziya for the two week festivities. Two metal barriers were placed on opposite sides of the road that wound through the old quarter and past the St. George church. The few policemen stationed in the town spent their days sleeping and drinking tea, and people scurried back and forth across the barrier as if there were nothing there. During the day, the town went about its business. At night, the church would start to fill, first with parents coming to watch their children perform in one of the choirs, then the young men and women who enjoyed hearing whichever visiting priest would be preaching that night. Outside the church, vendors would be selling fruit, sweets, popcorn, and cotton candy. There was a booth set up for religious tattoos. Some homes opened their doors and hosted carnival games. There was a table for gambling. Some grumbled that Fr. Boulos would never have tolerated such sinful behavior so close to the church.

A day before the fourteen-day *mazar* began, a truck stopped in front of the house where I sometimes rested during the heat of the day. A middle aged woman and a young girl got out. They unloaded some iron bars and wooden pallets, which they quickly assembled into a stand. They then brought several metal sheets inside, each filled with layers of the sticky sweets typically sold at such festivities. Both smiled at me. The father of the household told me that they had come from a neighboring village, as they do every year, to sell these sweets. Later he explained that the woman’s husband had died, and she struggled to take care of her only daughter. They were Muslims, and over time “love had grown” between them and the household. The young girl, Yasmin, had much time to kill, and our paths often crossed during the two weeks of events. While her mother would tend her goods, I would see Yasmin trail some of the residents as they entered the *asari* chapel next to the main sanctuary. Ministers from the church would be present, selling candles and prayer cards. She walked past them and imitated the people

who would rest their hands on the velvet cases containing the relics of St. George. She even reached up and touched them herself. When I saw Yasmin walk into the sanctuary one evening and sit among the women and children, I asked one of the ministers if Muslims were allowed to attend these services. He gave me a confused look – “that girl is a Muslim? – and then just shrugged.

As the day of the procession drew near, some people started to arrive from other towns. A few families had brought food and mats, and they would rest in the shade provided by a large tarp hoisted over the lot next to the St. George church. At the end of most nights, there would be a procession of the icon of St. George within the church. One of the priests would proceed with a thurible, the other would carry the icon, and a group of eight or ten young subdeacons, all dressed in white tunics and red stoles, would lead the procession by carrying standards topped with a cross encircled by a silver ring. The procession would go counterclockwise through the outer aisles of the church. Those in attendance would reach over to touch the icon as it passed, with some mothers holding their children out so they might do the same: all attempts to *yaksib* (“snatch”) *baraka*. One evening, the priests even took out the relics of St. George, poured oil on them, and then collected the oil to be placed in small vials and distributed to the faithful. Enclosed within the walls of the church, these processions and rituals might occur in any church in Egypt. But here this indoor procession culminates in the *dura*, an outdoor procession held at much greater scale.

+++++

It is late in the morning, and several men are rigging the large icon of St. George onto a litter that they will soon carry. Others are decorating a pickup truck in front of the church with white and red ribbons. A large speaker and amp have been placed in the truck bed, and several

men with large wooden sticks climb aboard. One carries a large image of Fr. Boulos. It is a photographic portrait of him, identical to the image I have seen in many homes: a man in black cassock with red piping, holding a small metallic cross, wearing his distinctive eyeglasses, and sporting a scraggly beard.

At around two in the afternoon, a crowd of young men gather in the street by the church. The two parish priests scurry back and forth. The crowd grows and starts to swell. I climb up to the second floor balcony of a nearby house. Up and down the street, women and children collect on balconies, laughing, taking pictures with their phones, and throwing candy into the crowd below. There are now over a hundred men in the street. A group pushes its way to the center, where they start to jump and thrash their arms in excitement. Everyone is clapping, and the young men in the center lead everyone else in a series of chants.

With our souls and our blood we will vindicate you, oh Victor!
biruh, bidam, nafdik ya batl!

Put one's palm on the scale of Christ, he is the winner!
hatt al-kiffa 'ala mizan al-masih, huwa al-kisban!

Oh Savior, give to us a dove, the Virgin is the triumphant one!
ya mukhlas dil al-'asfura, al-'adra, hiya al-mansura!

al-Sisi, al-Sisi, let the Christians be!
al-Sisi, al-Sisi, khal al-nasara tahizi!

With all the pushing and shoving, the ebullience of the crowd turns into aggression. I see men shouting at each other. One of the women next to me suggests that some of them are on drugs. The two parish priests elbow their way into the crowd and urge everyone to relax. There is clapping, the singing picks up, and the truck creeps forward. The *dura* begins.

The mob leads the way. Behind them are the ministers. Dressed in white scouting uniforms, their job is to clear a path. Then there are the young subdeacons, carrying standards

topped with encircled crosses. They are followed by a smattering of visiting Catholic priests and nuns. Then there is the litter with the icon of St. George, followed by four ministers taking hold of the sheet (*mandil*), ready to collect any money that is thrown. Then there is the pickup truck, which has the speakers, the picture of Fr. Boulos, and other ministers on top performing crowd control. Men move to the front. Women, older men, and children line the street. Off to one side street, I glimpse a dozen young Muslim women by themselves, watching from afar. The procession moves forward thirty yards, and then stops. A litany is sung, and the procession lurches forward, and the process repeats itself. The sun is high overhead, and the air is filled with the sweetness of incense and the stench of sweat.

About thirty minutes into the procession (it will last over three hours), I catch sight of the pastor of the St. George church. He is in a heated conversation with a man I do not know, and others gather around the two, all seemingly upset. The man yells and points his finger at the priest. The priest shouts back. Everyone watches – no one dares separate them. Some of those watching gesture forward at the route the *dura* is to take. In this direction, between the homes on either side of the street, I can see a barricade of several police cars and a dozen police officers, all equipped with plastic shields and clubs. Later I will learn that this year's procession had been drastically reconfigured. During the time of Fr. Boulos, the procession would trace the perimeter of the town. This year, the police have cordoned off the route, diverting the procession through a small loop in the old sector of the town. The priest does not back down, and even pushes the man against the wall of a house. There is more shouting, and the man tries to break free from the priest's grasp. Dust cakes the priest's black cassock and the two thrash back and forth. The crowd eventually separates the two and the procession continues.

When we complete the loop, the ministers who had been guiding the procession gather at the entrance of the church. Working together, they take hold of long wooden boards. In groups of three or four, they carry the boards at waist height and march in sync toward the crowd. Pushing everyone out of the way, the ministers create enough space for the icon of St. George and the picture of Fr. Boulos to be returned to the sanctuary. Once everything has been unloaded from the truck, the ministers start to back up, slowly making their way into the church while still holding the crowd at bay. When the ministers make it to the church entrance, they quickly shut the gates. Almost immediately, the crowd loses its energy. Most wander off in search of shade. A few hours later, the bishop arrives to celebrate the Divine Liturgy. Most are content to listen to the service, broadcast from the church loudspeakers, from the comfort of their homes.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I drew a simple comparison between two holy men, ‘Abd al-Masih and Anba Mikhail. In their own unique ways, these two men created concentrations of *baraka* at the social and geographical peripheries of Egyptian society. The places that they occupied or established – a cave and a monastery – were defined by peculiar yet well-defined thresholds. For ‘Abd al-Masih, the threshold was the receding boundary of the self, materially represented in an earthen cave, in tattered clothing, and in what Angie Heo calls “dissimulative behavior.” The threshold for Anba Mikhail is also manifold: the walls of Durunka, the cave church, his tomb. These frontiers are important, one might think, for corralling *baraka*. Upon the death of these men, these places have become self-replenishing containers of *baraka*, accessible to all who visit them. They were also critical for establishing the limit each man crossed over to interact with “the crowd,” in settings where Muslims are the majority.

We have seen how the town of al-‘Aziya does not conform to this model. Here, frontiers and thresholds are not as distinct and are subject to revision and dispute. During the life of Fr. Boulos, these frontiers had been relatively clear. Stories of miracles, the apparition of St. George, and the practice of the *dura* helped make his jurisdiction coextensive with the town. But in the landscape of Coptic pilgrimage sites, it is difficult if not impossible for an entire town to serve as a focus of pilgrimage and a container of *baraka*. Sometimes Copts speak of two Upper Egyptian towns – Esna and Akhmim – in these terms. The two towns are believed to have been the site of generalized killing of Christians during the time of the Diocletian persecution: the Coptic “age of the martyrs.” When I visited Esna, a Coptic companion explained that the entire town is like a monastery since “the blood of the martyrs is in the earth.” But there are two actual monasteries in Esna where pilgrims can go, and the same is true of Akhmim. These are walls that one enters, tombs one can touch, thresholds that are crossed.

Deprived of history and peripheral “centers” of *baraka*, the boundaries of al-‘Aziya are defined by the interaction of various parties. What we have seen is that this work of boundary definition makes use of a shared idiom, even if this common framework is used to structure disagreement. The idiom draws upon the cult of St. George, onto which a nascent yet undeveloped cult of Fr. Boulos has been grafted. People of different ages and backgrounds can speak of it at varying scales. For one person, it might be tied into the politics of the Middle East, for another it might simply represent the protection a patron saint provides the town. Even the local Muslim shaykh is an eager participant in this discourse. We have also seen how this shared idiom can serve as a wedge. In the story of “the loudspeakers,” Fr. Boulos was aligned with St. George against the police. But the reverse was starting to take hold during my fieldwork. The confrontation at the *dura* was evidence that at least some thought the priests in town were siding

with the boundary-making efforts of the police; in a sense, working from the other side of the frontier.

As for the *baraka* Fr. Boulos had channeled and disrupted during his life, one might say it is now diffuse and dispersed. His personal objects occupy a liminal state, neither filled with *baraka* nor completely of the world. His tomb is empty, the *siraya* locked up. In life Fr. Boulos had been able to sustain the tensions of political engagement and the pursuit of holiness; that is, being “forceful” while also being “strong of faith.” But in death, it has been hard for the people of al-‘Aziya to know which aspect of his character to recall and celebrate. In oral culture, it seems that the two live on in harmony, as is demonstrated in “the loudspeakers” story. But in print, in photographs, and in the objects he left behind, it is not clear if what is being remembered is an exemplary Upper Egyptian man, or a saint.¹¹

¹ As Geertz (1968:50) observed in writing of Sufi marabouts in Morocco: “The living descendants of the saint, i.e., descendants in the male line, called *wulad sayyid*, ‘children of the sayyid,’ are, like him, also sheriffs and are regarded as the contemporary stewards of the saint’s sacredness, his *baraka*, having inherited it from him as he inherited it from the Prophet. This *baraka* is, however, unequally distributed among them so that, although all, even the women and children, are at least touched by it, only a few – two or three men in most cases, in many only one – will, as demonstrated by their wonder-working capacities, actually be saturated with it, be true living marabouts. Generations may even go by in which no true marabouts in this sense appear.”

² The Coptic Orthodox Church, like the Catholic Church, has a lengthy process by which it declares someone a “saint.” My usage of the word is more colloquial, as there are holy men like Anba Mikhail who are not saints (at least not yet), but who many consider models of holiness and sources of *baraka*. For more on “contemporary saints,” see Heo 2018:212.

³ Popular stories about ‘Abd al-Masih often focus on his shawl. When he was asked to visit a sick young woman, he offered his shawl and asked that it be draped across her. She was then miraculously healed. After his death, the shawl continued to have the ability to heal.

⁴ Metropolitans are senior bishops who have been consecrated as such by the Pope in Alexandria.

⁵ For more details on Anba Mikhail’s life and death, see his obituary: Salama, William, Shukry, Victor, and Rifaat 2014. Also, Mamdouh 2017.

⁶ This procession marks the feast of Mary’s assumption into heaven, an important day of Coptic devotion.

⁷ Riesebrodt (1999:3) notes that Weber developed his idea of religious charisma by engaging with the preanimistic theory of Robert Marett, which allowed Weber to link charisma to *orenda* and *mana*. It takes only one more step to hitch *baraka* to this chain of signification. This chapter can be read as a first pass at developing a link between charisma and *baraka*.

⁸ Most of the official saints of the Coptic Church are men. A few important exceptions stand out, one being Tamav Irini, who will be discussed in Chapter six. It is worth noting that the Catholic saint that has enjoyed the most attention in Egypt, among Catholics and Orthodox alike, is St. Rita, the patroness of lost causes.

⁹ Drug addiction is a persistent and multifaceted problem in Upper Egypt. Drugs like Tramadol, though now heavily regulated, were once easily acquired over the counter. Some drivers take amphetamines to stay awake when working long hours. During my fieldwork, I had a young boy, no older than twelve, ask me to help him break free from a drug addiction.

¹⁰ Although Coptic Catholic priests have the option of marrying before becoming a priest, most are celibate. Orthodox priests, on the other hand, are required to be married. Perhaps the strongest factor in Catholic priests opting for celibacy is the long seminary process, which can take over seven years and does not allow the seminarian to earn income, either for himself or his family.

¹¹ It was only after finishing this chapter that Paul Johnson’s study of “nearhuman agents” arrived on my desk. He suggests that “we should think of religion-like situation as shifters of agency but not in any unidirectional way” (2021:197). One might interpret Fr. Boulos, St. George, and the people of the town as participants in the exercise of “nearhuman” agency, which can be diffuse (the *dura*), yet at other times concentrated (what Fr. Boulos’s tomb could have been).

CHAPTER 4

An Impossible Reconciliation

Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

The Gospel of Matthew 23:34-36

The only time I received explicit instruction on how to structure my dissertation was when an intelligent young Orthodox subdeacon told me, “Father, one of your chapters must be on feuds.” During my fieldwork, there were five ongoing feuds, also referred to as vendettas (*t’ar*). These vendettas were considered a problem, but it was not clear to me in what sense. When people would talk about al-‘Aziya being “exceptional,” they would often point to this ongoing (and increasing) violence, and their inability to bring it to an end. But the exceptionality of al-‘Aziya as a majority-Christian town, and its exceptionality as a society incapable of curtailing this kind of conflict, are not necessarily the same. Indeed, it is quite possible that al-‘Aziya differs little from other towns in Upper Egypt in regard to vendettas. And yet Christianity was never far from discussions about the town, which raises the question of how its residents

position this politics of vendettas in relation to their Christian faith, if they do so at all. Do al-‘Aziya residents distinguish one from the other?

That Christianity might interface with vendettas, it should be said, is neither obvious nor certain. Vendettas can be found in various Christian societies such as Italy, Greece, and other countries in the Mediterranean world. In Michael Herzfeld’s (1985) ethnography of a Cretan village – a very “Christian” place with its own practice of feuds – there is no sense that vendettas might constitute a problem for its Christian population. Moreover, vendettas are a feature of Upper Egyptian life that has typically been treated in cultural, and not religious, terms. That residents would single out vendettas as a problem for their Christian faith is something that needs to be explained.

This chapter offers an account of why vendettas and formalized attempts at reconciliation – called a *sulh* – might be a problem in al-‘Aziya. This problem is not exactly one of violence and disorder, though it is that as well. Rather, it is a conceptual problem that works itself out in space. Given the relative absence of Muslims in al-‘Aziya, residents are released from certain external limits that would likely bear down on Copts in minority-Christian communities elsewhere. This freedom might itself be a cause of the untick of vendettas, though such an argument would be difficult to sustain. What interests me more is the way that freedom, as experienced in this exceptional town, raises the question of where the life of the church begins and ends. This inquiry therefore starts but does not end with vendettas, since this practice exists within a broader political arena. In this regard, I ask: How far might the life of the church extend into town politics? To what extent would the opposite be true? How is the work of organizing a *sulh* distinguished from the Christian rites of forgiveness? With few limits imposed from the outside – be it the state or the Muslim Other – these questions play themselves out more visibly

in al-‘Aziya – especially, as we will see, in space and in the town’s landscape. There are no clear answers in al-‘Aziya, or in Upper Egypt, as to how vendettas relate to Christianity. But, as this chapter suggests, it is this uncertainty and instability that drives the efforts of situating one in relation to the other.

Vendettas, Reconciliations, Christianity

Vendettas can be found throughout the rural communities of Upper Egypt. In one sense, vendettas reflect the breakdown of the state. For instance, local news reports during my fieldwork identified the arrival of military-grade weapons from Libya as a cause of the rise of vendetta cases in the region.¹ Yet this anxiety about vendettas in rural Egypt, especially in the conservative south, is not new. As Nathan Brown (1990:64-5) notes, vendettas in rural Egypt were an occasional subject of concern and critique in Egyptian newspapers even in the early twentieth century. Vendettas also appear in the few ethnographic accounts that are focused on Upper Egypt, in which they tend to appear as part of the fabric of rural life. In an insightful dissertation on Copts from Upper Egypt, Elizabeth Oram (2004) even notes that the *t’ar* cycle can have long reaching effects on Coptic families, and she signals the need for further study.² An important implication of her observation is that, generally speaking, vendettas in Upper Egypt involve both Christians and Muslims.

The practice of vendettas tends to follow the logic of talion: “Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.” If a man is killed, the same should be repaid to the one who committed the act, or to one of his kinsmen. If someone is shot but only injured, the repayment should be the same. People speak of this law as “taking your right” (*yakhud haqak*). If you do not take “your right,” I was told, no one will respect you or your family: “You will be walked all over.” Because of these

questions of family honor, it is sometimes not enough that an offender goes to prison. Blood must be shed.

Reconciliations are more complex. It is only when the shaykhs or elders of the town manage to gather the feuding families together that reconciliation can occur, and the feud officially comes to an end. Often in Upper Egypt, this reconciliation is preceded by the payment of blood money. These reconciliations do not replace the criminal justice system in Egypt: they are customary, or extrajudicial, even if the state security apparatus keeps close tabs on ongoing vendettas. I found no evidence that murder charges are reduced if feuding families reconcile, or that sentencing is affected by the *sulh* itself. The reconciliation also involves a ritual of sorts, the details of which we will encounter later.

While the state does not organize *sulhs*, it will move quickly to encourage a reconciliation session if a feud involves Christians and Muslims. The fear is that these feuds can quickly morph into full-blown sectarian violence, as has happened on occasion in Upper Egypt.³ These *sulhs* can occur even if the source of tension is not a vendetta, and Christians tend to find these proceedings unfair (Heo 2018b:249). In the many towns in Upper Egypt where Christians are a minority, this attentiveness by the state might be thought to serve as an external source of pressure to reconcile. Another motivation, as I was told, is that Muslims will always exact more revenge in a feud with Christians, perhaps killing two for every death among their own. Christians therefore still engage in vendettas, but in majority-Muslim settings there are more incentives to bring feuds to an end.

With this overview in place, we can turn our attention to al-‘Aziya. What about vendettas between Christian families? If vendettas constitute a problem at a national level, and if Christians and Muslims both engage in vendettas, then why would al-‘Aziya be any different? To answer

these questions, some distinctions need to be made regarding how, and from what vantage, Copts view vendettas. Most people in al-‘Aziya, for instance, take it for granted that vendettas will occur. In this sense, they see little difference between themselves and Muslims. What troubles them is the inability of families in al-‘Aziya to reconcile. According to Fr. Bishoy and Hanna Anis, feuds had once been extremely rare in their town. In their telling, the recent uptick in feuds started at most two decades ago. Moreover, in all this time there has only been one *sulh*, and it occurred right before I began my fieldwork.

Such is the story within al-‘Aziya. Beyond the town, Christians I encountered expressed rather different views on the issue. The occasions when I would recount the feuds between Christian families to Copts in nearby Asyut, for example, I would be met with skepticism. “You mean, vendettas *between* Christians?” one Catholic minister asked me, with a hint of doubt in his voice. Even the Coptic Catholic priests in Asyut with whom I lived would question me, in disbelief, about the ongoing feuds in al-‘Aziya. When the Catholic Patriarch came on an official visit to Asyut, his plans to visit al-‘Aziya were canceled at the last minute because a new vendetta had begun. The priests in the bishopric were in shock. These reactions can at least in part be chalked up to an ambivalent sectarianism that frames Muslims as violent and Christians as peaceful. But there is something else at stake, it seems. These priests, along with many other Copts, would expect the danger of violence to stem from Muslims, not from fellow Christians. And in the case of the Patriarch’s canceled visit, it was as if the violence had encroached, or come dangerously close to, the church itself.

By toggling between the two perspectives, those within and beyond al-‘Aziya, I would like to highlight a tension that cuts through any discussion of Copts and vendettas. This tension can be reformulated in slightly different terms. At the level of everyday life, one might say,

Copts in Upper Egypt engage in feuds just like their Muslim neighbors. These feuds might end more quickly in majority-Muslim settings because of state intervention; in places like al-‘Aziya, Christians do not face the same external pressure to reconcile and therefore feuds could last longer. This is something most Copts would agree to. At the level of ideology, however, different viewpoints are articulated. While the people of al-‘Aziya are under no illusions about Copts and vendettas, other Copts, such as those living in urban settings or in small minority communities, might endow this otherwise widespread practice with sectarian bias. This distinction between the everyday and the ideological is only a heuristic, but what it allows us to see, or at least question, is whether Christianity is connected to vendettas, and whether Christianity can be marshalled to bring them to an end. What this initial overview suggests is that the answers, depending on whether we are dealing in the everyday or the ideological, and with those from a place like al-‘Aziya or elsewhere, could be a mix of yes and no. Put more plainly, two contrary views might be in circulation at the same time: that Copts engage in feuds just like Muslims, and that Copts are more peaceful than Muslims. My intention is not to sort out which view is correct, but rather to highlight the fractured and layered quality of this discourse. It is a kind of fragmentation that might invite questions over what boundaries should draw between Christianity, vendettas, and reconciliations.

These inquiries entail, in turn, a question of object-definition: what are these concepts, and how do they interact? The meaning of vendetta is relatively clear, but the same cannot be said for reconciliations (nor for “Christianity,” to which I will turn to soon enough). At this point, then, I would like to provide a bit more ethnographic context, especially in regard to reconciliations. As I came to appreciate in my fieldwork, the word *sulh* can refer to reconciliation sessions for a wide range of conflicts, with vendettas being the most violent. In al-

‘Aziya, there is a *sulh* about once or twice a month that involves lesser offenses, such as those concerning insults or fistfights. These *sulhs*, in contrast to those organized for vendettas, are not hard to arrive at, and even bear features of the town’s Christian character. I attended one such *sulh*. Two young men had exchanged words, and there had been some scuffling in the street between the two. The town shaykhs had brought men from both families to agree to reconcile. I joined a group of about ten men from one family. We sat in a living room until everyone arrived, and then we walked as a group down the *asfelt* to the house of the other family. We sat together briefly, and small bottles of soda were served. Little was said. We all quickly gulped down the soda. Then we stood up, prayed the Our Father together, and walked back – this time with men from both families – to the house where it all began. Fr. Bishoy had arrived late, and he walked alongside me. He whispered that this whole tradition is silly, that there is no point in walking back-and-forth, and in engaging in this farce of hospitality. When we arrived at the first house, we repeated the Our Father, and a shaykh stood up. “Peace is good, peace is from God,” he declared. When we all filed out, Fr. Bishoy told me that the shaykh “is doing this because he wants to be an important man.”

As for *sulhs* that end vendettas, I was told there had only been one that was successful in the history of al-‘Aziya. It had occurred recently and had been overseen by Fr. Bishoy. We will examine the details of this *sulh*, but it should be stated upfront that it is unusual for a priest to take such a role. Having myself spent time with dozens of priests (both Catholic and Orthodox), I never once heard about another priest conducting a *sulh*, much less doing so from his own house as Fr. Bishoy had done. What was even odder was the fact that the boy who started the vendetta was from Fr. Bishoy’s clan. A critical feature of the *sulh* is that it is organized by intermediaries who are not kin of either family engaged in the feud. Such was the case with the rather simple

sulh just described, and similar intermediaries, perhaps drawn from the town's shaykhs and elders, would be sought for a *sulh* aimed at ending a vendetta. How and why Fr. Bishoy took up this role is a problem I was never able to fully solve. Yet this mystery only brings us back to the question of how the *sulh* and Christianity relate, albeit in a different way. In orchestrating the *sulh*, Fr. Bishoy appeared to move from church to the realm of family politics. It was an act of boundary-crossing that might emerge from the unique features of this town, or so I would like to suggest.

While Fr. Bishoy's *sulh* hints at a connection between vendettas and Christianity, it is important to recognize that other people in al-'Aziya ignore the question of Christianity altogether when talking about family politics. When I would ask residents why *sulhs* (for vendettas) are so rare, for instance, I would hear more about the interplay of space and kinship than I would the town's Christian character. As a middle-aged mother of four explained, young men now want households of their own. Instead of moving to the upper floors of their parents' homes, they purchase land to the north and west of town, and raise their families on what, several decades ago, would have been the town's periphery. Now there are fewer concentrations of agnates, and while one household might want to call off a feud, other households, scattered throughout the town, might not. The expansion of the town – and diffusion of the authority of clan patriarchs – is abetted by its topography. During the 1980s, the *asfelt* marked the westernmost border. Beyond it lay the rocky land that gradually rises up to the western cliffs about two miles away. This was a time of migration. Men from al-'Aziya, as from elsewhere, went off to work in the Gulf states. During this time, or so the story goes, members of the Duraba clan had acquired much of the western land through *wad' al-yad*, the legal means by which one comes to own unclaimed desert or desert-adjacent land in Egypt. When residents returned, they

came back with disposable income. The Duraba then parceled out the land and sold it at elevated prices. Today the streets that extend westward from the *asfelt* tend to have streets populated by the same clan, but the further north and west one moves, the more dispersed they become. The Duraba still own much of the land that continues up to the cliffs, beyond which there is nothing but long stretches of sand and rock.

These accounts of family politics also focus on the division of kinship groups, which, in similar fashion, has eroded the authority of clan patriarchs. When residents speak about clans (as they do when talking about vendettas), they make a distinction with the Duraba, who have several “branches” (*furu*’) that are concentrated in different parts of the town. This clan was also the one responsible for most of the feuds. Large clans have households in Cairo and other parts of Egypt. These ties might be somewhat distant, but most middle-aged men and older can recite members of their patrilineage, going back five or six generations, along with a sense of where else their ancestors once lived. In that feuds deal with kinship, they draw upon these expansive registers. Feuds flow from the town’s expansion, its influx of wealth, and the overlap of metropolitan centers and rural life. It is a traditional practice aggravated by contemporary factors.

What we can see from this initial survey, then, is that while vendettas occur in al-‘Aziya as they do elsewhere, the uncertain relationship between the town’s Christian character and the collective inability to bring vendettas to an end is, or seems to be, unique. On one hand, the cause of this breakdown might have nothing to do with Christianity if one listens to local accounts. But the fact that Fr. Bishoy is the only figure to have organized a *sulh* suggests that there might be more to the story. This uncertainty marks an illustrative departure from the classic ethnography on feuds (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Gluckman 1955; Dresch 1987). In these accounts, feuds carry

out, among other things, the work of administering justice in stateless or weak-state societies. There is no alternative to this system of correcting wrongs and restoring balance among feuding parties – it is simply how social order is maintained. But the situation with Copts, in al-‘Aziya and perhaps elsewhere, does present an alternative in the form of Christianity, which has its own ideas about violence and forgiveness. Feuds may not cross into the realm of Christian faith (or vice-versa). But they could. In the end, perhaps these Christian ideas remain simply that – an ideology that hovers beyond yet rarely connects with the world of the everyday. Such seems to be the case in al-‘Aziya, where one might come to love one’s enemies, but only when justice is administered and one’s safety is ensured. Indeed, this would be true for most Christians. Still, in a place where the boundaries of Christianity are unstable, might the realm of the church seep into view of vendettas and reconciliations?

+ + + + + + + + + +

As always, when I have questions, I bring them to Hanna Anis. We have already spoken about vendettas, though loosely, and only with vague reference to the ongoing feuds in the town. This time I ask him more directly. How can Christians seek revenge when they are called to forgive and love their enemies? Hanna Anis responds that it is not for people to seek “revenge” or “vengeance” (*intiqam*). Vengeance is from the Lord. He then recites, slowly and deliberately, a passage from the Letter to the Romans (12:19). It is one he will repeat throughout our conversation, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Hanna Anis is fluent in scripture. Every day he reads the Bible on his smartphone. He recites passages that seem obscure to me without hesitation, and to great effect. When I ask him what he means by this verse from Romans, he reframes the conversation in terms of his own

experience. He claims he has seen this vengeance “many times,” carried out “from father to his son, and his son.” He gives me an example.

There was a bad man. He killed someone. He had three sons. The youngest, he was fine. And with the older two, one was outstanding. And the second was not as good. So the first one, the good one, came. He got sick, the first one with cancer, and died.

When he died, their father, this man who was not good, he said, “Against him came Yahweh.”

His son took up the crooked business [*bultajiya*] belonging to his dad, went out and died.

Two died. He had killed one.

Our Lord said what? “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

I’m not the one who goes out and takes revenge, no! For me, something happens to me, I follow the law. I don’t take revenge. But who takes revenge? The Lord.

There are parts of this story that are not clear to me. I do not understand what the man intended by saying “against him came Yahweh.” I even wonder if I have misheard. More importantly, I am not sure if the father viewed the death of his first son as retribution for his own sins – is this why he handed his business on to the second? Hanna Anis is animated in telling this story, and I do not want him to stop. Thankfully the overall moral of the story seems clear. The Lord punishes sons for the sins for their fathers, perhaps even in ways that confound human notions of justice.

I sense we have arrived at a moment of mutual incomprehension. It is something I have felt before in my conversations with Hanna Anis, a feeling that I am asking him to explain something he thinks that I, a priest, should understand. Hanna Anis is gracious about the whole thing. What puzzles me is that he thinks these theological points are obvious. Hanna Anis waits to see if I grasp what he is saying, “Are you with me?” Sensing I am not, he downshifts to a more basic principle. He starts to outline the death of Cain and ends emphatically with the

original mandate for divine vengeance, “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!” (Genesis 3:10).

Hanna Anis wants to make it clear these views are not just his own. He has been taught them on good authority. He proceeds to tell another story, this one involving the Orthodox bishop of Manfalut, Anba Lucas, the bishop who once promised to ordain his brother.

There once was Anba Lucas, the son of a Mamluk – his father was a Pasha. He would come and sit with me. When he would come, it’d be like a wedding in al-‘Aziya. The streets would be swept and furnished, not like today, no, people would bring out their wooden benches. That man, he was a learned, wise man.

At that time, I would read the Bible often. And I said to him, “Our Lord said, ‘All who take the sword will perish by the sword.’” When they took the Lord, what did he say to Peter? “Put your sword back in its sheath!” [see Matt 26:52; Matt 24:35]

Still there are people who haven’t killed, but there is much death. Why?

[Hanna Anis shifts the register of his voice to signal the bishop’s response.]

“Because of iniquity of their father. Their father did wrong, he killed. Or his grandfather did something wrong. The Lord takes revenge, he takes revenge in the third or fourth generation.”

He was a learned, wise man. It wasn’t because of his wrongdoing, it was [because of] his father or grandfather. The Lord takes revenge.

The Word of the Lord does not change. “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”

Hanna Anis draws heavily from scripture, especially from passages that touch on the “generational curse” (i.e., Ex 20:5-6; 34:6-7): “revenge in the third or fourth generation.” I wonder if this account is meant to serve as a theodicy; that is, an explanation for why God permits evil. But I also know that this theological exposition is not so easily domesticated. Hanna Anis is not simply talking about why evil occurs. He is demonstrating major points of convergence between the world of scripture and the world he inhabits. This talk of generational curses flows from a genealogical imagination rooted in patrilineage, a world where men commit grave sins and for which they are repaid, a world where sons suffer in the place of their fathers.

Hanna Anis even anticipates my objection. “My words shall not pass away,” he says, quoting Matthew 24:35. His views regarding vengeance are rooted in scripture and taught by the church. I am the one who has to account for himself.

I decide to press Hanna Anis. “What about the innocent?” I ask. “Why should those who did nothing wrong die for the sins of others?” Hanna Anis responds immediately with a verse from the Gospel of Matthew (23:35): “Our Lord said what about the scribes and Pharisees? He said, ‘So that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, who you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar!’” Hanna Anis emphasizes the last part, drawing out “the sanctuary and the altar.” The blood spilt had been innocent, he underscores. I still feel like my question has not been answered. I try again. Oddly, he changes registers, switching away from scripture to folk wisdom. “If an innocent man is killed in vengeance, people say, ‘The Lord will redeem him’ [*al-rabb ha-yukhallisu*].” The logic of vendettas makes sense to him. But he will not defend it. Vengeance is not from man, but from the Lord.

Shadow Zones

How does one draw the line between Christianity and the politics of vendettas? Hanna Anis provides one answer. Like most other people in al-‘Aziya, Hanna Anis does not see a theological problem with vendettas, at least in their logic. In fact, when explaining vendettas, he appeals to distinctly Christian sources. What *is* problematic is the presumption of taking up vengeance when it ultimately belongs to God. This approach toward vengeance might seem morally dubious to a secular, Western audience. Vengeance carried out on generations, not to mention on “the third and the fourth,” runs contrary to ideas of justice that focus on individual guilt and moral responsibility. That said, the concept of collective guilt and of generational

courses is clearly fundamental to Christianity. The effects of the sin of Adam and Eve, in the Christian imagination, include the entire human race. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, it was on account of the collective guilt of a sinful humanity. Different denominations have their own ways of approaching and interpreting these touchstones of Christian teaching. But the point remains that guilt and vengeance can be collectivized and individualized in Christian thought.

This observation is intriguing given how it cuts against the focus on the moral agency of the individual – an important trope in the anthropology of Christianity (Dumont 1986; Robbins 2004; Keane 2007). These studies tend to position the individual against his or her pre-Christian self, and the crafting of the moral self involves stripping away attachments both to others and to an externalized (non-Christian) culture. What Hanna Anis engages in might appear as the opposite. The Christian self in his presentation can partake in guilt belonging to collectivities of various sorts, and this aspect of Upper Egyptian culture is injected with theological reasoning. In thinking in such a way, though, Hanna Anis also lodges the issue of vendettas and vengeance into a distinctly Christian framework – what Asad (1986) would call a “discursive tradition.” One consequence of doing so is that the door is opened for contestation and dispute at a distinctly Christian register. Theological justification can be countered through appeal to the same authoritative sources that Hanna Anis draws upon.

Indeed, someone had arrived on the scene who would actively try to disentangle Christianity – or at least one version – from the parts of culture that Hanna Anis had grounded in the Christian tradition. When Fr. Bishoy returned from Canada, he not only initiated new building projects, but also a moral campaign. He wanted to offer some resistance to the vendettas that had grown in number in his absence. When I asked him why people engage in vendettas and why there are no reconciliations, he said, “It is because of a hard mentality. It’s a backward

culture.” Fr. Bishoy had left al-‘Aziya and had returned. In doing so, he could conceptualize and externalize local “culture” in ways Hanna Anis could not. Hanna Anis did not like the fact there were so many vendettas. But he was not embarrassed by them. What did he have to hide? Fr. Bishoy found them backward.

Fr. Bishoy had similar views about reconciliation sessions. For him, this manner of ending vendettas and other conflicts was merely functional. When I would ask him about the mechanics by which feuds and reconciliation sessions take place, Fr. Bishoy would give me brief, unenthusiastic answers: “Everyone knows this stuff,” he would say. What really matters, he would add, is “the conversion of the heart. People here have hard hearts.” In other circumstances it would be easy to isolate these views as the opinion of one man. But Fr. Bishoy plays a central role in the topic of vendettas in that he orchestrated the only successful *sulh*. I keep asking him to reveal more details, so Fr. Bishoy finally invited me to a “meeting” (*ijtim‘a*) he had organized between five brothers belonging to one of the Duraba branches. This meeting had nothing to do with a vendetta, but it captured the kind of work Fr. Bishoy had undertaken in the town. Other priests were very reluctant to get involved in family disputes. An attempt would be seen as pointless at best and dangerous at worst. But Fr. Bishoy forged a different path, driven by his desire to change what he considered the problematic parts of his native culture.

The day of the “meeting,” I met Fr. Bishoy outside the house and he explained the situation. The five had been fighting over their inheritance. I followed Fr. Bishoy through a side gate that led to a large open air lot where the brothers stored the tents and tarps they rented out. Fr. Bishoy instructed them to pull up chairs, and the seven of us sat in a large circle in the middle of the lot. Fr. Bishoy would speak a little bit to me in English, and then would turn and address the brothers. He often did this when I joined him for a pastoral meeting, knowing almost no one

in al-‘Aziya speaks English. “What I want,” he said to me, with everyone else watching us, “is for them to respect each other and not speak ill about each other. Their problem is greed.” He then turned to the brothers and, in Arabic, explained that I understand things better in English, so please excuse these side remarks. It went on this way for over an hour.

From this rather simple vignette, it should be clear that Hanna Anis and Fr. Bishoy have rather different attitudes concerning local culture; that is, what constitutes it, and how it relates to Christian teaching, and how it should be judged. But this difference, while evident, is not sharp, nor is it necessarily representative of broader social formations. Fr. Bishoy, for one, was a rather unique priest in his approach to ministry, and Hanna Anis was an eager reader of scripture – an avocation not necessarily shared by other Christians in town. Still, both men identified points of contact between the domain of family politics – from arguments over inheritance to the logic of vendettas – and the domain of Christianity and the church. That it is possible for them to do so suggests that these points of contact might be examined and negotiated in other situations and platforms. Andrew Shryock (2004a) has written about how cultural assemblages are sometimes assessed in ways that precede the act display yet are not necessarily hidden from view. In my own movement, I encountered similar patterns of assessment and innovation. Both Hanna Anis and Fr. Bishoy wanted me to document their views on vendettas and reconciliations, but this lack of coherency hinted at other forms of activity that were occurring throughout town, but could not be easily witnessed nor accorded conceptual stability. Such a “shadow zone,” writes Shryock (2004a:12), “is not meant to be broadly seen” (2004a:12), and the drama of vendettas and reconciliations pointed toward negotiations over the church/politics boundary that were being worked out in strange and subtle ways.

Elsewhere this social labor would be difficult if not impossible to observe. But in al-‘Aziya, as we have seen, the freedom to shape the town’s landscape means that activities often relegated to churches can spill into the open. The same is true with this particular shadow zone. These conceptual problems are being worked out in space, and, in what follows, I will examine two important examples. The first is one we have already encountered: Fr. Bishoy’s *sulh*, which, as of this writing, is both the first and the last successful *sulh* the town has witnessed. The second involves a church that was built in the wake of a vendetta killing. In both cases, the ordering of space reflects novel attempts at reestablishing the boundaries between church and local politics. In this perspective, the landscape makes visible a shadow zone of great importance to town residents, and to the study of Coptic Christianity.

In the Garden of Good and Evil

Fr. Bishoy organized the town’s first *sulh* a few months before I began my fieldwork. People would mention the *sulh* in positive terms, though no one could tell me why there had been no earlier reconciliations. In fact, residents said little else. This silence was somewhat frustrating because of the exceptional nature of Fr. Bishoy’s role. It was only after a year of conversations with Hanna Anis that I finally heard the full story. I already knew that the feud had resulted from the death of the son of one of Fr. Bishoy’s cousins – a useful piece of knowledge that helped me navigate his rather indirect account.

There were two boys, one from our family, the other from another family. Their behavior was bad, the two of them. Our boy was worse than the other, more despicable, and was, well, horrible in many ways, a troubled boy. I mean, the boy would go and eat bread with his friend [*bughdor*] and he said, “No, come on over, today you won’t go out. I want you.” He went out and a woman saw him, and our boy went and she said, “That’s an awful boy, and this and that, and I this and that.” The important thing is they let her walk away. Then the boy took a firearm that he had stolen to the mountain, the two went together, and they took some of the pills they had stolen, and the troubled boy took out the pistol and shot him, and he died.

I was surprised how Hanna Anis made no attempt to withhold his scorn for the Sama'an boy who died. The household where this boy had grown up and lived was less than ten doors down from Hanna Anis's house. There is also something mysterious about his narration. One gets the sense this unfortunate event was an accident, or that it could just as well have been the Sama'an boy who pulled the trigger.⁴

We talked about the family he belonged to. Will we shoot them [*yadrubhum*] or not? Father Bishoy said, "We won't shoot." He said, "I am a man like other people. Never. The law takes its course. We won't do anything." His uncle, named Hani, came along with his son. They said, "Never." They were much loved, the two of them. They didn't agree with Father Bishoy.

Then the boy informed us that their boy was the one responsible. And that he's a bad kid, and it's known he's a bad kid, that his behavior is bad, it's perverse. We called over some people, the elders of the community, they came together. What they offer cannot be refused.

Here he makes reference to the elders or shaykhs of the town. These are the mediators who calm both parties and encourage them to reconcile. Fr. Bishoy faces the tougher challenge of talking his kin out of seeking revenge.

So Father Bishoy took ahold of his older brother and said to him, "My brother, that boy is this and that." And he convinced him that we will let the law be and take our right in a way that's distinct and honorable, like the people of old, like the families, great and large. Like them, we'll take our right.

And his brother said, "how?"

And Father Bishoy said, "Let them take out the shroud" [*yashil al-kafan*]. They shot someone. That means the one who was killed receives the one who takes the shroud." Father Bishoy said, "There are three of them who can take the shroud. The boy who died has three brothers."

And Father Bishoy's brother agreed. "Is that it?" "That's it."

Father Bishoy went to the different houses. "If you shoot, you'll go where? You'll go to prison." And Our Lord said this and that, blah blah blah, and he convinced them.

At this point, the story becomes more about Fr. Bishoy. I smiled when Hanna Anis dismissed the theological arguments Fr. Bishoy presented to his brothers. Hanna Anis and others, including Fr.

Agnatius, were in awe of Fr. Bishoy's ability to win people over to his side. Hanna Anis builds to the *sulh* itself.

Then we made a truly great reconciliation [*sulh*] with the Director of Security [*mudir al-'am*] and Director of Investigations [*mudir al-mubahath*] from Manfalout and the Director of Investigations [*mudir al-mubahath*] from Asyut and the Fattah belonging to all of families from Beni 'Adi and 'Adamna and Manfalut, and people from the Asyut Governorate and people from other Governorates. Father Bishoy invited all these people, all of them, important people, members of the Egyptian Senate [*majlis al-sha'ab*] and the like. And one among them was the Director of Intelligence [*mudir al-mukhabarat*]. Lots of important people.

I stopped Hanna Anis and asked, "Why did he invite all these people?" I was struck by how quickly Hanna Anis shifted from the vague narration of the killing to the detailed enumeration of the *sulh* attendees. He said,

So that there'd be witnesses! And everything went well. The people of the town went because this was the first time this had happened in al-'Aziya. It never happened before, never! It occurred in the garden by Father Bishoy's house. There were more than a thousand people! People from all the towns around us. Beni Sanad and al-'Aziya and Jahdam, all of them!

And everything went well. The three brothers went and the brother of the boy presented them the shroud, and they said, "God pardons you" [*Allah 'afakum*]. And that was it. And the police were present, and they asked them if anything will happen, and they said, "No, nothing will happen." And there were recordings, it was video recorded, and speeches. Father Bishoy spoke. This was the first time for this to happen in al-'Aziya.

In his account, Hanna Anis mentions the components typically required for a *sulh*, though not everything is clear. It is odd that Fr. Bishoy helps negotiate the *sulh*, as such a task would typically be undertaken by intermediaries who are not a member of the feuding families. Hanna Anis mentions the presentation of the shroud (wrapped around a rifle or sword) and the acceptance of the shroud: the key part to the choreography of the *sulh*. Then there is the acknowledgement that the feud has come to an end ("God pardons you"). He recounts how state officials are present as well, though this affair is not part of the criminal justice proceedings. In fact, the description of the *sulh* is most detailed when it comes to the attendees and the setting.

Knowing the size of Fr. Bishoy's garden, it is hard to believe a thousand people attended the *sulh*.

Indeed, setting the scene is important for Hanna Anis. He is describing reordered space. We see this in the guest list, which is comprehensive, and includes notable families, officers, and politicians from major population hubs surrounding al-'Aziya. That the *sulh* was held at Fr. Bishoy's compound also means that it was contained. It was bound by four walls. Because of this staging, it was easily observed. There had to be witnesses, Hanna Anis reminds me, and the event itself was documented. Comprehensive, contained, observable: these are characteristics of a microcosm that captures and reflects a broader world.

Microcosmic events invite theoretical speculation. Following the work of Michel Foucault, literary scholars have found the concept of "heterotopia" to be a helpful shorthand for talking about alternate sites where aspects of society are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1986:24). Foucault uses the example of the cemetery and the garden, two places that, though removed from the landscape in which they are found, provide an idealized ordering of that broader world. This concept captures the allure of the *sulh*, which drew in the outside world and placed it within the bounds of Fr. Bishoy's garden. It also shows that the ordering of space is not the end of the story. Something more was afoot that day. Along with fashioning a "heterotopia," there was a script to follow, a unique form of interaction that was encouraged and had to be followed through.

In this regard, Hanna Anis has little to say. But he leaves some hints. A close reading of Hanna Anis's account reveals some slippage in the role of Fr. Bishoy, a wrinkle that adds complexity to the formatted interaction of the *sulh*. An important mechanism for any *sulh* is the role of neutral mediators, men unrelated to either family engaged in the feud. There also needs to

be parity in terms of space, hence the walk back-and-forth between homes in the *sulh* I attended. Fr. Bishoy's *sulh* ignores both these conditions. At the beginning of Hanna Anis's story, Fr. Bishoy is depicted as a fellow kinsman, trying to speak reason to other men from the Sama'an. But Fr. Bishoy then starts to drop from view. The event occurs within the confines of his compound; guests appear. Hanna Anis only mentions that Fr. Bishoy "invited them." The compound, he seems to suggest, has been turned into an arena for hosting, with those in attendance now identified as guests.

For Hanna Anis, as for many other people in al-'Aziya, the concept of hospitality draws upon the same moral sensibilities that feed into the structure of vendettas and reconciliations. Both might be classified by the outsider as distinctly "Arab" or "cultural," and therefore detached from an essentialized expression of Christianity that Copts might share with other kinds of Christians. But hospitality, like talk of vengeance and reconciliation, is deeply embedded in scripture – a point not lost on many al-'Aziya residents. One man, after having himself provided me excellent hospitality, encouraged me to write down a verse from the Prophet Isaiah (32:7) that he recited to me from memory. "Tell this to your friends in America," he instructed.

The schemes of the schemer are evil;
he devises wicked plans
to destroy the poor with lying words,
even when the needy speaks justice.

But a generous man devises generous things,
and by generosity he shall stand.

"Generosity" and "hospitality" are the same word in Arabic (*karam*), and the final verse might as well be translated "a hospitable man devises hospitable things, and by hospitality he shall stand." What strikes me about this verse is that, if it had been recited to me with source unnamed, I would have taken it as a colloquial proverb. This idea that hospitality and divine vengeance are

joined at the hip, and that the dealings of men cannot avoid the demands of God's justice fits just as easily within al-'Aziya society as it does in the world of scripture.

Still, I am not sure how Fr. Bishoy had used this act of generosity and hospitality to disassociate himself from, or even transcend, the ties of kinship. When I asked Fr. Bishoy about the *sulh*, he downplayed his role as host. For him, it was about managing the crowd and making sure those who spoke did not go on for too long. It struck me that he spoke about hospitality like an American event organizer. Maybe that was his intention. I suspect though that Fr. Bishoy's identity as a priest gave him cover, allowing him to assume an identity as host that could be detached from his identity as Sama'an kinsman. My reasoning is based on the unique relationship priests have with domestic spaces. A man like Fr. Bishoy – without wife and without children – does not have a proper domestic space. His life and work is bound to the church, where he offers, through the celebration and distribution of the sacraments, a ritualized form of hospitality. Within a clear “home,” then, he does not abide by the limitations faced by others. As Julian Pitt-Rivers put it, “The roles of host and guest have territorial limitations. A host is host only on the territory over which on a particular occasion he claims authority. Outside it he cannot maintain the role” (2017:180). That these restrictions might not extend to priests is an open question, and I think Fr. Bishoy was testing the tolerance of his townsmen in hosting the *sulh* as a priest, and not as a kinsman. But these are details that were kept from view. Neither Hanna Anis nor Fr. Bishoy wanted me to dwell on them, and my own speculation remains just that.

Whatever the reasons for the success of Fr. Bishoy's *sulh*, they proved difficult to replicate. Later when I asked Hanna Anis whether other *sulhs* have occurred since then, he repeated a story I had heard from others. Two different families, he said, had been engaged in a feud, this time involving a gunshot wound. Inspired by Fr. Bishoy's *sulh*, patriarchs from the two

families agreed to allow mediators to arrange a *sulh* of their own. This time the gathering would take place in the street that runs between the two feuding households. Residents of the street mingled with members of the two families on either side, and the balconies were filled with women and children. A man from the family that had committed the act of violence came forth with the shroud wrapped around a bolt-action rifle. He walked toward the small group of men who represented the offended family. At some point, though, a woman watching from one of the balconies saw him smirk. She rushed down the stairs, slipped into the street, and whispered to some of her male kin what she saw. The men from the offended family got word, became enraged, and the *sulh* was called off. It was a sort of ritual failure that was impossible to repair.

In sum, the transformation of Fr. Bishoy's house into a staging group for the *sulh* reflects the testing and redrawing of boundaries that flows from the shadow zone of vendettas and reconciliations. His action extends the church into the realm of politics, but it also reveals the inherent instability of his own domestic space. His actions provide one answer to the question of how Christianity interfaces with this world of family politics. It seems that, as a priest, he was able to bend the rules that govern the *sulh*. It is a privilege that those who tried to follow his example did not have.

+++++

It is early in my fieldwork and I have joined Fr. Bishoy for a drive out to the western edge of town. We are in his Toyota sedan, a recent model that he keeps very clean – there are even plastic covers over the seats. We drive south down the *asfalt* and turn west on the ring road, which is nothing more than a dirt path. To our right is the southernmost edge of al-'Aziya. Three-story homes, all made of the same red brick, stand alongside sheds for farming equipment. To our left is a six-foot wall that separates al-'Aziya from Jahdam, the smaller, majority-Muslim

town to the south. Some people claim there had once been a feud between a prominent Christian family in al-‘Aziya and a Muslim family in Jahdam, bringing the county (*markaz*) to build the wall to separate the two. Others dismissed this account – a disagreement that reflects the mixed-feelings al-Aziya residents have about their southern neighbor. Jahdam is visibly poorer. The homes are smaller, few people there own cars, and, unlike al-‘Aziya, there is no local industry apart from agriculture. At Christmas and Easter, Muslim women and children from Jahdam will come to al-‘Aziya and go door-to-door, begging for alms. There might be a history of tension between the two towns, but the attitude most people have toward Jahdam is pity.

We continue westward. On both sides there are fields of wheat and clover. Behind us, the skyline of al-‘Aziya becomes more visible now. The steeples of several churches rise above a long stretch of buildings. We pass underneath the high voltage lines carrying the electricity from the High Dam north to Cairo. There are more homes that follow the ring road as it turns north. Fr. Bishoy’s villa is one of them. But we continue west. Several industrial trucks rumble past us; there is a cement factory to the southwest, as well as a natural gas plant. There traffic is light, and soon we are alone. Here and there I see a few square-acre farming plots, each likely tended by a different household.⁵ Most of the land is sandy and rocky. Occasionally a small ledge of sandstone will mark a slight rise in elevation.

Fr. Bishoy says that he wants to check on the construction of a new Catholic church. Until this point, I only knew about two Catholic churches in town: the St. George Catholic church, where Fr. Boulos had served for many years, and the “northern” church whose construction Fr. Bishoy was overseeing. We follow the road up a hill that levels out onto an open plain. From here we can see the new church, as well as the western cliffs. Down below us is al-



Fig. 4.1 (above) The construction of the new Orthodox church as viewed from the St. Mark church sanctuary.

Fig. 4.2 (left) The unfinished sanctuary of the Duraba church. Note the Coptic inscription of “Abba Marqos,” or St. Mark.

‘Aziya, as well as the rest of the Nile valley. Miles away, I can barely make out the cliffs on the eastern side. Everything in between is lush and green.

We pull up alongside the church and Fr. Bishoy parks his car. He walks over and greets the workers, and then waves me over. We enter the unfinished sanctuary. I do not know the Coptic script, but I can recognize the name that runs across the dome at the end of the nave. It reads “Abba Murqus,” which I take to refer to St. Mark the Evangelist, the first Patriarch of Alexandria. I wonder what such a large church is doing so far from town. Fr. Bishoy seems to read my mind. “In ten years, there are going to be homes here,” he said, gesturing slowly at the fields around us. “We have to be ready.” He then motioned for me to look through one of the large openings in the sanctuary. “Over there,” he said. I can see a collection of white bricks and pillars made of poured concrete about one hundred and fifty yards away. “The Orthodox are

already here.” I want to ask more questions, but he tells me to be quiet. “We’ll talk more about this once we’re in the car.”

The Church of Two Martyrs

The reason Fr. Bishoy did not want to discuss this church in public is because it originated through a vendetta. As I later came to learn, Murqus is also the name of a young man from the Duraba who had been shot dead near the site of the new church. His family used money saved for his wedding to fund the construction. According to Fr. Bishoy, it was their intention to give the church and the land on which it sits to the Catholic diocese. I had never heard of a Christian family building a church as a memorial for a deceased layman, much less someone who had died during a feud. But given the control Christians exercise in al-‘Aziya, and the immense resources of the Duraba, such construction projects that would be unthinkable elsewhere are possible here.

This church, one might think, rearranges certain boundaries in ways similar to Fr. Bishoy’s *sulh*. Fr. Bishoy had leveraged his priestly authority to orchestrate the *sulh*, using his role as host to reconfigure his house into an ecclesial domain. This intrusion of the church into the world of vendettas, however, is flipped, with a church arising on the ground where blood had been shed out of vengeance. The issue is further confused by the fact that the language of scripture, in its usage of vengeance and generational curses, bridges these worlds of church life and interfamily politics. In this case, this language of scripture bleeds into the cult of martyrdom. St. Mark had himself been martyred in Alexandria, and, as Angie Heo (2018b:41-5) discusses at length, the return of his relics from Venice to Egypt in 1968 was an important milestone in the history of the Coptic Orthodox church. This new church therefore points to the death of two men, one a saint, the other a decent man, his life tragically cut short. I never heard anyone call the

young Duraba man a “martyr.” People did not speak about such things, though when his name did come up, he was remembered as “good” (*kwayis*). Nevertheless, the merging of these two Marks into one structure proved unsettling for many. Even Fr. Bishoy, who anticipated overseeing the church upon completion, did not feel at ease discussing the situation on-site.

The unstable identity of the church is reflected in other ways as well. Unlike all the other non-Orthodox churches, it has no “founding story.” How could it? Cut off from the town or any other cluster of homes, deprived of a priest or even a congregation, it can hardly claim to even be a church. What it does have is the story of the feud, one I was only able to piece together through some guarded conversations with Hanna Anis. The vendetta started, he explained, when one man from the Duraba refused to allow passage to a Muslim family to access some land they had acquired near the western hills. This Muslim family is powerful and studded with high ranking officials in the government and military. The hothead man from the Duraba did not care. When a man from the Muslim family later tried to access their land, this man from the Duraba shot him dead. Men from both families scrambled to the western plain, where there was much shooting, several injuries, and one death. Hanna Anis’s sympathies were directed toward the Muslim family, since this violence was clearly the result of Duraba stubbornness. If this is a founding story, it is a strange one, communicated only in whispers.

The church’s instability is also reflected in what would become its shifting denominational identity. This particular Duraba household was Catholic, but one day news spread that the church had been turned over to the Orthodox. It was also rumored that the Orthodox bishop of Manfalut had celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the church, thus consecrating, and indelibly marking it, as Orthodox. I was in the Catholic bishopric when the news was announced. The cell phones of some of the priests in the dining room lit up. One of the priests

asked me, furious, “Why did the Orthodox take our church?” What made this turn of events even stranger was that the Orthodox already had a church next to the St. Mark’s church. Now there would be two, side by side, with no congregants in sight.

The shifting nature of this building – its power to generate dispute, its multiple points of reference, its peripheral yet looming presence on the landscape – all reflect the strange dynamics one might expect from a shadow zone discourse. In the previous section, we saw confusion cluster around the uncertain ability of a priest like Fr. Bishoy to orchestrate a reconciliation. Here it is the significance of the young man’s death that is contested. As mentioned, everyone considered Murqus to be a good man. But his blood was shed in a vendetta, and even though he was killed by a Muslim, no one ever suggested he had been killed because of his Christian belief. When Hanna Anis mentioned to me that, before it had switched denominations, Fr. Bishoy had toyed with the idea of establishing a convent next to the St. Mark church, he voiced a rare objection. “How, with that boy?” he said, leaving it to me to figure out the rest. All the same, the backstory of this strange church did not keep several Catholic priests and an Orthodox bishop from vying to call it their own.

In the previous chapter, we witnessed the social labor involved in inscribing boundaries and frontiers around the town – a kind of activity that lends itself well to Bachelard’s idea of “topo-analysis.” Here we are presented with boundaries of a different sort. The walls of Fr. Bishoy’s villa and the towering nave of the St. Mark church are material boundaries that, given the problem of vendettas, become provocations. What do they contain? What kind of activity do they stage? The answers to these questions seem simple: for one, a *sulh*; for the other, the Divine Liturgy. But these answers only point back to the instability and uncertainty of the settings in which they occur. The concept of heterotopia is perhaps too vague to capture the strangeness of

these enclosed sites of social activity. But they do mark boundaries between the town and the outside world that turn the latter on its head. Beyond al-‘Aziya, the *sulh* held by Fr. Bishoy might look the same, but it would be organized by the state, and would certainly not be held on the grounds of a priest’s villa. Beyond the town, one might find a church that looks just like the one dedicated to St. Mark, but it would not result from a vendetta. These are exceptional buildings and activities for an exceptional town. That they both connect back to vendettas suggests that alongside the violence of vendettas lies a deeper conflict, one over what boundaries might or should exist between the domain of church and that of the town.

Rites of Forgiveness

In one sense, the inability of Christians in al-‘Aziya to bring feuds to an end is odd because the various churches, and especially the Orthodox and Catholic churches, all have institutionalized means of bringing about reconciliation. At this juncture I would like to continue this study of boundary-drawing by asking how these church-based rites of forgiveness interface with the domain of politics and of the town. To do so, I will examine more closely the two clearest avenues for reconciling oneself with God and neighbor: the Divine Liturgy and the sacrament of confession. Having myself concelebrated Sunday liturgies and heard confessions in al-‘Aziya, these rituals were often embraced with seriousness and, sometimes, with great emotion. But these practices rarely if ever touch upon the world of feuds. Priests themselves are reluctant to get involved – yet another reason why Fr. Bishoy’s *sulh* was so exceptional. Why is this the case?

The simple answer, as some people told me, is that priests are afraid. They do not want to alienate people from their congregation, and, even worse, they do not want to become entangled in the feud itself. An Orthodox doctor explained the issue in these terms. “Priests do not get

involved because these things involve honor and dignity [*as-sharaf wa al-karama*]. If a priest gets involved, maybe he might say something or hear something bad. Father, if you get involved, they won't listen, it will only bother them more." The priests I knew, though, put their hesitation to enter into feuds in different terms. For them, it was pointless to try to preach on the topic or insert themselves into problems they could not change. Fr. Bishoy, of course, was different. But even he would never preach explicitly about vendettas. People in the town assured me that even if priests get involved in such matters, they will never be subjected to violence. But this claim was not entirely true. When the clan of an Orthodox priest in al-'Aziya became caught up in a feud, the bishop of Manfalut sent him on a mission assignment to Kenya in order to protect his life.

This limited role of priests can be compared to that of other holy men in the Middle East. In reflecting on Raymond Jamous's (1992) ethnographic study of violence and peace-making in the Rif of Morocco, J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers wrote,

Peace is always above violence because the renunciation of violence implies spiritual superiority; the holy men, *shorfa* (sing. *shereef*), men of peace, supreme epitome of *baraka*, are above those who enter into the exchange of violence, because *baraka* is above violence. It is they who put an end to feuds. Yet since *baraka* encompasses the whole of life, the profane as well as the sacred, it is also the source of worldly triumph, of success, even in war. The supra-agonistic condition of the *shorfa* entitles them not only to make peace, but by the same token to represent the whole community. *Baraka* is like grace in that it is a divine quality, not answerable to the mundane logic of social relations utilized by men in their struggle for supremacy, but to the will of God. (1992:14)

The *shorfa* draw their authority, one might say, through their access to *baraka*, which in its divine quality encompasses the world of violence. Priestly authority touches similar notes, but it is complicated by the ritual framework of sacraments. The charisma Fr. Boulos generated was rather exceptional, and is not shared by other priests in al-'Aziya. The grace that flows from the priest is focused on his sacramental labor, which is itself anchored in liturgy, and mostly in the

church. There is more of a gap, then, between the grace of the sacraments and the world of politics than exists between the *shorfa* and their community.

This gap is important, however, because it allows for the work of liturgy to maintain its oblique relationship to the world outside the church. I want to emphasize this point because it clarifies why the ritual labor of priests does not easily transfer into the world of vendettas and reconciliation sessions. Consider the example of confession. The modern practice of aural confession is largely treated both in theology and other disciplines as a private affair between priest and penitent (Foucault 1990). But secret knowledge tends to have some kind of public life (Simmel 1950), and in the admission that someone has confessed, something is both revealed and concealed. In the Catholic tradition, a priest can be excommunicated for divulging what is said in confession, and similar restrictions are placed on Orthodox priests. Yet the fact that someone has gone to confession – that they “are confessed” (*mu‘atarif*) – can be acknowledged in indirect ways. Most Catholics and Orthodox will confess to the priests in their parish. Both traditions require someone to be “confessed” before receiving the eucharist, and some Orthodox priests, if they have doubts, will make a point of asking. Presenting oneself to receive the eucharist is therefore a public acknowledgement of one’s status as “confessed” (or that one is a hypocrite, if doubts linger). Moreover, most confessions, at least among Catholics, occur during the Divine Liturgy, when a priest will sit in either the sacristy or the baptismal chapel, and people come up, one after another, who want to confess. Again, these are private interactions that traffic in secrets, but nonetheless remain visible.

The common theme in public secrets is that they exist in an economy of knowledge in which some enjoy more access than others. There are always folks who, as Michael Taussig puts it, “know what not to know” (1999:2). Priests enjoy this kind of privileged access to secret

knowledge. The political implications of this fact struck me when I mentioned to a Catholic priest in al-‘Aziya that I was worried about a young man who kept trying to contact me. By this point I had spent over a year in the field, and I had heard whispers about this young man. A gruesome murder had been committed shortly before my arrival in al-‘Aziya, and one man was now serving a lengthy prison sentence. I had heard that the man seeking me out had been an accomplice; a piece of sensitive knowledge I decided not to share with the priest. He responded by telling me not to worry. *Huwa mu‘atarif*, he told me. “He’s confessed.” Later I saw this man in church. He received communion.

Confession can also serve as a means of securing and encrypting knowledge. There were a few times when some of my interlocutors lowered their face and told me to keep whatever they were going to share under the seal of confession. On four or five occasions, I would also be invited to a house – sometimes by a child who had been sent to find me – where a woman would then host me and give a confession. These confessions were always heartbreaking; they were also highly sensitive, and unusually dealt with the sins and cruelties of others. It was clear to me that I was being sought out because of my foreign status. Foreign priests are assumed to be more open-minded, especially in terms of issues of marriage and sexuality. These conversations would not deal with feuds, but they involved secret knowledge that, if exposed, could lead to violence.

The work required to keep this sacramental domain separate from the world of local politics can also be rendered in the more technical language of linguistic anthropology. As with all confessions, a certain kind of reframing of interaction had to take place. Much of such labor falls upon the penitent, who must shift, in accord with the literature on stance (Agha 2007; Lempert 2008), between a propositional stance and an interactive stance. As Foucault (1990) reminds us, a confession is a listing of sins, and the propositional stance facilitates this task by

placing the speaker in direct relation to what is being listed. A typical confession of a young man in al-‘Aziya, for instance, begins with “I curse, I lie, I get angry...” (*ana bahlaf, ana bakzab, ana bakrah...*). Penitents who are more schooled in the art of confession will signal this propositional stance through an assemblage of verbal and non-verbal cues, all of which rupture any co-presence previously established with the priest-confessor. The penitent might look at his hands, slightly collapse his posture, downshift to a whisper or more solemn tone, and avoid addressing the confessor in familiar terms. This behavior might mask whatever shame the penitent is experiencing; it also ensures the clean articulation and transmission of confessed sins, and the production of an appropriately thorough “denotational text” (Agha 2007).

This reframing, moreover, has to be brought back to “normal interaction,” or an interactive stance. This stance signals proper uptake, which in turn ratifies the denotational text. This particular point is crucial for many of the townspeople I spoke with about confession. A young, pious Orthodox mother of two told me that a priest must comment on each sin confessed, and she added that without such commentary one will never grow in holiness. The interactional stance also serves another purpose. In reversing the verbal and non-verbal cues mentioned earlier – addressing the priest in personal terms, normalizing the tone of voice, reestablishing eye contact – the relationship between priest and penitent is recalibrated, creating distance between the recitation that had just occurred and the relationship between the priest and penitent.

This granular analysis, in the end, can help us appreciate a much broader point. The sacramental distribution of grace, especially in the forgiveness of sins, occurs through channels whose (in)visibility and interactive format are highly calibrated and, for this reason, run isomorphic to the broader world of local politics. The two can touch, as they do in confession, But they must also be detached.

The same is true with the Divine Liturgy. It would be foolish to launch an interpretation of this particular ritual, both because of the wide-ranging theological discourse that surrounds it, and for the complex ways in which it is approached in a place like al-‘Aziya. What is more economical, and perhaps more revealing, is to observe when this ritual activity goes astray and is corrected; that is, when there is ritual repair. The Sunday morning Divine Liturgy at the “northern” Catholic church, for instance, is the liturgy I most often attended. The main sanctuary was still under construction, so the liturgy would be held in the first-floor gathering space. This area has low ceilings and few adornments. The walls were still unpainted at that time; surrounding the congregation were walls made of poured concrete and red brick. About three hundred metal chairs filled the space, and men would sit on one side, and women and children on the other. Near the front I would always see Hanna Anis, seated alongside men of the same age. All would be wearing crisp jellabiyas, with white or blue scarfs tied tightly around their heads. There would be some young men as well. Women would likely outnumber the men, some dressed in black, others in robes of muted colors, most wearing some kind of gold jewelry. Many people in attendance would be members of the Sama‘an, but there would be men and women from other clans as well. Either Fr. Bishoy or Fr. Agnatus would be the main celebrant, and there would be anywhere between five to ten young boys to serve at the altar. Often I would concelebrate, or hear confessions, or do both at the same time.

There was never a moment of complete ritual breakdown. There were occasions when I was surprised at something that occurred. At times Fr. Bishoy or Fr. Agnatus would stop the liturgy momentarily and tell the altar servers to pay attention or keep quiet. There would also be some confusion between priest and altar server, much of which would be resolved by the flick of the wrist or a tug at the server’s alb. But the closest the liturgy ever came to a grinding halt was

when I struggled with pronouncing some of the Arabic words in my early days of concelebration. People often discussed the voice of priests, especially in regard to their ability to chant (or lack thereof). The Liturgy of St. Basil, which is the rite used most often on Sundays, takes about an hour and a half to complete, and most of the time is spent reciting or chanting the text. The text itself changes very little according to the liturgical season, and faithful attendees know it by heart. When I would stumble over a word, I would inevitably hear someone shout the correct pronunciation. The gestures performed by the priest in the liturgy preoccupied me, largely because I could never get a straightforward explanation of what to do.⁶ But the attention of those participating in the liturgy was directed mostly toward the enunciation of the text, which they expected to be clear and pleasing to the ear.

The other way in which the liturgy would start to break down would be in the distribution of blessed goods. There were no problems with distributing the eucharist. What made for problems were the items that would only occasionally be blessed and distributed, such as oil and water. On Holy or “Great” Thursday, for instance, people will place bottles of water in front of the altar screen. During the liturgy, there is a very long blessing of the water, and the priest will use blessed water to bless the containers at his feet – a transference of *baraka* with many parallels in Coptic piety (Heo 2018b:84). When I attended the service, Fr. Bishoy had deposited several dozen small bottles of water in bulk in front of the altar screen, all of which were blessed as well. However, when the liturgy came to an end and people started to collect their bottles, there was confusion over which bottle belonged to whom. All of the extra bottles brought by Fr. Bishoy were carried off, so Fr. Bishoy had Fr. Agnatius retrieve more large plastic bottles of water from his car, which were then sprinkled with the water that had already been blessed.

Similar kinds of attempts at ritual repair occurred with oil that had been blessed through contact with holy relics, and would be distributed through small vials.

These two examples are simple, but I think an important insight about the Divine Liturgy, and the sacramental order in general, can be drawn from them. Language and exchange are fundamental aspects of any social order; they are also dimensions through which social inequalities are marked and reinforced. In these examples, however, the ritual repair restores a certain prescribed way in which the priest and the people communicate, and by which blessed goods are distributed. This communication, like in confession, is idealized and needs to be kept separate from the normal world of discourse. The distribution of *baraka* follows its own principles, which can include inequalities. Still, these formatted patterns of behavior are different from the normal state of affairs. As a ritual agent, I was obliged to speak in a certain way; Fr. Bishoy was obliged to provide the blessed water to all who desired it. The sacramental and the social are kept distinct. When discussing baptism earlier, I made reference to Jonathan Z. Smith's theory of ritual, which applies in this case as well. "Ritual," he writes, "is a relationship of difference between 'nows' – the now of everyday life and the now of ritual place; the simultaneity, but not the coexistence, of 'here' and 'there'...One is invited to think of the potentialities of the one 'now' in terms of the other; but the one cannot become the other" (1987:110). Doing ritual well, be it in confessions or in the Divine Liturgy, involves the maintenance of these boundaries. These activities reflect social life and mirror it, but the divide between the two cannot be collapsed.

Pluralism Revisited

Given that the relative absence of Muslims makes al-‘Aziya an exceptional town, it might be asked where Islam fits into this discussion on vendettas and reconciliations. Outside of al-‘Aziya, there is a sense among (at least some) Christians that Muslims are the ones who carry out vendettas. The reality, of course, is more complicated, and these two views, as I have tried to show, can coexist in Coptic communities. But the focus of this study has been on this particular town, and the absence of Muslims, at least in the telling of some people, is connected with an inability to bring vendettas to an end through reconciliation. When I began my fieldwork I wondered whether the mechanics of the *sulh* might be associated with Muslims. In the next chapter, we will learn more about Beni ‘Adi, the large majority-Muslim town immediately to the north. “Over there,” Hanna Anis told me, “there have been many *sulhs*.” Another man said that, in Beni ‘Adi, parents raise their children well, and when there are vendettas, there is more pressure from the community for families to reconcile. But this comparison was made in terms of geography, not religion. It was my idea to apply the framework of religious difference, and it was not matched with any interest from my interlocutors. I had to let it go.

Yet the Muslim Other is still present in these pages, albeit in relief. When Fr. Bishoy held his *sulh*, Shaykh Raf‘at, the Muslim cleric who delivered an oratory at Fr. Boulos’s funeral, was present, and one imagines that many of the dignitaries present were Muslims. The St. Mark church had been built because of Christian-Muslim violence. Islam, one might say, has never been far from the picture. But even when al-‘Aziya residents have had the opportunity to blame their struggles with family violence on an “Islamic” culture – something I would occasionally hear voiced by sophisticated Copts in Cairo – this step was never taken. Instead, discussion and activity concerning vendettas and reconciliations only forced people to look inward. Hanna Anis

drew upon the language of scripture to frame the problem, and Fr. Bishoy made use of his newly-adopted Western perspective to provide a diagnosis. When solutions or responses to vendettas appeared on the horizon (sometimes literally), they too bore the fingerprints of Christian identity and presence. If Muslims were present in the formation of these byproducts from the world of vendettas, it was only as a foil to emphasize the Christian character of this problem, and the pursuit of some, like Fr. Bishoy, for a solution.

The lesson here is not simply that these two religious traditions do not touch when it comes to issues of vendettas, reconciliation, and customary law more generally. They obviously do. What is instead at work is a process of experimentation, of debate and reform, of internal engagement that happens among Christians, and which is enabled by the “freedom” many claim to experience in al-‘Aziya. In following Shryock (2004a), I have framed this interaction as a “shadow zone,” a conceptual space where such work can occur. The demands of pluralism then are expressed in the way Muslim absence creates these zones. That this situation is unusual in contemporary Egypt does not detract from its importance. One might say the reverse is true. For if Christianity is to be an object of anthropological study, one that both interlocutors and ethnographers can discuss and observe, then the challenges that arise in exceptional spaces force a reckoning of where “Christianity” begins and ends, of what it includes or does not, and of how it should or should not be represented.

Vendettas make this point in a powerful way. To some outside observers, it might seem offensive to frame a religious minority like Copts as perpetrators of violence, and not victims of it. Some of the most moving images I witnessed during my fieldwork occurred in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. Families would gather and watch the live feed of funerals, and there were interviews of survivors who publicly forgave those who committed these terrorist acts. These

images of Copts are those perhaps most familiar to observers outside of Egypt, and many people in al-‘Aziya know this. But the coexistence of this suffering, motivated by sectarian and political tension, with the local world of vendettas is itself part of the problem that must be worked out. The refusal on the part of al-‘Aziya residents to read Christian-Muslim antagonism into a church built where a young Christian man was killed by a Muslim is a perfect case in point. This particular act of violence has not been folded into the broader political climate; in fact, it is not even clear how this church fits in with the broader Christian landscape. But because of the lack of restrictions in al-‘Aziya – because of Muslim absence – these sorts of questions could be asked.

In a majority-Christian setting, it can also be hard to draw the line between the ritual work of liturgy and the world beyond. This dynamic produces its own set of problems. When studying Copts, the ethnographer’s attention will always be directed toward the church and the monastery – places where Christians can interact and worship on their own terms. To study this idealized setting, though, raises the question of what exactly sets it apart from other domains of life. Appeals to ritual only go so far. As we have seen, the *sulh*, itself a ritual of sorts, has only a veneer of Christian belief (i.e., reciting the Our Father). It is a ritual that lives comfortably outside the church walls. Again, in this exceptional situation, where someone like Fr. Bishoy attempts to bridge the two, boundaries are tested and new questions are raised. Is it possible for a priest to organize a *sulh*? How does authority within the church translate to authority among families? These questions also take shape in the absence of Muslims, in a world where Christians create their own distinct society. These questions are worked out in the landscape of the town; through its buildings and the organization of its space. It is a kind of politics that is vibrant. It is also fraught with danger.

+++++

It is a Saturday evening in August. I am staying up late, talking with Fr. Agnatius. I had decided to spend the night in al-‘Aziya, and Fr. Agnatius is hosting me in his small apartment behind the “northern” church. After dinner, we go and sit in his bedroom. He has a small air-conditioning unit, and we both take in the cool air. I have given Fr. Agnatius an e-cigarette as a gift, and he puffs away while we catch up and talk about the day. By this point, Fr. Agnatius has become a friend. He likes to help me with my research, and being an outsider himself – he is from another town in Upper Egypt – he enjoys breaking down the strange dynamics of al-‘Aziya.

Most of the time, Fr. Agnatius is in a good mood. Tonight he is not. I know that he and Fr. Bishoy have had some disagreements, and I always try to support Fr. Agnatius without alienating myself from my host. But something has changed. “I’m going to quit, Father,” Fr. Agnatius tells me in English. “Tomorrow after the Divine Liturgy, I’m going to go to the bishopric. The bishop can do whatever he wants with me.” He points toward his computer. “I’m going to print out my homily so that no one can say that I was talking about Fr. Bishoy.” I want to have him rethink this decision, but he seems resolved. He gets up and turns on the TV, and soon I head over to the couch in the nearby sitting room and fall asleep.

Daybreak comes early. I feel the cool morning air, and already there is noise drifting in from the street. Fr. Agnatius is at his small kitchen table and offers to make me some tea. Priests are supposed to fast from food and drink before the Divine Liturgy, but I find it daunting to handle myself in Arabic without some caffeine. I quickly drink my tea as I put on my cassock and shoes. By the time I make it into the sanctuary, Fr. Agnatius has already started the service. On Sundays, I tend to hear confessions during the liturgy – my attempt at repaying Fr. Bishoy and Fr. Agnatius for their help and hospitality. I sit in the back by the baptistry, and men and

women will occasionally come in and give their confession. There is little silence in the Divine Liturgy, and so I have to lean over and cover one ear just to hear what is being said. Thankfully the confessions finish just in time for me to listen to Fr. Agnatius's homily. I grab my notebook.

As Fr. Agnatius begins to preach, I notice that Fr. Bishoy has entered the church and is seated in the back. He must have known that today would be Fr. Agnatius's last day in the parish. I keep an eye on him.

Fr. Agnatius launches into a discourse on faith. What is faith? Who has it, and who does not? He is a gifted preacher; his voice soars when he drives home a point.

Faith isn't an instructor in empty speech! This running of empty speech and running of prideful speech, it's all about the pride of one's being, the pride of a type of person given over to the flames.

There is much I do not understand, but it is clear that Fr. Bishoy is upset. Later I would hear that he thought the homily had been a veiled commentary about him. He gets up and leaves the church. After the homily and the rest of the liturgy, Fr. Agnatius announces that today is his last day at the parish. Some of those in the pews look at each other, but there is less reaction than I would have expected. The liturgy ends, and I follow Fr. Agnatius as he returns to his apartment.

Waiting for us there are three men from the parish council. Fr. Bishoy eventually shows up as well. The men keep a solemn face, and one asks Fr. Agnatius if he really needs to leave – *lazm timshi?* Fr. Agnatius goes into his room and retrieves a metal box. He opens it, takes out a wad of cash, and starts to count it for everyone to see. The men from the council check their ledgers, and Fr. Bishoy takes some of the money and tries to give it back to Fr. Agnatius, who refuses. "No," he says, curtly. After their business is concluded, Fr. Agnatius looks at me and says, "Let's go, Father." He goes into his room and returns with two large duffel bags. He opens the back hatch of his jeep, tosses in his luggage, and then gets into the driver's seat. I am barely

in the car myself when he peels out of the dusty patch in front of the church. He drives quickly down the *asfelt*; pedestrians and tuk-tuks hurry to get out of his way. “Did you see him try to give me money like that?” he says. “Like I’m his servant.”

When we get to the bishopric, Fr. Agnatius asks the secretary for a guest room, and I sneak off to my own room to process what has happened. Several hours later, I start to get calls from an unknown number. Then there is a text message. “Father, I am Mina, please answer me.” I know the name – he is a young man from the Duraba who had recently started to attend the Divine Liturgy at the “northern” Catholic church. I decide not to answer.

The next day, I learn the full story. After word spread of Fr. Agnatius’s sudden departure, men from the Duraba had come together and decided to take action. One of them took a metal chain, looped it through the handles of the church gate, and locked it. Another stood by with a bolt-action rifle. People had heard that these men from the Duraba were threatening to shoot Fr. Bishoy if he tried to open the church. “Either Fr. Agnatius returns, or Fr. Bishoy must go” was the message, supposedly sent to the Catholic bishop. Mina’s numerous phone calls, I come to understand, were an attempt to recruit me to broker some kind of agreement between the two priests.

When I bring these events up with my friends in al-‘Aziya, I hear other stories. I learn that Fr. Bishoy’s brother had readied himself to go to the church – armed, if necessary – to challenge those who threatened to shoot his brother. I hear that the bishop had been alarmed at what happened, and refused to counter the challenge thrown down by the Duraba. There had even been a delegation from the parish or from the Duraba (accounts varied) that went to the bishopric to press the bishop to send Fr. Agnatius back. There even circulated on WhatsApp a clip taken from one of the Coptic television stations. The reporter, during a news segment,

announces that there had been a disagreement between the two priests at the Catholic church in al-‘Azayza (she confuses the town’s name with another). “It’s a shame” (*khusara*), she says, but things like this happen. Left with no recourse, Fr. Bishoy abandons his role as pastor. It marks the end of our time together in his hometown.

Conclusion

Why was Fr. Bishoy exiled from his hometown? Few had an answer. For those who dared to talk about the matter, it seemed that he had left in order to avoid starting a feud with the Duraba. Others blamed the Catholic bishop for not taking a stronger stance in the matter. Over time, a consensus formed around what was deemed the true scandal: that two priests had been celebrating the Divine Liturgy together in public while (supposedly) harboring anger toward each other in private. People were disappointed at how the whole situation played out. But they were most disappointed in the two priests.

Was this intervention by the Duraba an attempt at ritual repair? Or was it an attempt to force a reconciliation of sorts between priests? Given the various ways the logic of feud collides with that of priestly ritual, it is tough to tell. The work of trying to discern an answer, or even figure out what question to ask, has been the topic of this chapter. Vendettas exist in a shadow zone. Their effect on the town’s landscape is discerned through the generative instability of space. The relationship between these feuds and the Christian faith is also not clear. For men like Hanna Anis, there is no problem in an idea of a generational curse, that a man might die in payment for the sins of his father. What is sinful in his eyes is doing something that only God should do. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” For others like Fr. Bishoy, this attitude is reflective of a backward mentality, one that can only be remedied through use of antiquated rituals. But these attitudes do not exist in a vacuum. At least in al-‘Aziya, these issues

can easily escape their analytical bonds and collapse the divides between culture/religion and church/town. For many months I tried to “figure out” how these vendettas work, and why Fr. Bishoy was forced to leave. Finally I realized that my questions were the same as those of everyone else. It was a problem we came to face together.

¹ People in al-‘Aziya would often mention, even brag, about the proliferation of guns in their town. Most families were thought to have at least one. I was even told that, on account of its armed residents, al-‘Aziya is known by its neighbors as “the Second Israel.”

² One of Oram’s contacts, an Orthodox priest, had himself been caught up in a vendetta. She writes that “shortly afterwards rumors circulated through the village that the Coptic family was planning to take revenge by killing Father S. because he was the ‘bravest and always a leader’ and was assumed to have masterminded the murder” (2004:112).

³ As was the case in the Upper Egyptian village of Sanabu, where in 1992 tensions led to the massacre of thirteen Copts. Sana Hasan has also noted the way vendettas have reverberated within church politics. She writes: “Pope Shenuda contributed to the moral character and capability of his coreligionists during the Mubarak years...by reenacting for his people, whenever they were tested by Islamic militancy, the cultural model of saintliness and martyrdom...asserting the precept of a public ethic as opposed to private obligations to family and friends he ruled out the kind of vendettas between Christians and Muslims which were the bane of Upper Egypt” (2003:119).

⁴ Hanna Anis’s depiction of the young Sama’an boy in some ways reflects an observation made by Michael Gilsenan (2016) on the social utility of lying. Gilsenan observes that, in order to defuse a possible feud, people can deem someone “crazy,” and therefore released from the constraints of everyday moral interaction.

⁵ Most families in al-‘Aziya maintained plots of roughly one-acre. Sometimes families would combine their land, but it was rare to see more than four or five acres being farmed by one family (with the exception of some of the land at the furthestmost western edge of town). These plots provided side income alongside other forms of business.

⁶ Learning to celebrate the Liturgy of St. Basil was almost like learning a dance. There were no books (other than the ritual book itself) that priests could give me to help me learn, and every priest seemed to have his own version of saying the liturgy. I simply had to follow their motions and hope for them to correct my errors. A Coptic Catholic bishop even told me not to worry too much about the gestures; a rather lax attitude that compares sharply with the insistence, shared by priests and the laity, that every word from the rite must be read aloud as written. For more on the structure of the Divine Liturgy, see Abdelsayed 2014.

PART III
The New Coptic Landscape

CHAPTER 5

Piety and Wealth on Display

For painting to be destined for flatness, it must be made to be seen as flat. For it to be seen as flat, the links that connect its images in the hierarchies of representation have to be loosened.

Jacques Rancière
Painting in the Text

Numerous houses in al-‘Aziya have images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, or other saints painted on their front doors and exterior walls. Alongside the many churches, these images are what most clearly announce that the majority of the town is Christian. Walking down the streets of the more compact eastern side and the opening expanse of the west, one easily detects a particular style at work. Most of the images of the Virgin Mary, for instance, depict her in the same pose: her head lowered, her arms slightly lifted at her side, and her hands open and palms facing outward. This format is not unique to al-‘Aziya. This particular image, and others like it, exist within a relatively limited aesthetic repertoire that extends throughout other Coptic communities in Egypt. It is also worth noting that little else accompanies these images. Rarely does one find text next to them – and if there is text, it is likely from scripture. There are no painted logos of soccer teams, as one might find in Cairo. In fact, there is almost no pictorial

imagery that is not explicitly Christian (decoration, or *zina*, is another matter). These images only change when one walks to the north of the St. George church, where the irrigation canal separates a cluster of old, mud-brick homes from the eastern fields. In this part of town, where the small Muslim community lives, it is easy to spot a crudely painted airplane on a few doors and walls – a marker signaling that a member of the household has made pilgrimage to Mecca.

One way of thinking about these images is that they are part of a broader series of social transformations. Icons (*iquniat*) are an important aspect of Coptic identity and spirituality. These images are not icons, of course, but they are related. Icons are produced only by people trained in the practice, and they tend to be attached to churches and monasteries (Ouspensky 1999; Heo 2018a). These images, however, might be said to extend these icons into the world. People speak of them simply as “pictures” (*suwwar*); here I will refer to them as “Coptic images” and “Coptic imagery.” These images are ubiquitous in the homes and shops of Copts throughout Egypt. Now they can even be found in the vast Coptic mediascape; in satellite television programs, and on social media platforms. They have even colonized other, more traditional domains of Coptic aesthetics. Hanna Anis could recall a time not too long ago when children in al-‘Aziya would receive a tattoo of a small cross on their wrist, administered with ash and mother’s milk. “That’s so it’ll be pure!” he explained. Now the same tattoo is given with tattoo ink, enabling a whole range of Coptic images to be placed on the body. In getting to know the people of al-‘Aziya, I had to familiarize myself with this relatively new and surprisingly consistent repertoire of images.

This florescence of Coptic images, while connected to a rich theological tradition, also reflects recent historical developments in the Coptic Orthodox Church. During what some historians have called the “renewal” (*nahda*) of the Coptic Orthodox Church, usually thought to

have started with the reforms of Pope Cyril IV (r.1854-61) but which gained speed during the papacy of Pope Cyril VI (r.1959-71), the Coptic identity became more visible and politicized in Egypt – a change that coincided with the growth of diasporic communities in North America, Europe, and Australia.¹ The effects of this “renewal” are numerous. Old monasteries that had once housed only a few monks, if any at all, were reestablished and repopulated – a topic I will discuss in the final chapter. Educational initiatives were expanded, most notably through the Sunday School Movement. Benevolent societies were created to provide welfare assistance to church communities. The clergy was reshaped through new forms of training and instruction. This story is complex. What is important to note is that this new Coptic landscape has tightened the association between Copts and the Orthodox Church, thus encouraging forms of public identity that are explicitly religious. While there are obviously non-Orthodox Copts, they also move through this circulation of imagery, and there are even moments of cross-fertilization. To be a Copt now means being *visibly* Coptic in ways unimaginable a half century ago.

Anthropologists have tended to discuss the evolution of Coptic imagery as a theological question with political overtones (Luehrmann 2010; Heo 2018a; El Gendi and Pinfari 2020). This approach understandably prioritizes icons. But in doing so, other images with less defined theological status drift out of view. What this chapter aims to show is that these Coptic images – some being icon-adjacent, others less so but still visibly religious – raise a series of perhaps more challenging questions: How sacred images circulate outside the church walls? What kind of *baraka* do they transmit, and how? What kind of surfaces do they require? How are they verified, and can they be rejected? This line of inquiry invites us to leave the realm of liturgy and examine how a Coptic aesthetics – one that is in some ways new – has taken shape in the world.

Over the last twenty years, the town of al-‘Aziya has been a canvas for the painting and display of these images. During this same period of time, there has been an influx of wealth. This wealth has fueled the building of new homes and churches. In doing so, it has also produced the conditions for appearance of these images; that is, the walls on which they are painted and the spaces in which they are observed. In this town, as elsewhere, political economy and the public display of piety are intertwined. This entanglement locates the proliferation of Coptic imagery in relation to factors that, at face value, do not seem religious. This broader set of concerns is itself a form of pluralism. How do these kinds of Coptic images exist alongside other kinds of images, be they foreign, manipulated, or sinful? Or, when looking at issues of political economy, how does the Other (in this case, Muslim neighbors to the north) help create the condition for this kind of Coptic imagery? These are questions that will be examined in the following pages.

New Wealth, Old Networks

In al-‘Aziya it is easy for young men to find work in a variety of industries. Many seek work in “trade” (*tajara*): an expansive category that can involve selling cheap clothing, furniture, plastic mats, and other ware to visitors coming to al-‘Aziya. It might also involve taking these goods to market in nearby towns. Young unmarried women can also easily find employment. For instance, some work as seamstresses in one of the dozens of homes that have converted extra bedrooms into tiny workspaces. The reason people give for this economic vitality – in a region known for its poverty and high unemployment (Gran 2004) – is that, as Christians, they cannot secure government sinecures. While there is discrimination against Christians when it comes to state employment, I should note that this explanation does not go very far. People recall that the town looked much different a quarter century ago. Real estate was far cheaper, most people

farmed the land, and money was scarce. All of this has changed, and quickly. The town's economic strength is a recent phenomenon, and it has produced new wealth.

Of all the industries in al-'Aziya, the one that has generated the most income is that of selling used automobiles. If people have heard of the town outside the Asyut region, it is likely because the name has come up in talk about buying and selling cars. Every day, minibuses will rumble down the *asfelt*, packed with people traveling between Asyut and the three towns of Jahdam, al-'Aziya, and Beni 'Adi. It was the ride I took most mornings, and occasionally I would hear someone ask, "Where are the car lots [*m'arad*]?" The reply: "They're all along this street!" The confusion is somewhat understandable since these lots are hard to distinguish from the houses that surround them. There are approximately fifty lots in al-'Aziya, and most are located either in the expanded garages of homes on the *asfelt* or on concrete driveways in front of them. A typical lot will only have four or five cars. Most of these cars are pickup trucks – Chevrolets, Nissans, Isus – that have been equipped with metal flaps around the bed. These pickup trucks are ubiquitous in Egypt. They are used to transport everything from livestock to construction supplies, and can be purchased for as cheap as eight thousand pounds (\$510).

This particular industry serves as the lens through which residents contextualize the broader social changes they have experienced. The first of these lots opened back in 2004. At that time, there were few houses west of the *asfelt*, and the man who opened the lot had been a peasant with a small patch of land adjacent to the road. As the story goes, he managed to acquire a truck, and then another, and soon he became one of the wealthiest men in town. Others have since followed this rags-to-riches trajectory, giving the industry considerable mystique. New wealth, in disrupting kin groups and other social relations, has been shown to give way to malicious rumors (J. Comaroff and J.L. Comaroff 1999). Similar social disruption has followed

in the wake of these used car lots. It is widely thought that some of these lots make their profit by acquiring stolen cars on the cheap, and then reselling them at normal rates. Others associate the lots with the traffic of other illicit goods, such as weapons or drugs. I was ready to dismiss all this talk as gossip until I learned that a man whose car had been stolen in Cairo had just arrived in al-‘Aziya to buy a new one. He found his old car on sale and called the police.

This influx of new wealth also disrupts moral sensibilities in a deeper, and perhaps more profound way. When I would try to hammer down the details of the auto lots – How do installment plans work? Where do the customers come from? – my hosts would slowly shift the conversation to the topics they cared about, which tended to center on skewered moral judgments. One young man named Bassam told me, with noticeable frustration, that people in the town equate wealth with intelligence and “cleverness” (*shatara*), even if the wealth happens to be inherited, or acquired simply by good fortune. “The people who used to own land by the *asfelt* – they did nothing, but now they are rich,” he explained. As Bassam helped me see, the real wealth now is not to be found in the auto lots. It is in the people who rent their land to lot owners, sometimes for over one thousand pounds a month (\$64). They do nothing and yet they get rich – a rentier class that is the envy of many.

There are other industries that made some people wealthy, or at least better off than their parents. I will discuss another such industry at the end of this chapter. But the auto lots serve as the upward limit of what one might hope to gain through hard work (or by other means) in the town. There is a sense that rising waters lift all boats, and the money spent by these customers – almost all coming from elsewhere – made the town better off. Yet the trade has also spurred reflection on the declining morals of the town. In short, this industry is a shorthand way to talk about al-‘Aziya character, both in its strengths (hard working) and its weaknesses (cares only for

money). Perhaps not coincidentally, these auto lots tend to cluster in the northern part of the town – right where several large, relatively new churches stand. Leaving church, people will pass men washing their cars and engaging with customers. When residents think about the moral character of the town, both these sites come to mind.

This final point is important because, for as much as people speak about the car industry as an object of local pride and fascination, it did not originate in al-‘Aziya. Instead it grew out of an auto market in Beni ‘Adi (pop. 145,000), a large majority-Muslim town located immediately to the north. The *asfelt* runs between these two towns, and auto lots line the road in Beni ‘Adi as well. The difference is that Beni ‘Adi’s commercial zone is modern and comprehensive. Over there one can purchase sedans, pickup trucks, construction vehicles, even motorcycles. There are glass-encased showrooms and lots dedicated to specific brands, all of which contrast sharply with the haphazard, open air “lots” in al-‘Aziya. When I brought these things up to Hanna Anis, he sharpened this distinction. “Yes, there are more lots in Beni ‘Adi,” he agreed. But, he added, over ninety percent of them are owned by the same clan. “They have many resources! Many doctors, policemen, wealth, land...” This litany was intended as praise. When people in al-‘Aziya speak of Beni ‘Adi, they refer to its large clans (*‘a’ilat*) with connections in Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt. The entrepreneurs in al-‘Aziya, it seems, managed to attract spillover from the Beni ‘Adi market, selling secondhand cars to those priced out of the upscale markets to the north.

Beni ‘Adi marks a fixed point on the northern horizon, and serves as an objective standard by which al-‘Aziya residents judge themselves. In fact, when talking about subjects other than cars, the people of al-‘Aziya show a strange respect for their neighbors. The reader might recall that Beni ‘Adi has been the site of several *sulhs*, as al-‘Aziya residents know. When

I asked why this was the case, a doctor told me, “There, they will correct a child if he does something bad. Here, we are corrupted [*mutahawarin*].” That most of Beni ‘Adi is Muslim does not matter at all. If anything, the presence of a Muslim majority is thought to provide a cultural and moral infrastructure that majority-Christian al-‘Aziya lacks. Hanna Anis would speak to me of the *kuttab* in Beni ‘Adi – an Islamic center of learning he and other Christians associate with moral cultivation. Beni ‘Adi also has a satellite campus of al-Azhar University, the large Islamic center of learning in Cairo, as well as the police stations, hospitals, and other civil institutions that are lacking in al-‘Aziya.

This sense of economic and moral inferiority becomes more complex when viewed in terms of the history of the region. All along the cliffs that rise on this part of the Nile valley, there are only two points where passage between the valley and the western desert is easily traversed. One is immediately to the west of Asyut, the other is near Beni ‘Adi. These points of entry into the valley were once part of the *darb al-‘arbayeen* – the trade route of “forty days” that would bring slaves, camels, and objects of trade up from southern regions such as Sennar and Darfur (Georgy 2015). This location at the crossroads of a major trade route once gave Beni ‘Adi much strategic importance. In 1799, the French army fought a pitched battle against peasants from Beni ‘Adi, an event recorded by contemporaneous Egyptian chronicler Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti. Later the Egyptian ruler Muhammad ‘Ali placed a garrison in Beni ‘Adi (Georgy 2015), and ‘Ali Pasha Mubarak, the nineteenth-century Egyptian geographer, offers a lengthy description of the town, which runs longer than his entry for Asyut. Mubarak gushes for pages about the great families of Beni ‘Adi, reproducing many of the names found in al-Jabarti’s chronicle. People in al-‘Aziya are only vaguely aware of this history, and their town is absent from this textual history.

BÉNI 'ADY : L'ARRIVÉE DES CARAVANES DU SOUDAN

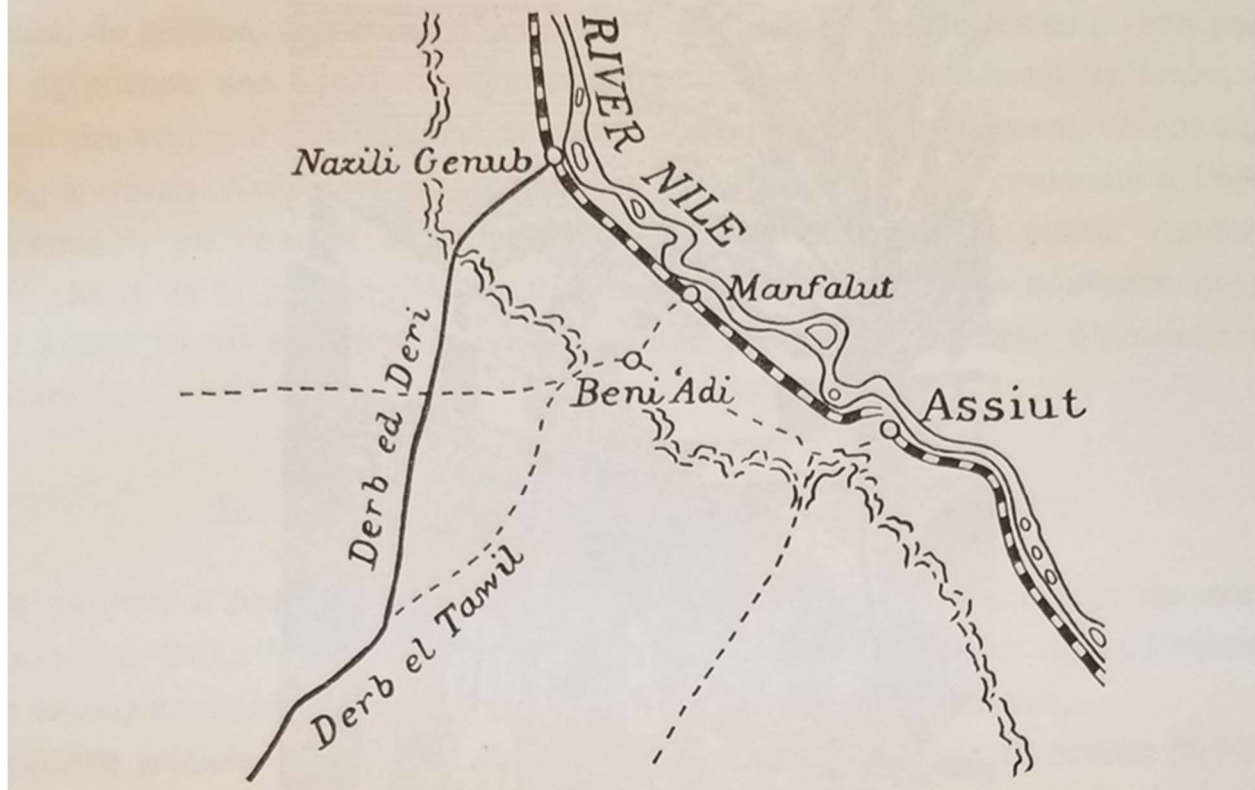


Fig. 5.1 “Beni ‘Adi: The arrival of caravans from the Sudan.” Copied from Sauneron 1983:123. Note the western ridgeline, with the two points of entry into the Nile Valley being at Beni ‘Adi and Asyut.

There are other, murkier ways in which al-‘Aziya is entangled with its northern neighbor, and with other majority-Muslim towns in the region. The influx of cash into the local economy has given way to the common practice of extending loans on interest. There are wealthy families in al-‘Aziya that lend money. Some are known to be loan sharks. I was told they give out easy loans to those addicted to gambling, only to claim the debtor’s possessions or home if payment is not made. I also heard that Muslims from other towns might come to al-‘Aziya, where they take loans without having to deal with bank regulation. Then again, the accumulation of hidden money always fuels speculation, and I could never test the claims people would make on these topics.

What is clear is that, at least in issues of money and economy, people in al-‘Aziya live in conceptual proximity to Islam. The issue of usury is a case in point. Generally speaking, Christians have a less uniform approach to *fayda* (“interest”) than Muslims, for whom usury (*riba*) is technically forbidden. Christians in al-‘Aziya do not care what Muslim think about the issue. There is no discussion of Islamic viewpoints; any talk of Islam as a religion is likely to be cast in harsh language.² However, the possibility of usury being sinful – itself an effect of Muslim discourse – is certainly alive. When I asked Hanna Anis for his thoughts, he was surprisingly direct. “Usury is wrong!” he said. “It’s written here,” he added, grabbing his phone to read a verse from the Book of Psalms (15:5): “He does not lend his money at interest, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. One who does these things will never be shaken.” Fr. Bishoy disagreed when I asked for his view. “I always say that it is fine to charge interest if it’s at the same rate the bank charges.” When I was seated with the shaykhs of the Evangelical church, a woman interrupted the meeting to ask whether *fayda* was “allowed or not allowed” (*haram aw halal*). She explained that another woman – the wife of a prominent member of the church – had been arguing with her husband over the issue and wanted an answer. The room went quiet, and finally one of the shaykhs, somewhat reluctantly, answered, “It’s not allowed. Tell her, it’s not allowed.” One young man, who himself attended both the Catholic and Evangelical churches, attributed these disagreements to the fear some priests and pastors have of alienating wealthy congregants, who could just as easily start attending another church. His view was that usury is wrong – again, it says so in the Bible – but the clergy are too weak to challenge the rich.

Like Beni ‘Adi, and the Muslims who (supposedly) come to take loans, Islam hovers in the near distance in a variety of ways. A common thread is money and, more broadly, political economy. Occasionally, Christians in desperate circumstances might use the threat of conversion

to acquire financial assistance. I witnessed this strange form of extortion once when Fr. Bishoy spoke on the phone with a parishioner. The man claimed he had a week to pay back a ten thousand pound loan he had taken out on interest. He told Fr. Bishoy that if the church did not help him, he and his family would convert to Islam. Completely unfazed, Fr. Bishoy replied, “It doesn’t matter if you’re a Christian or Muslim. The parish does not have the money. If I had the money, I’d give it. I don’t have it.” Perhaps this was an empty threat. But a Christian schoolteacher in al-‘Aziya did convert to Islam during my fieldwork. Some suspected he did so to avoid paying back loans. Others thought it was to escape a bad marriage. In one household, a lively debate took place over whether he might have converted out of conviction. Conversion to Islam is the ultimate escape hatch – a topic with obvious political ramifications at the national level (Mahmood 2016). Yet in the context of al-‘Aziya, Islam often appears in the context of money and networks of trade, which themselves evoke shared registers of moral evaluation. Many people in al-‘Aziya considered their financial success to stem from their distinctly Christian identity. But so often, entanglements with their Muslim neighbors are not far away.

From Wall to Surface

Walls, surfaces, canvases: these are not given, but are themselves afforded by a broader arrangement of social forces. The brief overview I have just provided of the town’s political economy gives a sense of what some of these social forces might be. There is new wealth. There is the town’s proximity to, yet removal from, a majority-Muslim center of prestige. And there is an unbounded landscape. Although available land is now scarce in the east and along the *asfelt*, the western part of the town is contained only by the cliffs at the valley edge. Each of these forces seem to invite barriers (or foreclose them). For instance, one of the key features of the town’s landscape, as we shall see here, is its economic inequality. New wealth has spurred the

building of new kinds of walls and other material forms of separation. Henri Lefebvre (1991:303), in his classic study on political economy and placemaking, writes of a shift from “enclosing walls designed to separate the inside from the outside, interior from exterior” to walls “reduced to a surface, and this in turn to a transparent membrane.” Lefebvre had a very different context in mind, yet his suggestion that walls can change character – that they can be remade to display different kinds of things, is a thought I want to hold onto.³ Couched in his language, we might ask: how do these new walls, built through the convergence of these various forces, turn into surfaces?

This question can be answered by looking at the different economic groups that are distributed across the town. Before I began my fieldwork, I stayed with a group of Coptic Catholic sisters in Luxor. One of the sisters had visited al-‘Aziya for years and, in describing the town to the other sisters, resorted to the language of class. There are the poor (*nas t‘aban*) who live to the west, she said, the wealthy people (*nas kibir*), who live along the main road, and the people (*sh‘ab*) who are everywhere else. I did not realize it at the time, but her description was very astute. She saw the town as I would like to present it to you, from the outside-in. The people in al-‘Aziya do not speak in these terms, but they make the same divisions clear in other ways.

Most of the poor live in a neighborhood referred to as “under the wires.” This name comes from the high-voltage lines, suspended by massive metal towers, that hang above these homes. For safety reasons, it is technically illegal to build in this space, and you can easily hear the hum of the electricity as you pass under them. There is little state regulation and an illicit economy has developed around this land. Some of the larger clans, whose households are clustered along specific streets branching off the *asfelt*, will claim the land that extends westward. Since there had been no water or electricity to the west of the *asfelt*, each clan had to

find ways of bringing in water and electricity as they expanded – a wrinkle in the town’s infrastructure that gives them control over whatever expansion happens immediately to their west. The “under the wires” neighborhood is therefore dependent on an electrical and water grid that maps onto kinship groups, which itself maps onto the streets moving westward from the *asfelt*. Residents sometimes complain that this haphazard infrastructure is due to the town’s Christian character – a claim that is partially true, though not in the way often imagined. When some of the Muslim families abandoned the old quarter and moved to the northernmost part of town, they were able to connect to the grid by building a mosque nearby, which the Egyptian state is therefore required to supply with water and electricity. Christians do not have this option.

The precarious existence of those living “under the wires” is reflected in their homes. Most of these homes are built with cheap white blocks that tend to trap heat in the summer. Roofs are made of corrugated metal sheets or dried palm tree branches. These blocks cannot be painted, and it’s unlikely anyone in this neighborhood could afford such a luxury. When I would visit an elderly couple in “under the wires,” they would host me in a sitting room that doubled as a bedroom. I would join the man of the household on his bed, which also served as a couch. Hanging on his walls were old calendars, the kind that are distributed at churches. I also noticed a large image of Jesus Christ – a plastic poster at least three feet in length – that he had managed to secure onto his ceiling of dried branches. This way, he explained, he could look at the Lord as he lay on the bed. Mina was his name; though Orthodox, he barely tolerated priests (“they only care about money”) and tended to prefer the Apostolic church.

This area might be thought of as a sector of town, but the people of al-‘Aziya have a slightly different way of conceptualizing this neighborhood. For them, the area is framed primarily in moral terms. People did not like me visiting “under the wires.” Many assume that

those who end up there do so because they have succumbed to one vice or another – drugs and gambling being the usual suspects. It is also assumed that the town’s criminals live in this area. The men in these places are mostly day-laborers, such as truck drivers and construction workers – dangerous jobs that carry associations with drugs.⁴ These moral judgments are only part of a broader framework that also includes the wealthy who live on the *asfelt*. In the eyes of most residents, many of the poor ended up “under the wires” because they took out loans they could not repay, thus losing their previous home. During my fieldwork, bulldozers showed up twice in this neighborhood to tear down two houses supposedly in violation of code, though no one believed this claim – the entire neighborhood is a code violation. Folks whispered it might be problems with *fayda*. The link between the poor and the wealthy also works the other way. The original owners of auto lots had come from “under the wires,” and there was sometimes a sense that these two groups of people are cut from the same cloth. Each, in some ways, mirrors the other. The poor had lost their money spectacularly, while the rich gain it quickly. For town residents, their landscape reflects these sharp turns.

The wealthy, which include but are not limited to those who sell used automobiles, tend to build their new homes along the northern half of the *asfelt*. This is right where the density of the old quarter gives way to more open space. People had little to say about these large homes – only that they are big and suggest new wealth. Perhaps this lack of interest is due to the logic of their construction, which represents new variations on an old theme. In a typical home, like that of Hanna Anis, the house is divided vertically by generations, with grandparents living on the ground floor and their sons’ families on the floors above. These new homes, on the other hand, are divided horizontally, with brothers each occupying one part of the first floor. In one such house (see fig. 5.2), located next to the “northern” Catholic church, there are two identical



Fig. 5.2 A new house alongside the northern half of the *asfelt*, with used a used car lot in front. Note the “northern” Catholic church in the background.

stairways that lead up to two entrances, with each half being an exact copy of the other. These homes are built with the expectation of adding new floors, so the basic framework still holds. But they represent a nascent compound that only the Duraba, with their long standing political connections, have managed to maintain.

The homes present plenty of surfaces for elaboration. Despite these possibilities, they take on the same muted colors as the churches that also line the *asfelt*. Embellishments on the façade of the house tend to be minor, perhaps to compensate for the large size of the house. Men who have come into wealth tend to be careful about their self-presentation. They continue to wear the traditional *jalabiyya*, they do not wear anything ostentatious (such as sunglasses or necklaces), and they maintain the traditional practices associated with eating and hosting that would be found in any other household. Their houses reflect this aesthetic moderation. They are

bigger, but not noticeably more ornate or opulent. And like the façades of churches, it would be garish to paint a large image of a saint on the side of a home this orderly. Plus, the long porches of these homes double as offices. The men who operate the car lots will spend long hours waiting for business, or having tea with potential customers. These families are ambassadors to the broader world.

It is only in the streets that turn east or west where Coptic images start to appear on walls and doors. This is where the “people” (*sh‘ab*) live. These homes, while often clustered around kinship lines, are inhabited by people engaged in a variety of occupations. A quarter century ago, almost all families would have been farmers. Some, like Hanna Anis, would have held jobs with the state. But now the people work in a variety of other areas. Some produce small-scale goods to be sold at regional markets (cheaply-made clothing; metal chairs and office tables; wooden bed frames, cabinets, and dressers; plastic mats). Others are shop keepers (clothing stores; farming and veterinary supplies; car parts; gold and jewelry; corner stores). There are also professionals of some sort or another (teachers; pharmacists; doctors). Most of the people I came to know in my fieldwork belong to this sector of society. They tend to be the most active members of the town’s various churches.

These homes delineate the safe and traversable parts of town. When I would visit the neighborhood under the wires, my hosts would insist on sending someone with me. They also would ask if I would like accompaniment when going to the home of a wealthy family. But these homes in this wide midrange enjoy a high degree of what might be called social legibility. It is clear which family the household belongs to (the poor and the wealthy being the households in flux), and it is more-or-less clear how they earn a living. Many of these homes have undergone significant renovation due to the overall injection of new wealth, and it is rare to find examples

of the older style of homes, such as those made entirely of mud-brick with domed roofs lined with dried water buffalo dung. Now one is likely to find walls made of poured concrete, high flat ceilings, tile floors, and a large iron front door. Such at least is the house that the guest encounters; sometimes the kitchen and the small animal stall in the back retains the old structure. In a world where the ostentatious self-presentation often generates suspicion, this household design is widely accepted as normal, unremarkable, and easily placed within the larger framework of social relations.

These are the homes that provide the right surfaces for Coptic images to spread. Surfaces are material, of course, but they also are social. These homes are perceived to have a permanence that allows for this kind of expression; their renovated walls allow space for painters to work; they have disposable income to fund this work, but need not worry too much about keeping a modest façade. And perhaps most importantly, there is no concern about upsetting Muslim neighbors. It is a place where Coptic artists can display their images.

Meet the Artists

Mukhlas is a gentle and soft-spoken man in his early twenties (see fig. 5.3). He is also one of the two artists who have produced most of the art in the southeastern part of town. I met Mukhlas through some of the young men who would hang around the St. George Catholic church. My ears perked up when he introduced himself as someone who likes and makes art. Mukhlas does not use that word himself (*fani*) – he claims to just “paint,” though he would like to be an artist someday. We set up a time for me to pay him a visit and to learn more about his work.



Fig. 5.3 The artist in his studio.

When I arrive at the house of Mukhlas's family, he ushers me into the sitting room on the first floor. His mother and sister come in and offer us tea, both delighted to have such an unusual guest. The television is blaring and other members of Mukhlas's family drift in. I am asked the same questions that, by this point, I have heard many times before. How did I learn Arabic? Which is better, Egypt or America? Is your family Egyptian? Mukhlas looks at me and smiles. It seems he knows I am trying to be a good guest, but that I have come to spend time with him. When I have answered everyone's questions, Mukhlas asks if I would like to take a walk. That way he can show me some of the art he has painted in town.

We excuse ourselves and together leave the house. Mukhlas's family lives at the dead end of a small alleyway. Their front door is wooden, encased in an arched doorframe, and the house's exterior walls are made of mud brick. There are no paintings here, nor could there be.

We emerge out of the cramped alleyway and enter the bustle of the old quarter, where renovated homes of poured concrete and large metal doors rise up two and three stories. Mukhlas leads me to the wall that lines part of the Duraba compound on the eastern edge of town. He shows me his first public painting – an image of St. George. He sounds embarrassed, and he identifies the flaws that he now no longer makes: the head of St. George is out of proportion to his body, and the horse and serpent are not well defined. It strikes me that these are critiques of someone invested in his craft. When I ask Mukhlas who hired him to paint the image, he dodges the question, answering in more general terms. “People will pay you to make these copies (*taswir*).”

As we continue our tour through the town, Mukhlas elaborates on this idea. When people hire you, he explains, they only want you to copy an image they have chosen. The image might come from some other form of mediation, like a church calendar or a poster. It also might come from the internet. The only way your work is judged is whether it is an accurate copy of the original. Mukhlas does not like this restriction, and later he will show me some of his artwork that bends these rules. Part of Mukhlas’s complaint is that the internet, and media technology in general, has lifted expectations to unreasonable heights. “People can print any image, and the print copy comes out perfect. They want the same from me!” We pass by several images, some of St. George, others of the Virgin Mary. A few of them are work done by Mukhlas, but he is not particularly proud of them. One of them is of Jesus Christ. His complexion is surprisingly white, and he has striking aqua green eyes. He also has blond hair and a cleft beard. I ask, not sure how to phrase my question, “Why does Jesus look like...a foreigner?” Mukhlas laughs and explains that, again, he has no options. People believe that Jesus must look this way because a monk a long time ago said so. If you change his image, he adds, people “will talk.”

We cross the *asfelt* heading west. Mukhlas is excited to show me one of his current projects. The homes here are larger – not as large as the ones lining the *asfelt*, but more spacious than those in the old quarter. There is also more artwork here, with the large walls and metal doors providing ample flat space, all of which lines the road that runs east and west. We stop at a house and Mukhlas bangs on the door, shouting the homeowner’s name. A man lets us in, and Mukhlas allows me to introduce myself. We walk to the sitting room, and the Mukhlas explains his artwork while the man of the household insists on giving us something to drink. I can see why he is proud of this painting. The unadorned wall and high ceiling provide an enormous canvas for Mukhlas to work with, and he has started to paint a sweeping image of Jesus as Christ the King, seated on a throne of glory. Clouds ripple away from the image, giving the sense that the Lord is hovering in the midst of the room.

As we return to Mukhlas’ house, he talks about these projects situated within the domestic space. He prefers them – they pay better, they are larger, and he can be more creative. This freedom is not always used for good, he adds. A wealthy man whose house lines the *asfelt* had hired Mukhlas to paint a naked woman in his bedroom. “He can ask for that because he doesn’t care what others think,” Mukhlas explains. “Of course I said no.” Others are more in tune with his artistic aspirations. Mukhlas seems to enjoy exploring the contours of space; he is only vaguely aware of Western art, though he would clearly identify with Baroque artists. We swing by the St. George Catholic church, and we walk up and down the aisles, looking at the stations of the cross painted above the windows. Mukhlas likes them, but he says they are not Coptic. “I think they are Italian,” he says. What Mukhlas knows about art stems from the many hours he spends online. He has hundreds of images saved: photographs, paintings, sketches. One

of them, a curious trompe l'oeil, is unlike anything I have seen in al-'Aziya. The image reveals a stone wall behind the trappings of comfort and domesticity.

+++++

Mukhlas does not like Samih, but Samih probably does not care. Older by two decades and gifted with a knack for exploiting niche markets, Samih is Mukhlas's main competitor. Samih was the first to offer his services as a painter in al-'Aziya. There are some paintings on walls and doors that preceded his work; they are easy to spot because they lack uniformity and skill. Samih is gifted with good vision and a steady hand, but he is also very pragmatic. He scales his fees according to how exact a copy his customers want. He knows that some of his work is sloppy. He still gets paid. Mukhlas had been eager to show me his art; Samih, I find, is eager to show me how he earns money.

Samih insists on having me over to this house. With his wife and daughters present, he puts on an entertaining display of craftsmanship and artistry. First he shows me how he can quickly produce the designs he uses to decorate the interior walls he paints. He takes a wooden board and squirts paint onto it, and then uses a brush to turn the wiggly lines into flowers. "That's nothing, Father," he continues, going to the kitchen and returning with small figurines, painted green and teal. These are the "pharaonic" pieces that he makes – his other business. He works with two men in town, he explains. One will look for gullible Muslims from other towns (Christians would be too risky, since they might know people in al-'Aziya). He will explain that a man in al-'Aziya has the ability to locate treasure – the second accomplice. When someone agrees to pay money for a guide to hunt for treasure, Samih will hide his ware in the western edge of town, out by the cliffs. The guide acts like he has an uncanny ability to locate treasure. (Samih imitates the nonsense he might mutter as he looks for the right spot.) Then he will lead

his client to the buried loot. When the victim discovers that his treasure is worthless, everyone will have already disappeared.

Faithful Copy

In the different and idiosyncratic ways they approach their craft, Mukhlas and Samih reflect the curious state of the religious art they produce. As Samih explained, they do not produce icons – those are made by specialists, and they belong in churches. Nor do they make decorations (*zina*), which anyone with a paintbrush can do. Rather they make copies. Mukhlas often used the word “true” or “faithful” (*haqiqi*) to describe the images that are demanded of them. They are religious in that they are reproductions of an original image. Sometimes the image is that of an icon. The many paintings of St. George in the town, for instance, are copies of the same image – a man on horseback slaying the dragon – that can be seen in his icon in the St. George Catholic church (which, of course, is the standard image one would find anywhere else in Egypt). Other times they are copies of images that have icon-like qualities. In my tour with Mukhlas, we stopped by an image of Fr. Boulos he had been hired to paint on the door of a house (see Appendix, fig. 8.4). Fr. Boulos is depicted the same way he appears in the life-size cardboard print of his picture, which hangs in the meeting hall by the church and is carried in the *dura*. Based on an icon or not, these pictures both represent the saint or holy person, whose likeness points back to an original. The copies also mark the threshold of what spiritual benefit might be expected from them. Icons are incorporated into religious practice: they can be touched to gain *baraka*, they can be carried in processions, and they can mediate forms of saintly presence (Heo 2018b:181-85). The work Mukhlas and Samih produce does none of these things.

What then do these images – this “Coptic imagery” – do? When I asked this question to homeowners, the answer was always “*baraka*, Father.” If these paintings deliver *baraka*, they do

so in ways that require little labor on the part of those who enjoy it. Icons, relics, and the special people and objects that distribute *baraka* typically must be touched. As Heo puts it, “the baraka of saints, the substance of holiness, circulates through contact and sympathy” (2018b:87). These images are never handled in this fashion. It would be unthinkable to swipe one’s hand on a door with an image of the Virgin, or a wall with St. George. This observation is more important than it might sound, as I was often surprised to see what exactly counted as an image worthy of producing *baraka*. For instance, when Pope Francis arrived in Cairo in 2017, I happened to be watching the televised news with a family whose father was a devout Catholic. When the news station played video footage of the Pope descending from the Alitalia jet, the father jumped up quickly, touched the screen, and kissed his fingers. “Our father is very Catholic,” one of his adult daughters said, smiling. I knew this family well; their father was another son of Fr. Izhaq, and some of his daughters had become Orthodox upon marriage. They would often joke about their father’s attachment to the memory of their grandfather, which played itself out in his strong attachment to the Catholic church. In short, this gesture was viewed as perhaps extreme (no one else went up and touched the screen), but within the bounds of acceptable practice. The hand-swipe merited a smile and a wink, but no correction. Similar boundary-testing gestures happened with cards of saints in homes (when one fell off the wall, a mother kissed it before putting it back in place), and in my own movement through town, when people, not knowing exactly who I was, were unsure how to touch or kiss my hands.⁵ Again, this kind of experimentation is normal, but it never occurred with the painted images that cover homes.

The tempering of spiritual expectations introduces a curious spin on the rich theoretical conversation on religion and media.⁶ Much of this literature examines the ways that the introduction of new media shapes religious practices (De Vries 2001), or how religious actors

adopt and align new media so that they might better achieve their goals – Islamic preaching distributed on cassette tapes being a helpful example (Hirschkind 2006). Work on icons fits neatly into these conversations, since the power of icons – to produce miraculous oil, for instance – can evade or invite capture from new media technologies like photography (Heo 2018b:197). At least with the case of icons, the focus tends to be on the ways icons are different from other images.⁷ What Mukhlas and Samih are doing, on the other hand, is something of the reverse. They are disentangling or reformatting forms of media that have deep associations with religious practice.

Consider this shift in the terms laid out by Birgit Meyer (2011). Her analysis on religion and media opens with a powerful image. A Pentecostal prayer service has come to a halt because a power outage has killed the microphones, whose mediation is needed to “generate” the desired religious experience (23-4). This use of mediation to produce immediacy – here, sonic mediation that channels the immediate presence of the Spirit – is a pattern that plays out in various religious traditions. Developing this idea, Paul Johnson (2021:112) adds that when saints and holy people come to be represented in such media (through photographs, relics, and tombs), their presence is encountered in various, overlapping, even fragmented ways: “The hybrid nature of saints’ being at once a historical person, a living presence, a localized material thing, and a mode of national or global flow is important because it means that...saints live multiple lives across multiple dimensions, diversely reproduced to circulate even centuries after their birth as saints.” These observations are entirely in sync with the heavy emphasis placed on mediation in Coptic piety, and we have already seen how St. George achieves immediacy in the lives of al-‘Aziya through the mediation of the person of Fr. Boulos, his relics, his apparition, and, of course, his icon. And yet, what does it mean to remove the possibility of mediation from the representation of a saint?

This question is worth asking in regard to Copts because the process of downshifting the mediatory potential of sacred images occurs in other domains as well. In fact, one of the most visible aspects of Coptic identity in public life is tattoos. Muslims, especially in conservative Upper Egypt, do not get tattoos. Almost all Copts, on the other hand, have at least a tattoo of a small cross on the wrist of the right arm. As already mentioned, it is now easy to find Copts with tattoos of a variety of religious images. The repertoire is very similar to what Mukhlas and Nabeel draw from: the formatted depiction of the Virgin, for instance, or the face of Christ with a crown of thorns. The tattoo vendor who set up shop in al-‘Aziya during the *mazar* even had a wooden frame that displayed all the options – each one, of course, being a saint, a cross, or an image of Jesus (see Appendix, fig. 8.4). Getting one of these tattoos is an act of piety, and it is not uncommon to see a young, devout woman with a large image of the Virgin tattooed on her forearm. Paying for and receiving this tattoo is done for *baraka*, though like house paintings, there is little else that needs to occur for this *baraka* to flow. It does not need to be activated through touch or ritual; it has become one-and-the same with the body. Meyer, in developing her thoughts on mediation and immediacy, notes that “media tend to ‘disappear’ when they are accepted as devices that, naturally as it were, ‘vanish’ into the substance that they mediate” (2011:32). But with tattoos and house paintings, the medium remains, but the bearer of *baraka* becomes displaced.

The effect of this reversal is found in the ways these images are folded into the social world. In this broader domain, modesty and domesticity are paramount. In this sense, the parallel between tattoos and house paintings is illustrative. Copts will sometimes make a distinction when talking about tattoos. They will speak about the small cross on the wrist – the kind that everyone gets – as both a source of *baraka* and a social symbol designed for public display.⁸

When speaking about tattoos of Coptic images, however, there is only talk of *baraka*. Because these tattoos are usually given during Coptic festivals, the tattoo must go on parts of the body that are accessible in a public setting, which usually means the arms and shoulders. These tattoos are public almost by default. In analogous ways, the domestic space has levels of exposure, and Mukhlas and Samih primarily tend to operate on surfaces that are most public and visible – doors and exterior walls.

It is only within the household that concerns about modesty are loosened. As we saw, Mukhlas cared little for his public-facing paintings. There had been too many demands regarding how the image should conform to the original. But within homes, he has more freedom to make use of wall space and to experiment with different styles (introducing clouds, or texture into clothing worn by the saints). The core image of the saint or holy man, in other words, does not change, but an intermediary layer of ornamentation is added. This preference certainly reflects Mukhlas's artistic aspirations. It also calls to mind Bachelard's own associations of the house with a space for dreams and imaginative play. In a poetic register, he writes, "House and space are not merely two juxtaposed elements of space. In the reign of the imagination, they awaken daydreams in each other, that are opposed" (1964:43). What I take from this insight is that in the receding corridors of the house, where concerns about modesty are loosened, a privileged space appears where the imagination of the homeowner – who has likely described what he wants – and of Mukhlas – who actualizes these ideas – is allowed to reveal itself. When Mukhlas would show me his art, it would almost always be photographs of these scenes, all hidden within various homes in town. Mukhlas did not talk much about *baraka*, and homeowners would *only* talk about this work as *baraka*. But it seems that within the home, their interests would align.

Is this a story then of the secularization of sacred imagery? Modernity narratives tend to speak of the beginning of “art,” at least in the West, as the slow unpairing of images from broader religious webs of signification (Dunlop 2009). And as we shall see in the next chapter, Saba Mahmood (2015) has labored to uncover how a secular episteme now informs the way religious actors in Egypt approach questions of history, art, and literature in Egypt. If this narrative is to be applied to the proliferation of imagery in al-‘Aziya, though, it must also account for the rather severe restrictions that artists like Mukhlas and Samih must navigate. These religious images exist at the intersection of the idiom of *baraka* and the language of modesty and domesticity. Their connection with icons and *baraka*-producing items is tenuous, but not completely detached. The respect both artists and customers give to copying from an original, then, seems to balance these two demands. Copy points both to an “original” and to its difference from the original.⁹

This order of aesthetics therefore seems to depend on a stable frame of original images. But what might be the range of this repertoire of sacred images? Angie Heo has noted that the Coptic Orthodox Church, in contrast to most other Eastern Orthodox communities, has made use of imagery from the Roman Catholic tradition. The clearest example, she adds, is the “Mary of the Miraculous Medal” image, which originated in nineteenth-century Paris and is now one of the most common depictions of the Virgin Mary in Egypt (Heo 2018a:84). For the trained eye, there are other examples in the landscape surrounding al-‘Aziya. When I visited Dayr Durunka, the Polish nun who accompanied me enjoyed pointing out the various images that came from the Catholic tradition. One of them, located near the shrine of the Virgin’s house, was the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus – without the heart. Yet when I mentioned these things to my Coptic

Catholic friends, they balked at the idea that these depictions, and especially that of Mary, had originated from outside of Egypt.

One example of a house painting that tests the bounds of what might count as a Coptic image came to my attention through Samih. He and I had been talking about the paintings he had done, and he wanted to show me a picture of something he had been asked to copy. We were in his house, and Samih went off to search for the original image. He came back with a crumpled piece of paper. It was a xerox copy of a newspaper article in Arabic (see fig. 5.4). The article was about an art heist – the 1995 theft of Titian’s *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* from Longleat House in England. Next to the text was a black-and-white reproduction of the painting itself. Several years ago, a man from the town had hired Samih to paint a copy of the painting on the wall of the man’s sitting room (see fig. 5.5). I was struck by the fact that Samih had retained a copy of the newspaper article, though I could understand why, as an artist, he might want to have it close at hand. Then I visited the house with the painting and the same thing happened. When we went to inspect the painting, the owner of the household did exactly as Samih had done. He reached into his wallet and retrieved the same newspaper article Samih had showed me. My host did not remember, or seem to care, about the details of the painter or the heist. Instead he held up the piece of paper and made detailed observations about Samih’s execution. Some of the trickier parts of the painting had not been cleanly reproduced, and he named each one. When I asked him why he wanted this particular painting to hang in his house, he simply said, “I like it.”

From one vantage, this image seems entirely removed from the realm of icons and *baraka*. It is not even icon-adjacent, and the reticent man who had it painted appeared to be drawn to its beauty. But a copy can also be part of a chain, one that can eventually be traced back to the source. As a kind of cultural logic, *baraka* works this way as well, passing through various



Fig. 5.4 (left) The newspaper article about the stolen painting.

Fig. 5.5 (right) Samih’s reproduction.

forms of mediation, all of which can be traced back to a saint, and then to God. Truth can also be established through these means. In the Islamic tradition, the practice of determining *isnad* – the chain of transmission – is used to evaluate the veracity of hadith (Hammond 2018). Even Hanna Anis had the habit of supporting his claims with appeals to scripture and church figures with whom he had interacted: “There was a bishop named Lucas. Before him was one named Antonios, before him was Lucas, and before him, Lucas...,” as he said when he first told me the story of the Catholic church’s arrival. I can only speculate as to what my host thought was at the end of this particular chain; whether it was also a line of *baraka*, of truth, or something entirely different. Regardless, it was important to retain at least part of the chain – a copy of a painting of an event that once occurred. It proved the painting to be a copy of something else.

It might seem that this insistence on copying, and not creative art, is simply the consequence of traditional society. There is some truth in this viewpoint – the same concern has kept the houses on the *asfelt* relatively unadorned. But copying and, more importantly, *verifying* a copy can cut both ways. In my conversation with Samih and his client, there had been no mention that this painting is “foreign” or by a “foreigner.” Given the subject matter, such a

remark would have been entirely appropriate. The setting of the painting looks nothing like Egypt, and the Holy Family is unlike anything one might find in a Coptic church. If there were ever a picture for a Copt to critique for accuracy, it would be this one. Yet the only criterion for accuracy was that of fidelity to the printed image in the newspaper. And herein lies the rub. In demonstrating this linkage, distinctions of space and time start to collapse. For it really does not matter where a truth-claim or a line of *baraka* is coming from if it can be located on the continuum that, again, leads back to the source. The people in al-‘Aziya have broad horizons in this regard; they know that there are saints, relics, and sources of wisdom wherever Christians are to be found. The question, and the challenge, is verifying the connection.

Untethered Images

These observations are being made in broad strokes, so I would like to develop them further, but in a different key. Another way of looking at chains of sacred images, truth claims, and *baraka* is through their reversals – those things that lack any such chain, copy, or connection. It is not hard to find examples of this kind in al-‘Aziya. Indeed, to discuss this topic returns us to where this chapter began. The influx of wealth, as we have seen, has provoked anxieties that cluster around particular industries, especially the reselling of used cars. Yet there is another industry that generates similar concern, though people do not speak of it often. In many houses, one will find an old computer console, oftentimes sitting awkwardly on the same table where food is served and where children study. This sight is a little jarring, since other luxuries – such as cars, air conditioning units, and smartphones – are still out of reach for many families.¹⁰ A journalist from al-‘Aziya, someone I was often encouraged to speak with, told me that the town has the highest internet usage out of any population center of its size in Egypt. It is a claim that is impossible to evaluate, of course, but a revealing one nonetheless. Sometimes

older people in the town would beg me to explain why all the youth keep talking about these websites. “What is twee-ter?” Hanna Anis once asked me. I never knew how to reply.

Here is the story I was told by the young man who pioneered the industry. He had discovered that easy money can be made by creating sham Twitter accounts, gaining followers, and then pushing links provided by Google Ads. Every click brings in fractions of a penny, but the money can add up, especially given that it comes in US currency. This young man’s parents are peasants, but they live in a three story house with a car, garden, and an air-conditioning unit. Other youth have been savvy enough to follow suit, and now, I was told, teenagers are making more money than their parents. Given that it takes considerable capital to open an auto lot, this grift – which everyone simply called “twitter” – is the best option for those looking to make easy money. The young man explaining these things emphasized that he builds his fake Twitter accounts around religious content. There is a recognizably Christian image as an avatar, followed by a steady stream of other Christian images. Once the follower is hooked, the young man explained, he will click on anything. First the images, then provide the Google Ads link as a place where more can be seen. “They’re like fish. They know it’s bait on a hook, but they still bite.”

Everyone involved in this business claims it is run on religious images; everyone also knows the real content is pornography. The thought is that Saudi Arabia has firewalls in place to block pornography, and Twitter provides a backdoor route for adult content. The young men in al-‘Aziya therefore have a targeted audience for the content they post, and this money flowing from the Gulf represents a strange parallel to the remittances an earlier generation had sent back from the same region. The religious image shtick, then, is an obvious cover, but a telling one. It is easy to imagine other kinds of morally neutral content that could plausibly do the same job,

such as updates on soccer or music. It suggests that someone trying to gain followers through promoting religious content makes sense, even if it is not very convincing.

The digital mediascape that Upper Egyptian Copts traverse is weighted at both extremes of visual content. Social media presents a threat to various aspects of life in a place like al-‘Aziya. It facilitates easy and covert conversation across the gender divide, it allows for the concealment of one’s identity, and it gives children an economic and social advantage over their parents. Everyone is aware that there are moral hazards involved in having a Facebook account, and the presentation of the self online requires care and attention. When I sat down to speak with the journalist mentioned above, he asked me if I had an account. I did, and so he opened my homepage on his phone and went through the pictures I had saved to my profile. He scrolled, shaking his head (I had saved pictures of art from a recent trip to a museum). “Hmm, no, not good, you should get rid of this... What is this a picture of? Not a saint? Get rid of it.” There seemed to be no middle register. These images must be religious or of kin.

This necessary patina of religious imagery on a social media site might invite a certain degree of cynicism. But it also follows the same principle by which house and body are adorned with such images. They are not channels of *baraka* – no one would ever think about swiping *baraka* from a Facebook page. But they are not art or decoration. They merge and abide by the demands of modesty and domesticity. In this regard, the façade of the house, the covering of the body, and the virtual space inhabited all offer related surfaces to be covered by Coptic imagery.

Or not. At the other extreme, similar concerns are expressed, though in ways that might be surprising. It is to be expected that pornography and sexualized images would violate a range of moral principles for Copts. But the concern I would often hear was not about content consumption. It was about how such content might be produced or manipulated. Fr. Agnatius

explained to me that some people were afraid that images of their wives or daughters might be transferred onto pornographic films. He even claimed that someone had tried to do the same with an image of a priest. These suspicions and anxieties about the veracity of film, especially in terms of religion and sexuality, are widespread in Egypt, and have even been the source of sectarian tension and violence. But the general awe over the power of film to disrupt boundaries, and to insert one person into a shameful situation, underlies the caution taken by many regarding media. If one lets an image of oneself lose into the mediascape, it becomes untethered and can be used by others at will.

Untethered images, then, might be thought of as objects of both fascination and moral concern. These images accumulate on the virtual surface of the mediascapes al-‘Aziya residents move through and create. At every step, the aim is deception for profit. It is a game others have learned as well, from Samih crafting fake antiquities to auto lot owners selling stolen cars. Everyone knows these things are at some level wrong, and yet they also are objects of pride, of identity, of wit and cunning. The artists and their customers frame the emphasis on “copy” in technical terms, a conservatism that, as Mukhlas observed, stems from concern about what others might say. But this conservatism must also be placed in the context of the onslaught of digital images, both sacred and profane, that have penetrated this society. At some level it might be a reaction to the flux introduced by the boundless vistas of media. For every elderly man who had never heard of Twitter, there would be a youth asking me about *Game of Thrones*. Yet this attempt at anchoring images through an idiom of copy is itself enabled through new media. Walking through the town, one can see a few paintings that were executed a decade previously, when few had access to the internet. Now those surfaces are filled. Customers arrive with xerox copies and screen shots of the images they want copied. Even the artists themselves are sought as

extensions of new technology. As Mukhlas complained, his work is held to the standard of machines. By seeking to ensure a faithful copy, these customers and artists are relying on technologies that are also eroding the link between copy and original.

When I would sit with Mukhlas and talk about art, I would be moved by his curiosity and sense of wonder. He too has an old computer, and he would pull up files of images he had saved: paintings of famous European and American artists mixed alongside what seemed, to my eyes, to be rather uninteresting sketches of Egyptian actors and politicians. When I would ask why these images drew his attention, he was hesitant to answer. In a way, I was the authority – he wanted me to tell him if he was on the right track. Mukhlas wanted to be an artist, but in his mind there were no other artists in town, and he was not sure what images an artist should uphold. Mukhlas, in other words, stood at the threshold of criticism – a shift from speaking of what a painting should be to saying what a painting is (Rancière 2007:78) – and was asking me to help him navigate the passage. When pulling up digitized reproductions of his own work, he would constantly ask me: “What would you rate this, one out of ten?” In the midst of the trove of images he had compiled and created, it seemed that I was the objective standard he was looking for.

Mukhlas was most proud of the large paintings he produced in sitting rooms. In some ways, this space represents the boundary between the tethered, verified Coptic images he paints on exterior walls and doors, and the untethered images found in the mediascape. With the large flat walls of the newly renovated homes of the *sh‘ab*, there is ample room to unveil images beyond the scope of a saint or icon-like image. The fact that this space doubles as both public (for guests) and private (for the family) means that some liberties can be taken. There is no worry about a passerby judging the family to be ostentatious or reckless in their display of piety. When

Bachelard writes about holding fast the connection between house and daydream (1964:5-6), we might think of these interior walls, surrounding the sitting room, as a site where these two merge. People in al-‘Aziya, like elsewhere in Egypt, talk often of their dreams (Mittermaier 2011). Saints appear in dreams, and can be recognized by their highly formatted features. We might recall that Fr. Boulos appeared to a woman, giving her the name of her unborn son. This movement of the imagination is obviously out of reach to the ethnographer; it only appears in flutters, receding as quickly as it came. But Mukhlas is exceptional in the sense that he was desperate to externalize what he considered to be his art.

In going through his digital art collection, Mukhlas stopped at one image. It was a photograph of a painting he had made in the sitting room of a house (see fig. 5.6). He had little to say about it. Not surprisingly, he wanted me to judge it. In a way, he was pushing this image into my world, one where artwork is judged for what it is. I had been in the mindset of viewing images for what they should be; ethnographic objects, slotted at a safe remove. Which is why I am of a divided mind when I view this picture. The ethnographer in me perceives a brilliant array of connections. It reminds me of new walls that had been built over mudbrick. It suggests that behind the veneer of new wealth, there is a void. I wonder if this geometric design marks safe territory for a figurative painting that is not explicitly religious. I am struck by the way the painting takes over the surface of the wall, both creating and defying the border that contains it. I even ask myself why Mukhlas chose to have himself in the picture, and in the distinct pose of the artist at work. There is even the question of what kind of place is being revealed: a tomb, a cave, an abyss?

But then I realize that these ponderings have drawn me into myself. I am no longer thinking about Mukhlas, but about the strangeness of the object he has created. Which means

that he has succeeded. This painting is his art. Theologically it is flat, but another order of representation emerges.



Fig. 5.6 A painting in an al-‘Aziya sitting room.

Conclusion

In following Coptic images as they leave the realm of churches, monasteries, and liturgies, I have tried to show how the world of piety, *baraka*, and saintly presence intersects with the world of political economy. This zone of encounter is, of course, where most Copts experience such images. The icons housed in al-‘Aziya’s churches are of obvious importance. But they were only put to use – one might say activated – during moments of intense liturgical activity. In the normal rhythm of life, it is rather in the real and virtual surfaces of homes, walls, and internet mediascapes where these images are encountered. One might think that the diffusion of this imagery is mainly a result of sectarian politics, or a placeholder for the more intense

encounters with icons and other more immediate sources of *baraka* (relics, the sacraments). Yet this assertion needs to be tested against ethnography, as I have sought to do. What is clear is that certain preoccupations – most notably, the need to copy – guide the way these images are reproduced. Moreover, the structure of political economy shapes how and where these images are displayed. Finally, the work of producing this imagery can give way to certain kinds of innovations that suggest that boundaries are constantly being drawn between the world of Coptic imagery and the flow of images that lies beyond. The walls within the sitting rooms are one site where this boundary is negotiated – a liminal space where artists can be creative, yet face pressures to not overstep their bounds.

Pluralism is part of this story in two ways. The first can be found in the case-specific history and landscape of al-‘Aziya and the surrounding region. Through the forces of shared markets, flows of customers and resources, and accumulations of wealth, the lives of Christians in al-‘Aziya are shaped by the removed (yet nearby) presence of Muslims. Often, though not always, the medium of this interaction is money and trade. Yet the effects of this interaction can be detected in the moral frameworks al-‘Aziya residents use to judge themselves. Whether it be auto shops or the question of usury, what residents sometimes take to be distinctly Christian concerns often bear the fingerprints of the Muslim Other.

The second can be found in the more abstract world of digital media. Through the internet, residents are now awash in various kinds of images. Some have taken to producing such content themselves; in this chapter I have focused on artists like Mukhlas and Samih (and those who hire them), as well as the youth who are engaged in making sham Twitter accounts. In these two modes of image production, the demands of pluralism can be detected in the ways the circulation of images is understood. For these artists, the restraint of copying acts as a way of

integrating what might seem like foreign images into the local world of images, surfaces, and homes. For the youth with fake accounts, their actions generate moral concern about the influence of the internet and the corruption of morals – a concern that dovetails with the broader transformations wrought by new wealth. The order of Coptic images outside the church is far more unstable. It is open to multiple vistas; it invites these challenges of pluralism. That *baraka* is still able to flow through these images points to the importance of surfaces – points of stability that can anchor images in a changing world. This turn toward the study of surfaces, as opposed to the content of the imagery itself, hints, yet again, at the manifold ways houses interact with churches. Icons might be a privileged site of *baraka*, but the tableaus on the interior walls of homes reveal their own unique expressions of an evolving Coptic imagination.

¹ Unlike other Upper Egyptian towns, al-‘Aziya does not have a strong connection with a diaspora community. Some of the families I came to know in the town had a brother or cousin in Europe or the United States, but the influence of these connections on the daily lives of residents was hard to detect. The situation is very different in other parts of Egypt; see Lukasik 2020.

² Copts in al-‘Aziya tended to view Islam in the harshest terms when speaking about it in the abstract. Interacting with Muslims, however, was an entirely different matter. On one occasion, I was lectured by a Christian on the many problems and inconsistencies in Islam, only to watch him only minutes later host a Muslim friend, the two laughing and enjoying each other’s presence.

³ For more on the possibilities of studying surfaces, see Ingold 2020.

⁴ These workers, especially drivers, tend to take amphetamines in order to stay awake and work longer.

⁵ During one of my first days in the field wearing a cassock, two sisters asked if they could take their picture with me. Standing at either side, one asked permission to put her hand on my shoulder. After the picture was taken, she removed her hand and looked at it, unsure whether or not to kiss it. Awkwardly, she reached down, grabbed my hand, and kissed that instead.

⁶ This literature is vast. Important works on this topic that have appeared throughout this study are Hirschkind 2006; Meyer 2011; Heo 2018b; Johnson 2021.

⁷ Heo suggests that, in a brief phrase, that copies of icons are viewed as “communal images” that solidify sectarian identity (2018b:202). How these communal images might be approached and used goes unexamined. This chapter can be read as picking up this thread.

⁸ Some Copts wondered, fancifully, if this custom was born out of a period of oppression, when Christians were required to bear the mark of the cross.

⁹ The idea that copying and repeating involves both similarity and difference is fleshed out in extraordinary detail by Giles Deleuze (1994).

¹⁰ Although the town has many automobiles for sale, few families can actually afford to own one. Those who owned and used cars tended to either be priests, the handful of doctors and professionals who needed to travel, and those who worked as drivers.

CHAPTER 6

An Archipelago Hewn from Rock and Stone

The house, the cellar, the deep earth, achieve totality through depth. The house has become a natural being whose fate is bound to that of mountains and of the waters that plough the land. The enormous stone plant it has become would not flourish if it did not have subterranean water at its base.

Gaston Bachelard
The Poetics of Space

At the farthest point to the west, where the plots of farmland come to an end and the cliffs begin to rise, there is a cave. Its opening is large enough that people can enter without bending over, yet small enough to be covered, as it is, by a large iron gate. Like the many caves found along the western and eastern cliffs of the Nile valley, it has been modified by human hands. Perhaps at some point it had been a quarry. "It was probably used by the Romans," Fr. Bishoy wondered aloud. No one really knew or seemed to care. Natural rock formations connect the ground to the ceiling, and there are several branches that work their way into the recesses of the cliffside. The floor is unusually smooth, as are some of the walls. There is little else to suggest what purpose the cave might once have served.

When I arrived for my fieldwork, the cave was starting to be incorporated into a monastery complex. When I left eighteen months later, modest progress had been made. An Orthodox priest had started to say the Divine Liturgy there once a week. A few small buildings were being constructed. All the same, the cave seemed only to linger on the horizon of the town. Nobody I knew attended the liturgies, and the new monastery rarely came up in conversation. The town nevertheless was moving rapidly in that direction, as Fr. Bishoy and others knew. It only was a matter of time, perhaps in five to ten years, that homes would start to appear in the vicinity of the valley's western edge. This chapter takes up the topic of monasteries – how they are viewed from the outside, and why they are important to Copts. It asks how this cave might become a monastery; that is, how it might be linked to the network of monastic sites that stretch across the Egyptian landscape.

Foundations, Chronotopes

The revival of monasticism is one of the great triumphs of the modern Coptic Orthodox Church. It was only in the middle of the twentieth century that some of the Orthodox Church's great monasteries increased in size and influence – a shift that owes much to the leadership of Pope Cyril VI and, later, Pope Shenouda III (Gruber 2003; Guirguis and van Doorn-Harder 2011). When I visited the monastery of Anba Mercurius, one of several monasteries located in the Wadi Natrun, I was shown the old keep (*husn*) and collection of monks' cells that had been in use until the 1970s. They could only house a dozen or so monks. An even smaller number might have been living there at the time. Now there are several hundred monks in residence, and the sprawling complex includes hundreds of acres that are used for orchards, fish farms, and agriculture.

More recently, the revival of monasticism has created new forms of pilgrimage for Copts. The *rihla*, the weekend trip to a monastery, is a staple weekend activity for many Copts living in cities like Cairo and Alexandria (Oram 2004; Coleman 2019). Of course, visiting monasteries has been a part of Coptic life for as long as Copts have lived near monasteries. Hanna Anis can recall a time during his childhood when “most of al-‘Aziya” would travel by camel to Dayr al-Muharraq during the month of June, when there would be an annual *mulid* in honor of the Virgin. But the *rihla* today is a product of modern life. Every Friday, dozens of buses will pull up to any given monastery. Parents will let their kids run free. Favorite monks will be sought out, and one can have a cup of tea and a simple meal under the shade of large awnings, some of which hold hundreds of pilgrims. During the summer, parishes will organize weeklong trips to visit multiple monasteries, sometimes throughout the entire country. I was supposed to go on one such trip with Hanna Anis. He was certain it would be the highlight of my fieldwork and was eager to serve as my guide. Then a terrorist attack took the lives of twenty-eight Copts who were themselves traveling to a monastery by a remote desert road. Our trip was canceled.

The people of al-‘Aziya liked talking to me about monasteries. They would show me pictures of monasteries on their phones. They would serve dates, honey, onions, and other produce they had brought back from a recent *rihla*. One even arranged for me to meet her preferred monk, who was her “spiritual director” (*murshid ruhi*). When I would ask why Copts love monasteries, I would get an answer similar to what Hanna Anis told me. “You can take *baraka*,” he said. “Why? Because in most of the monasteries there are the relics of saints and martyrs. You go in and you see the beautiful pictures and icons and all that.” He then added, “Because of this...it’s the foundation [*al-asas*]! Christianity is the foundation. It has roots. Roots

from thousands of years ago. Egypt had been Pharaonic, from that it became [*ightalabt*] all Christian.” Monasteries provide a glimpse into the history and foundations of Christianity.

At the beginning of this study, the concept of chronotope helped illustrate how church histories relate to each other in terms of space and time. I would like to draw upon Bakhtin again, this time with a broader scope in mind. Hanna Anis’s comment draws upon a linkage of space and time. That Egypt had been Christian, and it continues to be so – in a different way – in the domain of monasteries is a claim that hinges on specific ideas of space (Egypt) and time (its history). In the essay in which he develops the idea of chronotope, Bakhtin has the practice of taking a particular genre, such as the biographical novel, and teasing out the spatial and temporal elements that give it structure and coherency. Earlier we saw how the genre of “adventure time” parallels the kinds of narratives that people use to tell the histories of non-Orthodox churches. Monasteries, though, are not churches. While monastery complexes have churches within their walls, they are inhabited by holy men and in a few cases, as I will show later, holy women. Different kinds of stories are told about monasteries. These are places where people dwell, where they live and die, and where they engage in sacred activities like prayer and fasting. Monasteries also encompass other parts of life, such as forms of manual labor and custodianship over holy objects like relics, icons, and ancient altars. In a way, they are microcosmic societies of the living and the dead. But this claim does not do justice to the unique texture that someone like Hanna Anis provides in his descriptions of these places.

In an early conversation with Hanna Anis, he attempted to teach me about the various monasteries in Egypt. Perhaps because of his background in agricultural science, he was particularly interested in the contours and built environment of these places (he was less interested in the stories of saints, or speculation on ancient history). In each place he named,

there was a specific feature he would elaborate upon. For the monastery of Anba Antonios, located on the South Galala plateau in the eastern desert, he recalled the many steps (“one-thousand two-hundred!”) it takes to climb up the cliffside. He described the size of the cave (“if you’re fat, you can’t get through”) and that, within the cave, there is an “ancient altar” (*al-mazbah al-asari*) on the site where St. Anthony (251-356), the first of the desert fathers, lived and prayed. Hanna Anis then described the spring of water at the base of the cave. French engineers, he noted, had built a system that allows pilgrims to easily access this water, from which they get *baraka*. “There is another spring like this at Anba Boula,” he added, referring to the monastery of St. Paul, located on the other side of the plateau. Shifting to the monasteries in the Wadi Natrun, he mentioned an old “door” (*bab*) in Dayr Baramus on which prophecies are inscribed. “It says there will be seven intervals [*fatra*],” he explained, adding that it had predicted, correctly, that one such interval would be the arrival of Islam. Finishing with Dayr al-Muharraq, he mentioned the “ancient altar” in the old church. “Between Aswan and Alexandria, this is the center of Egypt.” There is the house of the Holy Family at al-Muharraq, of course. And then he added that next to the old church is the keep, where, in ancient times, monks could hide and pull up the ladder if they were in danger. These remarks would be familiar to anyone who has visited these sites. They capture the wide array of objects that invite attention and respect in these monasteries. Each monastery has its own character and internal topography. A visit involves sensory contact with these iconic features, all of which can be seen, touched, and/or consumed. Copts like to cycle through these inventories of monasteries – it is landscape exclusive to them, and it can only be learned by visiting these places and experiencing these features for oneself.

Of course, Hanna Anis's description is just that of one man. But it touches upon a broader genre that is used by Copts when discussing monasteries. From the perspective of Bakhtin, we might say that these descriptions have a certain coherence in terms of space and time. They share something beyond their institutional status that allows them to be pulled into this network. I would suggest, in line with Hanna Anis's own description, that they are *foundational*. These objects say something about time, and, in different ways, point to the origins of Christianity. Additionally, they reflect ideas of domesticity. Like the spring of water by St. Anthony's cave, these sites are shelters that allow for human dwelling.

The range of domestic trappings that can inhabit this kind of space-time is not as wide as one might think. Given the emphasis on the origin of the site, they cannot be made or introduced from beyond; instead, they are found, discovered, made by monks, or recovered. These doors, ladders, springs, and ancient altars must, at some level, be anchored – the need to “have roots.” These iconic objects blur the distinction between the natural and the social. They belong in-place and cannot be easily moved. To rephrase this observation in chronotopic language, these dwellings contort space and deepen the temporal by folding the space occupied by humans into something from the earth, something that has “roots.”

Caves, of course, are the ultimate example of this kind of dwelling. Hanna Anis's most vivid description was that of St. Anthony's cave. The popular legend of St. Anthony is that he was led to his cave by an angel. It was a cave with a spring and collection of date trees at its base, a miraculous site that could sustain his life of asceticism. This kind of permanent house, waiting to be discovered, is a story that reappears in Coptic lore. The Coptologist Otto Meinardus relates the following story about Matta al-Maskin, the priest (and later bishop) who

would go on to oversee the revival of the Monastery of St. Mercurius and become one of the most influential churchmen of his generation.

In the autumn of 1960, just prior to the official suspension of Abuna Matta al-Maskin and his disciples by the patriarch, he went again to Wadi al-Rayyan. This time, Abuna Matta al-Maskin and his disciples arrived in two jeeps at ‘Ain al-Rayyan al-Bahariya, where they stayed for some time. While they were living near the well, some Bedouins approached them, asking them whether they were mere visitors or whether this was to be their homeland. Then Abuna Matta al-Maskin remembered the vision and the charge of the old man, who had entrusted the wadi to him. At first, the Bedouins mocked them; however, when they realized that Abuna Matta and his disciples were determined to remain in the wadi, they offered their help. One of the Bedouins said to Abuna Matta al-Maskin, “When I was a youth, some forty years ago, I used to enter this wadi to search and dig for treasures, and at that time, I discovered a cave which is fit for you.” Although afraid of being led astray, Abuna Matta al-Maskin and his disciples departed from the well and went along with the Bedouins, and after a walk of almost two hours, they arrived at the cave, which was filled with sand. Abuna Matta al-Maskin and his disciples remained at this cave, however, assured that it was the will and the design of God for them to live there. (1999:254-5)

There are no angels in this story, just Bedouin with uncanny knowledge of the terrain. But they might as well be one and the same. Matta al-Maskin and his followers had to be led to the cave. It seems that one cannot simply choose such a site. It must be part of “the will and the design of God.” Caves then play this role particularly well in that they have a permanence and stability that allow them to disappear and to be rediscovered. They can be lost, as we shall see, only to be reopened and revived, almost like buried treasure. But the fact that they have been present all along gives them a foundational quality that other forms of dwelling lack.

Viewed from a critical perspective, though, this concept of unearthed foundations raises the question of what this chronotope does. When Matta al-Maskin traveled to the desert, what was he seeking? There are theological answers for sure. But while one might speak of forgoing the decadence of urban life as the motivation for such a retreat – to draw from St. Athanasius’s *Life of Saint Anthony* – it remains to be asked why this particular assemblage – of caves,

stairwells carved into cliffsides, ladders, walls, ancient doors and ancient altars – proves so appealing.

Consider this question in terms of Bakhtin’s own literary analysis. Anthropologists tend to use “chronotope” as an analytical tool. But Bakhtin’s analysis of various genres contains a wealth of insights, especially in his work on Rabelais. Given the excesses associated with Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* – the drink, sex, defecation – it might seem an unlikely companion to Coptic monasticism. But what I want to suggest is that Rabelais’s provocative images provide a model for thinking about the “genre” of monasticism. Like Coptic monasticism, Rabelais, as I briefly want to show, is in pursuit of foundations.

What makes Rabelais so generative for Bakhtin is that Rabelais wrote at the threshold of “the newly opened cosmos of the Renaissance” (Bakhtin 1981:242). It was a time when historical change and societal transformation disrupted the permanent structures of the old world and raised questions about where new cultural and spiritual foundations might be found. In Bakhtin’s analysis, Rabelais located an Archimedean point in laughter, the only “ancient complex” that “never underwent sublimation of any sort – neither religious, mystical nor philosophical” (236). Bakhtin explains: “The extraordinary force of laughter in Rabelais, its radicalism, is explained predominantly by its deep-rooted folkloric base, by its link with the elements of the ancient complex – with death, the birth of new life, fertility and growth” (237). The truth of laughter reveals the “false verbal and ideological shells” that “had distorted and kept separate these realities” (237). Yet this kind of universalism is established through the crumbling of previous order, and it was the “earthy space” (206), inscribed in the basic actions of the human body (eating, farting, laughing) that provided this anchor, a foundation for a new era.

The linkage I detect between Bakhtin's analysis and the idea that monasteries are roots and foundations appears at several points. The genius of Rabelais, Bakhtin seems to argue, is that he achieved this foundation through a recovery of the primordial, or that which has escaped corruption. For Hanna Anis and others, monasteries are microsocieties that have been separated and walled off from the world. They have avoided the corruption that Copts sometimes associate with the arrival of Islam (Hanna Anis was not the only one to point out the prophetic door at Dayr Baramous). They provoke a nostalgia of sorts, the kind that brings Hanna Anis to talk about Egypt's Christian past.

Another connection can be found in the flatness or horizontality of Rabelais. His writing focuses on the mundane aspects of life. As Bakhtin notes, Rabelais's stance is polemical – it is set against the “verticality” of medieval thought. While Coptic monasteries may be sites of deprivation for those who live there, the pilgrims who visit them find that simple experiences like eating, walking, touching, laughing are heightened. Hanna Anis assured me that the food produced in monasteries is purer and tastes better. On parish trips, teenage boys and girls can mingle and flirt; parents can rest easy while their children play. These are places where Copts can taste the “freedom” that people in al-‘Aziya claim to have.

In the end, Coptic monasticism might be thought of as an “earthy space” set against a world perceived to be in flux. It would be too much to say that all Copts find in monasteries the traits that Hanna Anis mentioned. But the institutional Church certainly would agree. In investing heavily in restoring these monasteries, and building new ones – including the new monastery complex in al-‘Aziya – it seems that these foundational qualities are now more valuable than before.

In discussing Rabelais, Bakhtin also notes that the idea of chronotope not only helps us understand Rabelais's text, but also understand his motives. He is the first author in Bakhtin's analysis to have an awareness of spatial and temporal relativity, since his polemic aims at "the re-creation of a spatially and temporally adequate world able to provide a new chronotope for a new, whole and harmonious man, and for new forms of human communication" (1984:168). There is a self-awareness, in other words, about the way space and time can be challenged and distorted – yet another quality that appears in monastic space. These links can only take us so far, and there are obvious ways this comparison does not work. All the same, I want to approach monasteries, to channel both Hanna Anis and Bakhtin, as "earthy space" – places where the seemingly flat can go deep.

This suggestion rubs against another recently-advanced approach to ideas of time, foundations, and the transformations of the modern world. In a discussion about a debate between the Egyptian novelist Youssef Ziedan and a Coptic Orthodox bishop, Bishop Bishoy, Saba Mahmood argues that a secular episteme now informs the historical views of both religious and non-religious or secular narratives. The debate she mentions concerns the historical accuracy of Ziedan's novel *Azazeel*, which deals with a Coptic monk in fifth-century Alexandria. She writes,

Despite their disagreement, both Ziedan and Bishoy purport to describe ecumenical events located in *calendrical* (linear, empty, homogenous) rather than *sacral* time, and each posits a distinction between the factuality of events as they "really happened" and their narrative meaning. This distinction is part of the history of the secularization of religion, one in which both religionists and antireligionists came to accept the independence of metaphysical truth (transcendent) from the empirical nature of this world (immanent). (2016:197)

This distinction is not without its problems. It is not clear, for instance, what "sacral time" could mean within Christianity, where "calendrical time" – not in the sense of dateable time, but in the

sense of “the factuality of events” – can be found throughout the New Testament and the history of the early church.¹ But I think it can be repurposed if we understand that these two “times” can coexist, even if modernity – or the secular episteme – motivates a “purification” (Latour 1993) of events, things, or people into one slot or the other. In developing the idea of “earthy space,” I wonder if it might be a discursive frame where coexistence occurs. To return to an earlier example, the door at Dayr Baramous illustrates this tension well. Viewed from one angle, it captures calendrical time since it has predicted the arrival of Islam (and, one imagines, other things as well). Viewed from another angle, it is prophetic, even magical – an old door with a forgotten history. What I want to explore now is the way the monastic space platforms these various interpretations. Here the calendrical and the sacred coexist, albeit in awkward ways. Because of this pairing, time and space are constantly being evaluated and reconfigured.

Earthy Space

I would like to flesh these thoughts out in reference to two brief studies, each tethered to the town of al-‘Aziya in different yet equally important ways. The first is about a monastery located along the same western ridgeline as the cave in al-‘Aziya. The second is about a convent in Cairo that was introduced to me by people from town.

Case Study A: The Two Monasteries of al-Ganadla

Fr. Kyrillos is the pastor of a small Catholic parish in the town of al-Ghanaym, which sits at the western edge of the Nile valley south of Asyut. He is a highly educated man. He earned a master’s degree in Rome, and had once worked for the Catholic Church in Algeria. He can handle himself easily in French, Italian, and English. He has heard about my research in al-‘Aziya and has offered to show me around the area south of Asyut. He dismisses Durunka as a

place of interest for someone interested in Coptic history. “I’ll show you a real monastery,” he says.

We drive north from the parish, with the cliffs rising to our left and the valley extending to our right. Soon the monastery comes into view. It is tucked away in a perch high above the valley. Fr. Kyrillos explains that the same monk who founded the monastery at Durunka and other monasteries along the same “line” (*khatt*) also founded al-Ganadla. People believe that the Virgin Mary once rested in this cave as well. Fr. Kyrillos points out several caves that are easily visible. These are places where Copts had sought refuge during times of Roman persecution. They began as sites of refuge and a few have become monasteries.

We turn left and pass through a gate. The road is flanked by sand and rocks, and we quickly rise in elevation. We soon reach a perch where there is a small space for parking and a gift shop. Fr. Kyrillos briefly steps in to say hello to the woman running the store. “Don’t buy anything here,” he whispered. “It’s too expensive.” On sale are religious trinkets, toys for kids, snacks. Once outside the gift shop, which rests at the edge of a sharp drop-off, he points toward the north. Below us is a large swath of land situated between the valley and the cliffs that is closed off by a fence topped with barbed wire. As Fr. Kyrillos explains, this area belongs to the military. In fact, the military had seized this entire area during the time of Nasser, including the al-Ganadla monastery, and had only opened this one portion up about fifteen years ago. There is another cave church in the military zone, he adds. It has not yet been opened to the public. Fr. Kyrillos then ushers me up the path toward the cave and the monastery. We pass several Roman capitals, strewn on the ground with other toppled ruins.

We arrive at the face of the cliff. Under a rocky outcropping is an opening that leads to the cave church. We enter together and Fr. Kyrillos gives me a tour. He points out images of

saints that are painted in a row along a flat rocky surface that drops from the ceiling of the cave. They are visibly old – Fr. Kyrillos suggests the fourth century – and their eyes have been scrapped off. Toward the back of the cave the ceiling sharply dips. Dusty carpets and wooden pews have been arranged on the floor. Fr. Kyrillos points out a rock formation that protrudes slightly from the ceiling. He explains that ten years ago, fragrant oil started to drip when a young boy touched the rock. Since then it has stopped and has yet to start again. Fr. Kyrillos is not interested in this folk piety. He quickly ushers me back to the front of the cave, which is where the altar and altar screen are located. A man greets us there, and he attempts to give me a tour. He points out an ancient stone lodged into the masonry at the front of the cave church. It has on one side an ankh-shaped cross and a fish on the other. “It’s from the first century,” he claims. Fr. Kyrillos, standing beside him, makes a face.

Returning to Mahmood and the dichotomy she employs, it would seem that Fr. Kyrillos is clearly at home in “calendrical” time. He is committed to historical accuracy, or at least some form of it. Yet it is not easy to disentangle this historical hermeneutic from the popular piety that has made this cave attractive to pilgrims. They are encompassed by the cave – they are one and the same site. Furthermore, the physical properties of the cave almost invite tactile interaction. With Bakhtin and Rabelais, the body was the surface through which various primordial qualities can emerge. One might even think that the boy “activated” the cave by touching this miraculous rock shortly after the site opened, as if the cave had been awakened from sleep. The cave church brings together both modes of engagement and it encourages a variety of interpretations. Even the tour guide has his own views of how to situate the objects around him in time.

After our visit to the Orthodox Monastery, Fr. Kyrillos takes me to a Catholic monastery at the bottom of the cliffside. He talks about the difference between Catholics and Orthodox, and

it is clear he sees al-Ganadla as shared patrimony. Ever the historian, he notes that the cave church had been founded before the two churches separated in 451 after the Council of Chalcedon. As for the Catholic monastery, it had been abandoned years ago. Fr. Kyrillos has hopes of restoring it. The monastery had been built at this particular location because of the al-Ganadla cave church, only to lose pilgrims when the cave was sealed by the military. Having been cut off from the source, the project failed.

Case Study B: The Convent of Philopater Mercurius (Abu Sayfayn)

While in Cairo, I always make sure to visit Umm Samuel and her sister, Umm Mina. They are both from al-‘Aziya but now live with their families in a working class neighborhood in Cairo. These two sisters have been my guides in the world of Coptic spirituality. Today we are going to visit Old Cairo, a small enclave south of downtown where several historic churches are clustered together.

We head straight to the Church of St. George, where the two sisters hold and pray with the chains that once bound St. George. We then descend into a lower alleyway. The two sisters are excited to visit the Convent of Philopater Mercurius, the beloved military saint otherwise known as Abu Sayfayn (“Bearer of Two Swords”). I had heard much about this saint from these two sisters. Like St. George, Abu Sayfayn was also a soldier under the reign of Decius who had been martyred for his Christian faith. Umm Samuel had given her oldest son the baptismal name of Philopater, and she credits the saint with several miracles. We enter into the church that stands within the convent, passing through a corridor and into a shrine where the relics of Abu Sayfayn are deposited in a velvet case. Some of the nuns are present behind a glass screen off to the side. They give some holy oil and prayer cards to the two sisters. We then leave the church and head to a sitting area nearby, where we have a snack and some tea.

Such is a typical visit to a monastery in a place like Old Cairo. Yet it is only part of a connection that someone like Umm Samuel has with the convent. She likes religious literature, and she gives me a book she particularly enjoys. It seems to have been composed by some of the nuns from the convent. Umm Samuel likes this kind of literature, and we flip through it together. The book is a hybrid account. On one hand, there are appeals to historical authorities, on the other, it reads as a celebration of the primordial. The historical part of the book draws heavily from Western observers, such as Alfred Butler's 1844 *The Ancient Coptic Church of Egypt*. Yet woven into these historicizing narratives are accounts of the miraculous, many having to do with constructing, renovating, or tearing down buildings. For instance, it notes that workers who helped widen the church in 1979 encountered oil flowing from an image of the Holy Family. This convent came to be renovated and revived through the leadership of a nun named Tamav Irini (*tamav* means "mother" in Coptic). Its history is therefore not entirely clear, and the book makes an attempt at both showing where the previous monasteries of Philopater Mercurius had been located. Also included are various pictures of old, toppled walls and decrepit doorways. It seems to me that Umm Samuel could read such an account in a variety of ways. When I asked her how she approaches such a text, she laughed and said, "I only read the accounts of miracles." She shows me where there are various accounts of miracles, all listed with dates and statements by medical professionals, vouchsafing the authenticity of the accounts. She explains that when someone experiences a miracle on behalf of a particular saint, he or she can document the miracle through the monastery associated with the saint.

In these monasteries – in the places and sights they present to pilgrims, and in the texts they produce – history is not easily disentangled from its conceptual opposite. The chronological and the sacred, to return to Mahmood's framework, are less a dichotomy than a spectrum. The

two are held together through spatial proximity. More than anything else, monasteries are bounded units. They contain people and things, and their structures reflect this purpose. Encountering a monastery, then, can be akin to experiencing something that is temporally unstable, moving in-and-out of history. Fr. Kyrillos is very different from Umm Samuel. Yet for both, monasteries are privileged sites for contemplating and discerning roots and foundations.

+ + + + + + + + + +

Over the past few pages, I have tried to provide a broad sense of how monasteries are approached by Copts, looking from the outside in. We saw that monasteries are dwellings of a primordial sort – a kind of “earthy space” that channels different modes of engagement with space and time. It would seem a tall order for the cave at the western edge of al-‘Aziya to become such a place. During my fieldwork, the process had only begun. In what follows, I would like to examine the various components that started to emerge and come together – elements that, perhaps, might allow this cave to become a place like those described above.

A New Monastery

The most important thing about the cave on the western edge is that, for almost the entire history of the town, it has sat empty. It has been an unremarkable part of the natural landscape. Only a few years ago – nobody could tell me when exactly – the Orthodox church placed a large iron door at the cave’s entrance. The doors are marked with crosses, but for a while little else happened. It seems these developments occurred at around the same time as the death of the beloved Duraba son. When the church of St. Mark started to go up, the Orthodox bishop of Manfalut – the Orthodox diocese to which al-‘Aziya pertains – acquired several acres of land that stretch between the cave and, moving eastward, the point just south of the St. Mark church.



Fig. 6.1 The new cave church at the western edge of al-‘Aziya.

It is there that the Orthodox bishop ordered construction of a new church. It was the church Fr. Bishoy pointed out the first time I went to the western edge of town. From that point onward, a monastic complex started to emerge. Soon there were two Orthodox churches standing side-by-side, the other, of course, being the church of St. Mark (it was later renamed to “the Church of the Patriarchs”). To the southern end of the cliffside, there appeared a long and narrow building made of cinderblocks and equipped with fans slotted in its walls – an industrial chicken farm. There was a small building there as well, which seemed to be a residence of sorts. And the cave itself was slowly domesticated. A gas generator was installed and wiring was strung alongside the cave walls near the entrance, which allowed for some basic lighting. Carpets were laid down and wooden pews were added, as well as a simple altar (though no altar screen). Later some prints of sacred images, such as the Flight into Egypt, were placed on wooden boards that were then propped up alongside the rock formations that occasionally connected floor to ceiling. At least at the cave entrance, it resembled a church (see fig. 6.1).

It was surprisingly difficult to get to the cave at the western edge of town. During my fieldwork, I only visited it four times, and not for lack of effort. Few people were interested in making the short trip. Some thought the journey to be dangerous, others a bit of a hassle. But the main reason for not going was there was little to do. When I first went to the cave with Fr. Bishoy and two other men from town, they watched me as I walked in, head lowered, deep into the interior of the cave. Everyone else stayed near the entrance. People rarely said anything about the cave. If asked, they might talk with a hint of pride about the developments going on out west, but that was it. Compared to the interest residents had in Coptic monasticism, it was curious that this particular project – a monastery being built in their backyard – would be met with such indifference.

Fr. Bishoy was the only person I spoke with who had strong opinions about the new monastery complex. He explained to me that the Orthodox bishop of Manfalut only cared about expanding the Orthodox footprint in Egypt: building churches, monasteries, or whatever else he could. Of course, the same could have been said about Fr. Bishoy in al-‘Aziya. Fr. Bishoy had originally wanted to establish a convent next to the St. Mark church. He had even invited Carmelite sisters to visit and inspect the place. But even for Fr. Bishoy, who had cultivated a comprehensive vision for the Catholic Church, the cave was of little interest. I got the sense he chalked the new monastery complex up to Orthodox intransigence. Then again, Fr. Bishoy was from al-‘Aziya, and for those from the town, the cave was largely of no interest.

This new monastery complex was being developed and overseen by the Orthodox bishop. Everything that occurred in this complex, from the outfitting of the cave to the chicken farm, was thought to be done with his blessing. For this reason, it is worth hovering over this link between the bishop and this new monastery. Monasteries, as we have seen, are spaces where history and

the primordial are encountered and sorted. But they also serve as the sole pipeline for members of the church hierarchy. Only monks can become bishops in the Coptic Orthodox Church, and only bishops can become pope. Bishops are therefore understood to have a particular attachment to a monastery, and can be seen as founders of new ones. For instance, the Metropolitan of Asyut, Anba Mikhail, had entered the monastery of St. Mercurius (near Alexandria) as a young man, and decades later, after being named bishop of Asyut, was called back to take over the leadership of the monastery. Of course, Anba Mikhail also oversaw the extensive restoration of Dayr Durunka. Monasteries are therefore centers of church leadership that create idiosyncratic networks, as was the case with Anba Mikhail straddling responsibilities in two different parts of the country.

To the popular imagination, the Orthodox bishop in Manfalut tended to be associated with the Monastery of Amir Tadros, an Orthodox monastery in the city of Manfalut. Even though it was one of the most accessible monasteries in the region, Amir Tadros did not excite people in al-‘Aziya. Perhaps this is because the monastery sits in the heart of the city, separated from the surrounding sprawl only by very high walls. The bond between bishop and monastery is nonetheless very secure. Upon entering the monastic complex in Manfalut, one encounters a large hall where various possessions of bishops and monks who have either lived in the monastery or have served as bishop are on display. These are the bishops whose names Hanna Anis would recite on occasion. They all are associated with this monastery, and the monastery complex acts as a repository for other sacred items in the diocese as well. When I would ask about the old icon that had been in the St. Mary’s Orthodox church, one young man speculated that the bishop in Manfalut had stored it in Amir Tadros for safe-keeping.

One of the problems the bishop faced in regard to this new cave church was the fact that it had no history – no ruins or material connection to the past. Or perhaps it was history of the wrong sort. There was no lingering association of the cave with the vendetta violence that had been waged on the nearby plain. But the church of St. Mark made for an awkward historical reference – it was at once too imposing and too specific. On occasion, however, I heard people associate the new Orthodox church and the cave church with the Virgin Mary. Perhaps these were fleeting thoughts. Yet the Virgin did provide the best access point to the network of saints that, like bishops, also forms a network across monasteries. To the north there are monasteries associated with the holy men who lived there, such as the Monastery of St. Anthony, or that of St. Paul. There are others that draw upon the patronage of a particular saint, such as the Monastery of St. George near the Upper Egyptian city of Luxor. But there are a multitude of monasteries dedicated to the Virgin Mary and, in a way, there could never be enough. The nearby monasteries of Dayr al-Muharraq, Dayr Durunka, and Dayr al-Ganadla – all of which have appeared in these pages – have the Virgin as their patroness. They have the additional advantage of being able to claim she once rested in their caves (or at al-Muharraq, in a house). This popularity of the Virgin reflects how she, in a way, precedes all the saints. Roman Catholics might refer to this status as that of co-redemptrix, but the Copts I knew spoke of the Virgin more in a genealogical sense. Copts often have a favorite saint, and it is likely that that saint also had a patron saint of his or her own. But traced back to the beginning, all lines of *baraka* will likely pass through the Virgin.

Nevertheless, the new monastery's ecclesial association with the bishop (and his monastery) and potential association with the Virgin Mary did not add up to much. Given that responsibility for this project rested (or was seen to rest) entirely on the bishop, it is worth asking

what he hoped to accomplish. I could not ask the bishop myself; that would have been impossible. But it is easy to imagine how replicating a site of worship and potential pilgrimage – one that had worked so well at Durunka – might be advantageous. That the cave had no history for the people of al-‘Aziya does not mean it could not contain history for others. Moreover, the cave’s physical properties – its permanence, its ability to contain and obscure history – might provide the “foundations” and “roots” of which Hanna Anis spoke.

At the same time, the cave needed to be discovered or found. For residents of the town, the cave had always been there, which proved the insurmountable problem. Someone needed to find it anew and make it a dwelling. For a cave to “work,” in other words, it needs to first be a shelter or a home.

Spiritual Travel

The few times I went out to the western edge of town, I would see a solitary monk. He might be seated in the shade of a rocky outcropping. Or he might be walking through the construction site of the new Orthodox church. He was a middle aged man who wore cheap sandals, a tattered black robe, and a baseball cap to keep the sun out of his eyes. He came out to welcome me and others from the town when we arrived one day. He was kind and generous, but was not particularly interested in answering any questions. I asked Fr. Bishoy about him. Does he live in the new monastery? “No, father, no,” Fr. Bishoy replied, shaking his hand but refusing to elaborate. When I asked other people about the strange monk, I was mostly met with a shrug.

In the tradition of Coptic monasticism, one could say there are two branches. The first stems from St. Pachomius. It emphasizes communal living and is the kind of monasticism most familiar to western observers. The second stems from St. Anthony and emphasizes extreme

asceticism, solitary living, and dependence on God. Yet those who follow this tradition – “anchorites” – are not cut off from communities of monks. In fact, the two have historically played off each other. St. Anthony is an important example in this regard. Not only was he led to a cave by an angel, but years later he was also instructed by God to travel to the other side of the plateau, where he encountered St. Paul, also living in a cave. Both these locations gave rise to monasteries that are still in operation – examples of anchorites sanctifying a place by dwelling in it, and therefore making it suitable for a monastery.

The idea of a solitary monk, however, does not square easily with other aspects of the Coptic tradition. Solitary living creates conceptual problems that, one might say, have to be repaired. For instance, anchorites still need to receive food and the sacraments, hence the freshwater spring and date trees at the foot of St. Anthony’s cave. A crow, according to some legends, would also bring him the eucharist. People in al-‘Aziya know these stories, yet those who were most interested in the lives of the saints would speak of another means of achieving community across the barriers of space and time: spiritual travel (*siyaha ruhiya*). It is a gift that allows holy men and women to pass through walls, fly great distances, and convene with others who have the same ability. This idea, of course, kindles the imagination. There are stories of these “travelers” (*suwah*) gathering in caves or churches in the Sinai to celebrate the Divine Liturgy. More than simply repairing a conceptual problem, though, spiritual traveling also greatly expands the horizons of Coptic monasticism and spirituality. With spiritual traveling, monks can go anywhere. And they do.

Although others claimed to know little about the monk by the western cave, Umm Samuel – the mother mentioned earlier – looked at me and thought for a second. “I don’t know about *that* monk,” she said, “but there *are* monks that can travel...” She paused, not sure whether

to keep going or not. “There are monks that travel and, I don’t know, I heard there is a monk that goes there [to the cave] to pray.” She could read my reaction – this was the first time I had heard of spiritual travel. “I don’t know, though,” she added. Months later, after we had visited the Convent of Philopater Mercurius, where Tamav Irini had once lived, she gave me another book (besides the one about the convent’s history) that went into detail about Tamav Irini’s life. Tamav Irini was one of the *suwah*, she explained, directing my attention to various stories that relate her many spiritual gifts. One of them involves a journey with Abu Sayfayn, her patron saint.

That evening, after Tamav Irini finished her prayer, she began to wonder about the location of the head of our blessed martyr. In an instant she saw the martyr Abu Sayfayn in front of her. Her put her on the horse and flew with her to Mount Athos in Greece and they entered the church in the Monastery of Vatopedi and he pointed out a large cylinder and said to her,

“My head is here.”

Tamav Irini was overcome with joy and she prostrated herself before it and kissed it with fervor. Then she smiled and said to the martyr,

“Let us stay in our monastery.”

And he said to her,

“Let us pray.”

And the monastery held a great festival and the whole island exalted the martyr and they processed with the whole monastery to the sound of artillery shots, making clear his military rank as that of the highest in the Roman army. Some of the monks in the church saw Tamav Irini, but they did not see the martyr with her. They were shocked and asked her,

“Who are you? And how did you get in here?”

And the martyr translated for her, and she informed them – in the English language – that she was a Coptic nun from Egypt. Tamav Irini was filled with joy over her visit to this holy place, then the martyr returned her once again to her cell. (Dayr 2011)

The book provides a useful footnote at the end of this story. It explains that women are not allowed to set foot on Mount Athos, hence the confusion the Greek monks experienced at seeing a woman in their midst. That the book does not provide footnotes for any other part of the story

is telling. When I first arrived in al-‘Aziya, people would ask me about Russia and Greece, and it took me a while to realize that what they were talking about were Orthodox monasteries. In the books that Umm Samuel gave me, there is a map of all the places that have at one time held the relics of Abu Sayfayn. Little flags are sprinkled throughout the Greek Isles and along the Dalmatian coast – an archipelago of holy sites and monasteries.

The particular book that the aforementioned story comes from – *The Blazing and Luminous Torch of Love in the Heavens of Coptic Monasticism* – reads both as a hagiography of Tamav Irini and an almanac of global Christianity. There are some instances where Tamav Irini “travels,” as with her trip to Mount Athos. But most often, the book provides first-hand accounts of people across the globe who have experienced healing through her intercession. There is a story, told in first-person, of a nominal Catholic in Brazil who is miraculously cured, and only comes to know about Tamav Irini through an Egyptian friend. The two travel to Egypt together, and the Brazilian man is able to meet Tamav Irini, whose prayers he credits for his healing. To Umm Samuel, none of this seemed exceptional. She knew I was interested in Coptic spirituality, but we never spoke about pluralism or place – we did not share a common language in that regard. Her approach to the broader world, a world of different peoples and tongues, was the same as that of Tamav Irini. There are Christians elsewhere, and they too have churches and monasteries. It is not that Coptic monasticism is better; it is simply the source.

The image on the cover of the book captures this nascent pluralism (see fig. 6.2). It can be viewed as an expression of Christian unity amidst an array of denominational, national, and other forms of difference. In the middle is Tamav Irini. Immediately behind her is Christ the Good Shepherd, and behind her left shoulder is Abu Sayfayn. Hovering imperceptibly in front of her is the shadow of the Virgin Mary (or is it just a flame?). And surrounding all these figures are

churches or monasteries that harken back to the stories in the book. There is St. Catherine's monastery in the Sinai, where Tamav Irini would (spiritually) travel to meet with anchorite monks. There are various European churches, some seemingly chosen for their foreign attributes (i.e., buttress supports and monastic courtyards). Closer to Tamav Irini is a wide-angle image of her satellite monastery in Alexandria, which she founded. The picture is contorted, almost as if to suggest it is emerging out of her body. At her hips are additional buildings from the same satellite monastery. At the base is the original Monastery of Philopater, where she began her life as a nun. This original monastery is endowed with walls and a garden that, in real life, do not exist (the old monastery, we might recall, is located in crowded Old Cairo). As a background, one sees clouds and a bright column of light – evocations of the afterlife. Looking at the image, the idea of travel across geographical space and travel to the heavens start to blur. One gets the sense that any building or place could be added to this collection. Perhaps even a cave church in a town like al-'Aziya. They are tilted, as if drawn toward the blazing torch, which, like an Archimedean point, holds everything in place.

It strikes me that the pluralism on display here is sustained through this torch, which is itself a foundation. The image also makes me think of the denominational pluralism within al-'Aziya, where there are churches that have arrived, and the Orthodox church, which has not. Something analogous is at work, but the terms have shifted. It is not the Orthodox that is stable, but rather Coptic monasticism. Coptic monasticism is the pillar that extends from earth to heaven, and around it all other churches, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, are situated. It provides the support to which other churches are tethered. It holds them together in a network that might be described as pluralism. This arrangement is that which is found in al-'Aziya, but cast at a global scale.

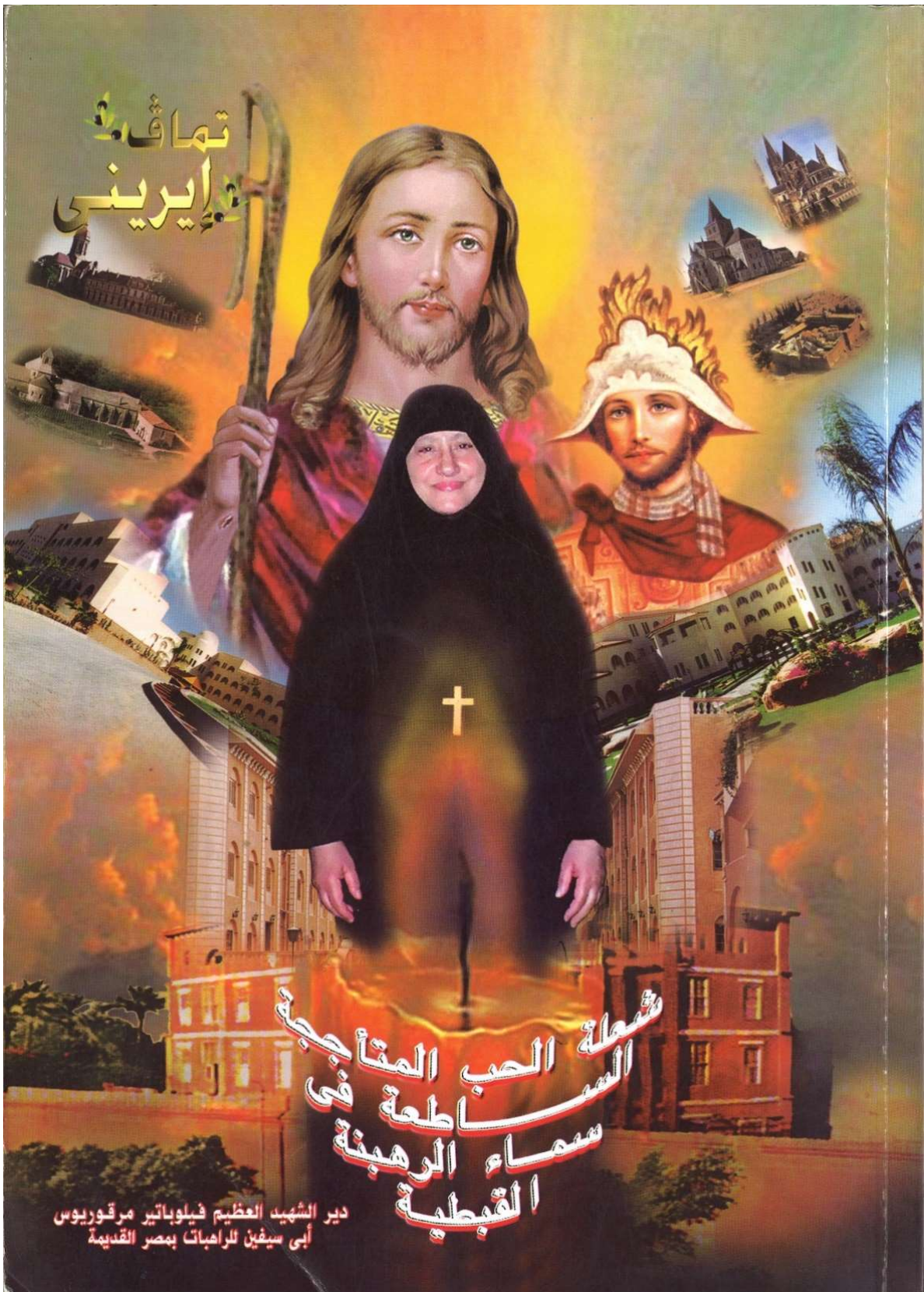


Fig. 6.2 The cover of *The Blazing and Luminous Torch of Love in the Heavens of Coptic Monasticism*.

Life After Death

Hanna Anis spoke of foundations and roots. Fr. Kyrillos, with the eye of a historian, was a curator of monasteries. Umm Samuel viewed monasteries through the prism of Tamav Irini, and saw the world. The thread that runs through these different perspectives is, as I have argued, the theme of dwelling, foundations, and the primordial. But what we have also seen is that, in looking to monasteries for a sense of stability, the flux of a modern and ever-changing world is cast in relief. Umm Samuel does not speak of spiritual traveling as a recent phenomenon. It is a gift that has always been available to the saints. But with the open expanses of the broader world, this kind of traveling takes on new meaning. It crosses linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries. One might think that this encounter with pluralism would require a firmer base.

This provocation can be scaled up as well. The Coptic Orthodox Church has not only revived its monasteries in Egypt. It has built numerous churches, and even a few monasteries, in Europe and the United States. The diaspora is increasingly important, and Copts also find themselves brushing shoulders with different kinds of Christians in the West. One wonders if, as the Church grows wider, it is also trying to go deeper. The cave church in al-‘Aziya might itself be a part of this effort – yet another foothold in an attempt at creating permanence in a church confronting a modern, pluralist world. These thoughts, again, are a provocation. But they touch on observations made by anthropologists about the production of locality; namely, that the local in modernity is fashioned in tension with the global (Appadurai 1995). Cave churches and monasteries are not “local” in the same sense; their distinctive characteristics, as we have seen, are temporal. Of course, anthropologists have tended to cast a suspicious eye toward practices that claim to have perdured over long periods of time (Scheele and Shryock 2019). There are certainly recent examples of “producing” a sense of the timeless in Coptic monasticism – the

cave church in al-‘Aziya might be one. Yet Coptic Christianity has a powerful conceptual grid and an ideal natural landscape for cultivating this sense of permanence. One might approach these questions in various ways and at various scales. What I would like to do is examine how the creation of permanence – of foundations and the primordial – reverberates back into the self. Bachelard’s study of space has been a touchstone throughout these pages. A central concept for him is the interplay between self and shelter, of imagination and the built environment that surrounds it. When one thinks of monasteries, one might be tempted to associate this interplay only with the monks and nuns who live in the structure. However, the growth of monasticism, and the accessibility Copts now enjoy to these places – both in terms of visits, but also through media such as books and television programs – has trickled down into the popular imagination. Thinking about permanence and eternity can easily summon images and ideas of monasticism.

In this regard, it is important to note that monasticism is associated with a kind of dying to the world. Entry into monastic life involves cutting off or rearranging social relations: celibacy, the forgoing of a career, the changed name, the strict controls on social interaction. This shift restructures space – a monk or nun’s cell becomes more than a room. When I visited the monastery of Anba Maqar, for instance, my guide corrected my Arabic when we passed by a row of antiquated monks’ cells that had been preserved as an exhibit. “Cells” (*quayat*), he said, gently. “Not rooms” (*odat*). Monks and nuns are considered to have “died” to the world upon entering their monastic life (Van Dooren 1995), and their existence straddles this world and the next. Copts in al-‘Aziya, as throughout Upper Egypt, tend to take these ideas seriously. Some cynicism is usually reserved for priests, who live in the world, who own cars, travel, and have families. The same cannot be said for monks. The lack of interest people showed toward the

solitary monk at the western edge might instead have been reverence. There is no need to worry about him, they might have thought. He is pursuing his monastic life, and God will provide.

Monastic life, which allows people to witness a kind of social death and rebirth, therefore provides a framework to think about and imagine these realities. Holy monks and nuns, like Tamav Irini, help people move from one state to the other. In this sense, spiritual traveling can also be a kind of spiritual accompaniment from death to new life. These themes are of course recognizable to anyone familiar with the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. But what is particularly pronounced in the Coptic tradition is the emphasis on the monastery itself: its walls, its caves, and, especially, the cell. These are insights, among others, that I received from Umm Samuel. Our many conversations would drift across spiritual topics of one sort or another. She was eager to learn about my favorite saints, and she wanted to teach me about hers. Though younger than me, she had lived a difficult life. Her husband had been kidnapped by ISIS while working in Libya; he escaped captivity, only to return to Libya again in search of work. She hated the overcrowded apartment in 'Ain Shams where she lived with her husband and two kids. Before I finished my fieldwork, she and her family decided to move back to al-'Aziya. They had purchased a small plot of land to the north of the city, and they were building a new house.

Umm Samuel wanted to help me with my research, and so I suggested she write something. After some discussion, we both settled on the topic of heaven. After a few weeks, she gave me a notebook with a picture of Donald Duck on the cover. Inside were several pages of Arabic script, all written carefully so that I could read it. Given the way Umm Samuel emphasizes certain points, like spiritual traveling, I sense that the text is directed to me. But she also knew it would be read by other people from my country; given the tone, I see that she has tried to explain herself to an audience she can only imagine. It is a document about her professed

faith, but also an attempt at communicating to people she expects to have different denominational, even religious, beliefs. In other words, it can be read as an expression of pluralism. She writes,

Job questioned if there is life after death. Job asked the question in the Old Testament, and asked if a man has a soul and if he lives after death (Job 14:14). This question is constantly asked by others within themselves: is there life after death? God alone does not die, and man gets a share of immortality by the power of the resurrection of Christ. This Christian teaching stems from the belief that a person can obtain a share in immortality, which means life after death. The hope of Christianity is not based on the impossibility of the human soul dying, but rather on the power of Christ's resurrection, which gives the believer eternal life.

The main reason for the existence of life after death is God, who alone has immortality, and who alone can give the human soul a share of life. In the person who is patient in righteous deeds, there is a righteous struggle [*jihad*]. We can learn it from the life and biography of the saints who persevere and strive for eternal life. We mention the names of the saints, Anthony, the father of all the monks in Egypt who is the basis of monasticism in Egypt. His life is full of righteous struggle and many spiritual monks are against Satan. And if there is righteous struggle, one will not die.

Regarding the continuation of life after death, Christianity asserts that the creation of human life will remain alive even after physical death. The human body is, by its nature, dead. But the living essence of the human soul has attained an ability to remain alive with God, even when the cells of the body are dissolved. Life after death is a gift from God. It is a provision of salvation to make one's partnership with God firm and eternal.

A martyr like Saint George lived seven years while he was tormented for not denying God. He who is patient till the end will be saved. If we look at ourselves in front of the greatest of the saints, our souls weaken. But God, from His love for us, accepts anything. Even a cup of cold water given is rewarded. With God, something that you do might seem small to your eyes. But to God, it has great value.

The opening of this essay is heavy on doctrine, such that I suspect she is establishing a baseline with the reader. Where I see Umm Samuel's personality begin to emerge is in her mention of St. Anthony and St. George. Umm Samuel grew up just a few doors down from the St. George Catholic church. She was baptized by Fr. Boulos and was Catholic until she married. These saints are familiar.

Umm Samuel then turns to Tamav Irini. The setting of this particular anecdote seems to be a horrific bus accident that occurred in 1999.

We must pursue our goal, which is eternal life. So how do we reach it? Here we can mention minor stories of this or that deed. But have people reached eternal life? And from the human being and the great saint, Tamav Irini, who is in the flesh, and who God blessed: she visits heaven and tells great stories about this wonderful life. Tamav Irini tells a story about something that happened in 1999. It occurred one evening, and she tells us about this accident that demonstrates the afterlife or the eternal life, the moment when the body is separated from the soul.

I was praying in my cell, my place in the monastery, and at the time of this accident, I found myself transported with my body to the place of the accident. Here we must observe how Tamav Irini was transported [*intaqalit*] with her body. Here we profess belief [*huna n'artarif 'ala*] in spiritual traveling [*siyaha*]. This spiritual traveling is not something any person can reach, but only the extremely spiritual person [*al-insan al-ruhani jidan*], one who does much fasting and prayer. For this is an ability that comes from God.

The children of God – the saints – and Tamav Irini have reached this blessing. Who could be delivered to this grace without this great spiritual struggle? And the story continues; I was transported in my body to the place of the accident and I watched it in detail. It was very painful, and I said in the name of the cross, where am I? Where is God to see who these people are?

And I heard the voice of the chorus of Mari Girgis Heliopolis [Saint George], and I saw a column of light, which began in the sky and ended on the earth, reaching the top of the bus. And when the columns of light came down, I felt peace. Then, around the column appeared two rows of beautiful angels, illuminating the column and singing beautiful praises. Every one of our youth gives over his soul, each wearing a diaphanous, luminous garment. The spirit takes the same form for all, and they continue to shine. To each one who gives over their spirit, the angels place a crown on their head, a cross in their right hand and a tall candle in their left.

Tamav Irini is introduced as being in her cell. It is the same way her “trip to Mount Athos” begins and ends. It is also where Umm Samuel makes shifts from indirect to directly reported speech (Vološinov 1986). I am not sure why this is, partly because Umm Samuel quickly shifts to the first personal plural, speaking both for herself and, one thinks, the reader, “Here we profess belief in spiritual traveling.” The effect is that Umm Samuel moves between Tamav Irini and the reader. It is a kind of shuffling that resembles Tamav Irini’s own movements. In fact, it can be noted that, unlike the other saints mentioned, Tamav Irini is important not simply for her

“righteous struggle” and “holiness,” but for what she has observed regarding the death of the innocent and faithful. She has gone there and come back again. Other saints provide an example of holiness; Tamav Irini is summoned for her value as a witness. Umm Samuel therefore labors to build Tamav Irini’s credibility to someone, perhaps myself, whom she suspects might struggle to believe in these extraordinary powers.

Umm Samuel continues to elaborate on Tamav Irini’s description of this procession. Here we see the importance of the Virgin Mary.

The flame of the candles was giving forth light, not fire, and the people were also singing the same praises of the angels. The sounds of the angels’ praises mixed with the hymns of the choral of heaven, in a beautiful procession, in the front of which was the Virgin, Mother of Light. She is very beautiful and luminous. The Virgin always appears in a heavenly garment with golden crosses on it, but this time her robe is a luminous flame of the luminous column, on which there are golden crosses.

Here Tamav Irini knew Our Lady the Virgin by her robe. This change of dress indicates the strong relationship between our mother the Virgin Mary and Tamav Irini because she was seeing her very much. After that, she heard a voice full of tenderness and love, saying, enter into paradise and raise a procession at which the Virgin is in front, and behind them are the angels, and behind them, the innocent saints. After everyone disappeared, the column went up just as it had come down and it disappeared in the sky. I felt happiness and peace first and behind her were the angels and the righteous saints. In heaven, while I was very happy that they entered paradise. In these moments, Tamav Irini engages in spiritual struggle in her monastic life [*umna bitijahid fil rahbana*].

Umm Samuel anticipates some confusion on the reader’s part. She helps us see how Tamav Irini made sense of this incredible scene through her “strong relationship” with the Virgin. As usual, the Virgin plays the lead role, followed by the angels and saints.

Dozens of years and here we stand for a moment and we say that the saints have a relationship [with us] in spiritual struggle. Our souls weaken, but in this story, it gives me great hope in God who accepts a few of us. It was a very simple service in the church, but God accepted it. It was destined to usurp the sky and he intended to take hold of the heavens, which means that you will have him at the moment of your death. Even if your work is very simple, the important thing is when the hour of your death comes, you will be ready, and Tamav Irini says the names, which are sweet and beautiful.

What began as a doctrinal statement ends with an appeal to saintly authority. One might find it striking that Jesus Christ is referenced only at the beginning, where Umm Samuel is trying to find her voice. Once she locates it, though, the description of “life after death” becomes heavily mediated. The voice of God is mentioned, but the procession involves a whole host of heavenly actors, which are witnessed by Tamav Irini, and which have been passed on to Umm Samuel. In the midst of this movement, however, the monastery, and the cell, stay fixed. It is where the story begins, and where we are led to assume it ends.

In her cell, Tamav Irini might be said to exist on either side of life or death. It is yet another site that can be added to the growing list of places that blend into each other. The cell, of course, might be thought of as both a house and a tomb. It is where she lives and dies, which is how I interpret Umm Samuel’s view of the “spiritual struggle” that is monastic life. Fasting is the example Umm Samuel uses, which is a means of depriving oneself while still giving the body sustenance. Prayer is another example, which in the case of Tamav Irini, involves actually seeing the Virgin Mary – a privilege the faithful usually receive only when they die, as the description of this procession suggests. Finally, there is spiritual traveling. This breaking free of space and time, yet remaining in the body, is the ultimate liminal state. It is only because of this ability, anchored as it is by the monastic life, that Tamav Irini is able to enter into the experiences of people like Umm Samuel. She gives witness to the realities that others cannot see, but that are occurring around them all the time. Spiritual travel is what allows Tamav Irini to leave the monastery. But it is also what allows Umm Samuel to enter into the world of Coptic monasticism.

Conclusion

For most of al-‘Aziya’s history, the western cave has sat empty. Something has changed. That the Coptic Orthodox Church finds greater need to avail itself of this natural resource says something about the broader role played by monasteries, caves, and the holy people who dwell in them. There are many causes that enabled this transformation. The improvement of infrastructure throughout the country in the 1990s, for instance, made some monasteries accessible by car for the first time. Hanna Anis would speak of leaving early in order to attend the Divine Liturgy at Dayr al-Muharraq and returning to his house after lunch – a stark difference from the caravans that used to leave al-‘Aziya during his childhood. But there is more to the story. Monasteries provide an access point to something firm, stable, foundational, rooted – an Archimedean point in a changing world. We have seen how this kind of stability might be framed or understood in different ways, and Copts approach these sites with different levels of education, faith, and insight. Yet the cave in al-‘Aziya still lingers, and poses a question. Is it possible to replicate a foundation? The monastery at Durunka is relatively new, but it was constructed around the ruins of an ancient convent. Creating permanence is different, even if one has a cave.

Pluralism has appeared in various ways throughout this chapter. At each step, monasteries have been a mediating factor. Monasteries present an interactive site where questions of history and permanence are sorted out. Egypt before the time of Islam can be imagined, which might be viewed as a shift away from the Muslim Other. But monasteries also platform new channels of engagement, as we have seen with Tamav Irini and other spiritual travelers. Their spiritual movement respects no political borders. They travel to meet fellow monks, and they answer the prayers of people in need, be they in Egypt, Brazil, or elsewhere in the world. They create relationships that parallel other kinds of networks that form across

monasteries: those between bishops and monks, and those between monasteries and saints. These are spiritual topographies with long reach.

On the last day of my fieldwork, I asked Umm Samuel and her sister to join me on a trip to the cave. Two friends from the United States had come to visit, and I wanted to show them the western edge of the valley. Umm Samuel arranged for several tuk-tuks to take us there. Unless one has a car, I realized, it is hard to make it out to the cave, and the sisters had not been there in several years. Our caravan of tuk-tuks kicked up dust. The sisters' children stole glances at the American visitors, who smiled back. When we arrived, the children spilled out and rushed up the incline, all carrying balloons that Umm Samuel had brought for the occasion. We walked up and took in the view. We could see the new Orthodox church and St. Mark's church, both nearing completion. In the distance were the cluster of steeples in the old quarter. I showed my friends the church where Fr. Bishoy had been pastor, farther to the north.

The kids had already entered the cave and were exploring its various crevices. Umm Samuel and her sister walked in and sized up the place. I had visited churches and monasteries with them before. They usually relished the chance to take *baraka* wherever it might be found, and I was curious to see what they would do here. I made some jokes, took pictures, and watched the kids as they played. All the while, the two sisters stood by the altar near the entrance of the cave, waiting.

¹ There are no references to calendrical dates in the New Testament, and in this sense “calendrical time” would not apply to Christian scripture. But in my reading, Mahmood intends “calendrical time” to include events that occur in “empty” or “linear” time, where the narrative significance of events is separated from the facticity of their occurrence. This broader understanding of “calendrical time” is harder to square with Christianity. Mircea Eliade, for instance, make use of a similar distinction – mythic time and historical time – to show how Judaism (and with it, Christianity) gave rise to a distinctly “historical” approach to time: “Compared with the archaic and palaeo-oriental religions, as well as with the mythic-philosophical conceptions of the eternal return, as they were elaborated in India and Greece, Judaism presents an innovation of the first importance. For Judaism, time has a beginning and will have an end. The idea of cyclic time is left behind. Yahweh no longer manifests himself in cosmic time (like the gods of other religions) but in a historical time, which is irreversible” (1987:110).

CONCLUSION

The well-defined loses its outlines; its edges drift and blend into what is next to them. Rather than a flexibility of transition, what we have here are forms in transit. They are “metaphors” in process. This slippage, a gentle outflow of figures, is all the more disturbing in that it is carried out with the greatest clarity of detail (nothing hidden, no shading, no blur, no impressionism) and in an absolutely stable, even rigid framework...The forms travel, but within a fixed space.

Michel de Certeau
The Garden: Delirium and Delights of Hieronymus Bosch

Michel de Certeau’s remarks about *The Garden of Earthly Delights* speak of the strange transformations that play out across Hieronymus Bosch’s famous painting. He observes that the charm – or beguilement? – of the artwork lies in its orderly chaos, the way that incoherent elements are sutured together. The eye is encouraged to wander, but the constant movement is dizzying. Meaning seems within grasp, only to slip away. This restlessness is due in part to the stability offered by the frame itself. Everything can move, touch, and change into the other. But it cannot breach the edge of the canvas. In this arena of flux, it is the unremarkable frame that holds the painting together.

This observation reflects the methodology this study has embraced. It also raises a question. The methodology, of course, has been my intense and prolonged focus on a specific

site – the “arbitrary fieldsite,” as Matei Candea puts it. Throughout these pages, characters have appeared and undergone various transformations: from local saint to an ambiguous memory, from a housewife to a leader of a prayer group, from a hometown priest to a priest in exile, from painter to artist. Buildings of one sort or another have also shifted, with churches blending into houses and houses into churches. Tombs and caves are filled or left empty; walls are erected or torn down. Changes have also occurred in the town. At times churches spill into the streets, at other times local politics encroach into the church. These permutations are only grasped from a point of stability. Like Bosch’s painting, change needs permanence to be observed. Candea advocates for the arbitrary fieldsite in order to show how a seemingly bounded unit might, in actuality, be internally complex. This study has advanced this position, and then some. For while the town of al-‘Aziya is complex, so are its basic social units. There is nothing simple about houses, churches, or caves.

The question that de Certeau implicitly raises, though, is what does all this change mean? The disorder of Bosch’s painting invites interpretation, de Certeau notes, while also pushing it away. Could an analysis of internal complexity be different? At least in this study, the aspiration has been to say yes, and it has attempted to do so by focusing on the way place is made. Perhaps the simplest way this activity occurs is through building: constructing walls, raising a church steeple with a loudspeaker, making a tomb, establishing a monastery. But these activities only scratch the surface. We have witnessed more subtle, and occasionally more enduring, ways of erecting boundaries and perimeters. The *dura* is the most elaborate way this kind of boundary-making occurs in al-‘Aziya, but we have seen others: shifting interactive frameworks in prayer meetings; historical narratives that draw close or separate house from church; rituals that keep apart politics from the church (or bring them together); image production that replicates, but does

not replace, sacred art. Placemaking, in this study, is the act of inscribing and erasing these divides.

But the divides between what? The shadow of Durkheim lingers in this regard, as his view of religion hinges on the sacred/profane dichotomy, which itself invokes ideas of boundary-maintenance. “Sacred things,” he wrote, “are things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must keep at a distance from what is sacred” (1995:38). It is unfashionable to express admiration for Durkheim these days, especially for those who, like myself, are interested in the plurality hidden in the guise of seemingly stable objects. But the critique this study makes of this classic divide is not that it is wrong, but that it is limited. Between these extremes of sacred and profane, there are many shades of near-sacred and near-profane. Sorting out the difference requires more subtle forms of action than prescribed rites (though sometimes those are needed as well). Fr. Boulos lived in this grey area. It is where Mukhlas’s paintings belong. One might even say the town itself falls between the two extremes.

The benefit of studying Coptic Christians is that, at least according to conventional wisdom, they have a ready-made grid for separating the sacred from the profane. As any Copt will tell you, churches and monasteries are sacred. These are places that one goes to in order to find sacred people and things. Even the way many Orthodox Copts address priests reflects this confidence – “Your sacredness” or “Your holiness” (*qudsak*), as some people said to me. In a sectarian world, these sacred places, people, and objects attract attention. They work as identity markers for the community at large. They raise concerns about protection, and they have served as targets for those who seek to cause maximum damage. It is no surprise that ethnographers who study Copts in Egypt tend to spend lots of time in churches. It is usually where Copts want

you to be. Yet with such a strong sense of the sacred – if one may call it that – the question of how to handle near-sacred things is actually heightened. Ethnography that stays in the church (or refuses to go in it) can miss this vibrant midrange range of social interaction. Given the challenge of living as a minority community, this midrange can be hard to observe, as I learned when I traveled through majority-Muslim towns in Upper Egypt. But when the situation is reversed, as is the case in al-‘Aziya, these granular distinctions rise to the surface. What is an exception in the context of Egypt, then, is also an opportunity to witness a process that elsewhere remains hidden.

We have seen as well that the midrange between the sacred and the profane – that which happens at the intersection of house and church, for instance – is also where the demands of pluralism are met and engaged. I have used this phrase on occasion as something of a placeholder, trying to allow an ethnographically-informed expression of pluralism to emerge from the ethnography. Here I can be more direct. Pluralism has tended to mean religious pluralism in this study, and it has played itself out in two salient ways. The first is through the presence of various denominations, as noted from the beginning. Presence is the key word. Residents in this town encounter people of other denominations every day, perhaps even in their own household. The denominational pluralism that emerges from this interaction is not uniform. The centrality of the Orthodox church gives way to different kinds of denominational histories, all of which trickle into the everyday lives of residents. Likewise, women tend to have alternate ways of approaching denominational difference, which generate a distinct pattern of interpersonal interaction and interface between church and house.

That these demands are channeled through the presence of the denominational Other means that church-adjacent spaces become important contact zones where this difference is negotiated. When Kabir Tambar (2014) writes about pluralism in the context of Turkey, he has

in mind the imposition placed by the state on ways the Alveï minority should and should not express their minority identity. The situation in al-‘Aziya is much different in that the demands made by the Egyptian state are not as immediate. But the sense that a particular kind of denominational pluralism must be performed in public is present. It is seen in the strangely uniform church architecture, in the similar forms of bodily movement with churches, in funerals and in female-led prayer meetings. Because of al-‘Aziya’s unique character, these church-adjacent spaces loom large, and the performance of this kind of pluralism is more visible.

The other way that pluralism has been addressed is through the relative absence of Muslims. Absence does not pair as easily with notions of pluralism; in fact, it might seem to remove the problem that pluralism, as an ideology, seeks to address. But pluralism in the way I have chosen to study it does not cohere around a stable set of principles. Instead it is encountered in certain deficiencies that come from within. Part II examined the way that boundaries have to be redrawn in light of Muslim absence, either in terms of the topography of the town, or conceptually in terms of family politics, reconciliation, and the church. These cases are, in a sense, portraits of pluralism inside-out. When I began my research, I thought that residents might find ways to reincorporate the Muslim Other into their lives. But what we have seen is something different. This absence spurs innovation and experimentation. It is a generative absence.

The town of al-‘Aziya might be an exception for now, but throughout the Coptic communities in Egypt, walls are going up. The Coptic Orthodox Church has become the primary social network through which families come to know each other, friendships take root, and communities are formed. The effects of this transformation are inscribed in cities and towns throughout Egypt. Churches provide meeting halls, fields and recreational space for children, clinics, all often contained within the church complex. During my fieldwork, the Catholic bishop

of Asyut oversaw the grand opening of a pavilion lined with small soccer pitches – every night it was filled with parents and children. Copts will never fully withdraw from Egyptian society, but this slow separation of Muslim and Coptic forms of sociality is well underway. It would not be surprising then to see an emergence of shadow zones, or places where Coptic identity is reassessed. These shadow zones will likely not be as violent or gripping as the vendettas explored here. Yet they could very well exhibit the same dynamics: confusion over the boundaries of culture and scripture; a reassessment of the divide between the ritual life of the church and the world of politics; a reordering of space that reflects these changes. As the social ties between Muslims and Copts are reconfigured, Coptic communities in Egypt will change. If al-‘Aziya is to be a case study in this regard, the best place to look for such changes is where these internal boundaries and divides start to be redrawn.

This story focuses on Copts, yet there are lessons to be learned in terms of the broader anthropology of Christianity. The anthropology of Christianity has grown over the last quarter century in large part because Christianity has become an unavoidable feature of places that, at least to western eyes, can be safely slotted as “other.” The fact that Papua New Guinea and broader Southeast Asia and Oceania have been fruitful sites for working out the basic components of this anthropology is a case in point (Robbins 2004, 2009; Keane 2007). The narrative arc these studies follow is one about how Christianity – and especially Pentecostalism – coincides and moves alongside an emerging neoliberal global order. This order is structured around certain ideas about the individual; for instance, that “thick” kinship commitments need to be restructured to accommodate the demands of emergent markets and labor practices. Christianity can provide a moral and spiritual framework that helps facilitate this transition – one

that ultimately results in “the Other” becoming more modern, and more like the western observer.

This interplay, in which anthropology departs from a largely post-Christian North Atlantic world only to encounter western forms of Christianity in the global south, is disrupted by Middle Eastern Christians. People like Copts have never been that different from Christians in the West. The tension between Orthodox and Catholics in al-‘Aziya is a case in point. This struggle is one due to similarities, not differences. Moreover, the language of saints, miracles, churches, and monasteries is one that resonates throughout the Mediterranean world, as well as in other places where Catholicism or Orthodoxy have deep roots. In these traditions, there are not straight lines between Christianity and modernity. In so far as Coptic Christians engage with modernity, they will likely do so on different terms than Christians in the convert societies anthropologists of Christianity have traditionally studied. It provides a useful counterbalance to a now well-established theme in the anthropology of Christianity.

Yet the expressions of Christianity found in Egypt, and covered in these pages, are nevertheless having to confront a world that is changing rapidly. These changes involve an influx in what might be called the near-sacred and the near-profane. Outside the doors of every monastery there is a gift shop selling superhero toys to kids, and in the house of most Copts there are images of saints and holy people. The temptation in encountering this proliferation of the sacred is to see it as a kind of identity marker in a sectarian world – signs stripped of sincerity or religious import. Or, on the other hand, one might see in these things *only* the sacred – an approach that can make the lives of Copts appear otherworldly. The truth, which should be obvious, is that most Copts live somewhere in-between. Studying Copts therefore requires a

language of these sacred-profane assemblages. The contribution Copts might make to the anthropology of religion, I would suggest, lies in fashioning this kind nuance.

Which returns us to de Certeau and his remarks on Bosch's painting. At the core of de Certeau's analysis is the idea that Bosch's hybrid forms betray a certain unraveling of the medieval Christian mind. Those things which are meant to "respond" to reality are distorted, warped, and given new hybrid shapes – it is the correspondence theory of truth eroded before our very eyes. This provocation can be good to think with when it comes to the study of Copts. In the heady world of cosmopolitan theory, there will always be a preference for the Heraclitian over the Parmenidean, which is to say, a preference for flux over stasis, instability over stability, hybridity over solidity. This study has moved primarily through Heraclitian zones: places that fuel social innovation, produce conceptual problems, and create unique formations like house-churches and monasteries around a cave. But this analysis should not make one assume that this theoretical preference is necessarily shared by Copts. When Copts point to their churches, monasteries, saints, miracles, and icons and say, "Look there," they mean it. These are the core elements of Coptic identity. But the conceptual alignment that these sacred things enjoy raises the question about what kinds of misalignments lie elsewhere. These misalignments, I have suggested, can be found in the shift from icon to icon-adjacent, from church to church-adjacent, and so on. What Bosch shows, in de Certeau's essay, is that a stable frame can reveal the beauty, strangeness, and violence of such misalignments. Planting one's feet allows such shifts and changes to unfold. However, these hybrid forms, while perhaps necessary, may also reveal the loss of a world that is receding.

APPENDIX

Fig. 8.1 The founding narrative of the First Apostolic church of al-‘Aziya. See Jaballah 2013:157.

The First Apostolic church of al-‘Aziya

(State Resolution number 375, year 2007)

1. The year of the founding: It was founded in 1932.
2. The story of its founding: It was the brother ‘Atallah ‘Abd al-Milak Yaqoub after its renovation who had the biggest role in the founding of the Apostolic church of al-‘Aziya. He was often used in the healing of the sick and the exorcism of demons, which were witnessed by all. Also, the brother Wadi‘a ‘Atallah al-‘Azawi who afterwards became an Apostolic minister and who founded the Apostolic church in Samalut in 1956 during which he was the pastor of the Apostolic church in Teba.

Those who also shared in the founding [of the church] in al-‘Aziya are:

Brother Yousef Raziq Salih – Brother Yousef Jadallah – Brother Rizq Jadallah – Brother Anton ‘Atallah – Brother Wahib Sa‘d Hanna. The gathering began in one of the homes.

3. The buildings: The brethren bought the land on which the current church is built and then built the church “provisionally” with green and red brick. In 2007 the church was demolished and it was widened and the new enlarged building was built with three stories and was opened on April 10, 2009. The members of the church council and the youth council at that time had a big role in carrying out this great task, and they are: The Shaykh: Zaka Boulos Boktor, secretary of the church – Brother Yaqoub ‘Awida Amin al-Sandouq – Brother Zakaria Farag – Brother Rizq ‘Atta – Brother Fil Labib – Brother ‘Abd al-Malik Yousef – Brother Elia ‘Awida – Minister Josef Nadir – Minister Mamdouh Mirad – Minister Amir Raghieb – Brother Mamdouh Fahmi – Brother Harbi Radi – Brother Nasir Riyad – Brother Kariz Kalib – Brother Osama Hanna- Brother Hani Hanna.

4. The pastors: The first pastor of the church / the minister Iskandir ‘Abd al-Mesih al-Amiri from 1944-1948 – the minister Salib Kiltu 1948-1956 – the minister Nathan Kamil Georgy 1954-1958 – the minister Daoud Garas 1958-1972 – the minister Habib Izhaq 1962-1975 – the minister N‘aim Ghali – the minister Naji Sidqi Qidisi – the minister Gamil Fahim – the minister Ibrahim Gabir 1970-1990 – the minister Daoud Garas 1992-1993 – the minister Hani Tawfiq

Milayka 1993-1994 – the minister Izhaq Qarqarsh 1995-1996 – the minister Mawdi Gargas ‘abd al-Milak al-Manfaluti 2002-2006, and the minister Mamdouh Mirad Shafik, the first of the church’s children, has been pastor since 2010 until the beginning of 2013.

٢- الكنيسة الرسولية الأولى * بالعززية (قرار جمهوري رقم ٣٧٥ لسنة ٢٠٠٧)

- ١- سنة التأسيس: تأسست في عام ١٩٣٢م.
- ٢- قصة تأسيسها: كان للأخ/ عطاالله عبد الملاك يعقوب بعد تجديده الدور الأكبر في تأسيس الكنيسة الرسولية بالعززية وكان مُستخدماً كثيراً في شفاء الأمراض وإخراج الشياطين بشهادة الجميع وأيضاً الأخ/ وديع عطا الله العزاوي الذي أصبح فيما بعد قساً رسولياً وهو الذي أسس الكنيسة الرسولية بمعصرة سمالوط عام ١٩٥٢ بينما كان يرعى الكنيسة الرسولية بالطيبة. وشاركهما في التأسيس بالعززية الإخوة:
- الأخ/ يوسف رزيق صالح - الأخ/ يوسف جادالله - الأخ/ رزق جادالله
- الأخ/ أنطون عطاالله - الأخ/ وهيب سعد حنا. وبدأ الاجتماع في أحد البيوت.
- ٣- المباني: اشترى الإخوة المكان المقام عليه الكنيسة حالياً وتم بناؤها بالطوب الأخضر والأحمر بطريقة بدائية، وفي عام ٢٠٠٨ تم هدم الكنيسة وتوسيعها وبناء مبنى حديث وفخم ثلاثة أدوار وافتتح في ١٠/٤/٢٠٠٩. وكان لأعضاء مجلس الكنيسة ومجلس الشباب في ذلك الوقت دور كبير في إتمام هذا العمل الضخم وهم:- الشيخ: زكا بولس بقطر سكرتير الكنيسة - الأخ/ يعقوب عويضة أمين الصندوق - الأخ/ زكريا فرج - الأخ/ رزق عطا - الأخ/ فل لبيب - الأخ/ عبد الملاك يوسف - الأخ/ إيليا عويضة - ق/ جوزيف نادر - ق/ ممدوح مراد - ق/ أمير راغب - الأخ/ ممدوح فهمي - الأخ/ حربى راضى - الأخ/ ناصر رياض - الأخ/ كريز كالب - الأخ/ أسامه حنا - الأخ/ هانى حنا.
- ٤- الرعاية: أول راعي للكنيسة القس/ إسكندر عبد المسيح الميـرى من ١٩٤٤-١٩٤٨ - ق/ صليب قلته ١٩٤٨-١٩٥٢ - ق/ ناثان كامل جورجى ١٩٥٤-١٩٥٨ - ق/ داود جرس ١٩٥٨-١٩٧٢ - ق/ حبيب إسحق ١٩٧٢-١٩٧٥ - ق/ نعيم غالى - ق/ ناجى صدقى قدسى - ق/ جميل فهمي - ق/ إبراهيم جابر ١٩٨٠-١٩٩٠ - ق/ داود جرس ١٩٩٢-١٩٩٣ - ق/ هانى توفيق مليكة ١٩٩٣-١٩٩٤ - ق/ إسحق قرقوش ١٩٩٥-١٩٩٨ - ق/ ممدوح جرجس عبد الملاك المنفلوطى ٢٠٠٢-٢٠٠٦، ويقوم برعايتها حالياً منذ ٢٠١٠ حتى الآن نهاية ٢٠١٣ القس/ ممدوح مراد شفيق أحد أبنائها.

* كتيب مقتطفات تاريخية عن تاريخ الكنيسة الرسولية بالعززية للأخ المحامي/ سليمان رمزى ثابت.
* ينبغى أن أشير أن الكنيسة الرسولية الثانية بالعززية قد تم بناؤها على مساحة ٢٠٠م تقريباً وتم افتتاحها في يناير ٢٠١٤ أثناء طبع الكتاب واتخذ قرار رسامة الأخ// حربى راضى قساً لها.

Fig. 8.2 Hanna Boctor leaves the Orthodox Church. See Hanna 2000:97-99.

Hanna replied [to the bishop of Asyut] that he did not want a special dispensation from the Patriarch or anyone else. If it was a sin for the carpenters to attend Dr. Hogg's meetings, it was a sin for him to do so too, and no dispensation of the Patriarch could alter the moral character of his action in the matter. "I am ready, moreover," he added, "to give up attending the night meetings at the mission house upon two conditions. Firstly, that you read a haram next Sabbath against all who use intoxicating drinks; and secondly, that you have a night meeting in the church for the study of the Scriptures, and grant permission to all of every creed to attend it, even the American missionary, if he chooses to do so."

The Bishop actually gave Mr. Hanna permission to read a paper against the drinking of arrack...[The] next day at the close of the mass, Mr. Hanna Boctor called out aloud to the officiating priest that he had an address which he wished to read to the congregation, and that the Bishop had given his consent.

"We know what you wish to read," the priest replied, in great indignation, "you wish to lower us in the eyes of the people, in order to lead them astray at your will. We know our duty without asking you to come and teach us."

Mr. Hanna replied that if he did, perhaps others did not. "The paper I wish to read would do no harm to you or anyone else who wanted to lead a Christian life." Only two days ago people had been publicly reprovved for the sin of reading the Bible. There was another sin of which a much greater number of them were guilty, the sin of drunkenness. "The paper which I hold in my hand exposes this sin, and I am resolved that it shall be read."

"It shall not be read," was the curt reply.

"Then you hold it is unlawful to read the Bible, and lawful to drink arrack."

"Yes, it is lawful to drink arrack," replied the priest.

A scene of indescribable confusion followed, some calling out one thing and some another...seeing the uselessness of persisting in the attempt, Mr. Hanna Boctor called out to his companions to come off with him to the mission house, "and leave Ephraim to his idols." (97-99)

Fig. 8.3 Jokes about Orthodox rebaptism

(1) There was a Catholic girl betrothed to an Orthodox man. The Orthodox priest said, "you've got to marry 'Orthodox.'" They agreed. He then said to the bride, "you've got to be baptized 'Orthodox.'" They agreed. And he knew her parents weren't married 'Orthodox,' so he said, "they must be married 'Orthodox.'" The Orthodox priest said that her mother and father must be married as well. But they replied, "There's a problem, her father died." And the priest said, "There's no problem. We can pray over anything that belonged to him." So they grabbed his jacket and propped it up, and the priest married it to her mother!

(2) There was a Catholic couple whose daughter was betrothed to an Orthodox man. Of course, she had to be baptized 'Orthodox,' and her parents had to be married. And so, they went to the

church. And when her father was asked by the priest if he took her mother to be his wife, he said no!

(3) There was an elderly couple who had children, and those children married and had children and they married. And the children along with the neighbors joked with the grandparents, asking them, “How did you marry?” They answered, “Catholic.” And they said, “No, your marriage is invalid (*batl*). You must get remarried.” And the grandmother came at them with her sandal in hand, and she yelled at them. Then she went to the Orthodox church and asked to see Father ‘Dog.’ And they said, “There’s no Father ‘Dog’ here, just Father Youssef.” And she said, “That Father Youssef, his name is Father ‘Dog.’”

Fig. 8.4 Coptic imagery

- (1) A painting on a house door of Fr. Boulos al-Hermini with the Virgin Mary
- (2) A catalogue of sacred images used by a tattoo vender at the al-‘Aziya mazar.
- (3,4) Paintings in sitting rooms of al-‘Aziya households.





BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archival Material

The Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
 Davida Finney Papers
 Edwin M Bailey Papers

Books in Arabic

Dair al-Shahid Abi Saifein lil-Rahibat bi Masr al-Qadima. 1989. *Sirat-al-Shahid al- 'Azim Filubatir Marquriyus "Abi Saifein" wa Tarikh Dairihi*. Cairo: Al-Anba Ruways.

-----2011. *Tamav Irini Sha 'alat al-Hub al-Mutajajat al-Sat'ia fi Sama' al-Rahbana al-Qibtiya*, Vol. 6.

Jaballah, Hilmi Adham. 2013. *Al-Kinisa al-Rasuliya fi Misr 1907-2013*.

Mamdouh, Joseph. 2017. *Qiṣṣa Hayat Muthallath al-Raḥamat al-Anba Mikha'il Muṭran Asyut Wa Ra'is Dayr Abu Maqar*.

Mubarak, 'Ali. 1888. *Al-Khitat al-Taufiqiyah*, Vol. 8.

Ramzi, Muhammad. 1994. *Al-Qamus al-Jughrafi Lil-Bilad al-Miṣriyah, Min 'ahd Qudama' a-Miṣriyin Ila Sanat 1945*. Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyah al-'Ammah lil-Kitab.

Sorial, Al-Mojtamaa Riad. 1984. *Al-Kebti fi Misr fi Al-Karn Al-Tase' 'Ashr*. Cairo: Al-Māhābāh Bookstore.

Articles and Books in English and French

Abbas, Rauf, and Assem El-Dessouky. 2011. *The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837-1952*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Abdelsayed, John Paul. 2014. "Liturgy: Heaven on Earth." In *The Coptic Christian Heritage: History, Faith, and Culture*, edited by Lois Farag, 143-159. London and New York: Routledge.

Agha, Asif. 2007. *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Agrama, Hussein Ali. 2012. *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Albera, Dionigi, and Maria Couroucli, eds. 2012. *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Armanios, Febe. 2008. "Patriarchs, Archons, and the Eighteenth-Century Resurgence of the Coptic Community." In *The Cave Church of Paul the Hermit at the Monastery of St. Paul, Egypt*, edited by William Lyster, 61-74. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press.
- 2012. *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2017. "A Christian Public Space in Egypt: Historical and Contemporary Reflections." In *Religious Interactions in Europe and the Mediterranean World Coexistence and Dialogue from the 12th to the 20th Centuries*, edited by Katsumi Fukasawa, Benjamin J. Kaplan, and Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, 317-330. London: Routledge.
- Asad, Talal. 1986. *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*. Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University.
- 1993. "Discipline and Humility in Christian Monasticism." In *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 125-167. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bachelard, Gaston. 1964. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Baer, Gabriel. 1962. *A History of Landownership in Modern Egypt 1800-1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1969. "The Settlement of the Beduins." In *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bandak, Andreas. 2014. "Of Refrains and Rhythms in Contemporary Damascus: Urban Space and Christian-Muslim Coexistence." *Current Anthropology* 55(S10): 248-61.
- Baron, Beth. 2014. *The Orphan Scandal: Christian Missionaries and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

- Basso, Keith. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Bialecki, Jon. 2014. "After the Denominozoic: Evolution, Differentiation, Denominationalism." *Current Anthropology* 55: S1983-S204.
 -----2017. *A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bielo, James. 2009. *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*. New York: New York University Press.
- Boddy, Janice. 1989. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zār Cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977a. "The Kabyle House or the World Reversed." In *Algeria 1960*. Translated by Richard Nice, 133-153. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 -----1977b. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 -----1989. "Social Space and Symbolic Power." *Sociological Theory* 7(1): 14-25.
- Boylston, Tom. 2018. *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brown, Nathan. 1990. *Peasant Politics in Modern Egypt: The Struggle Against the State*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
 -----1997. *The Rule of Law in the Arab World: Courts in Egypt and the Gulf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Peter. 1981. *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, Wendy. 2006. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Burgess, Stanley and Eduard van der Maas, eds. *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press.
- Candea, Matei. 2007. "Arbitrary Locations: In Defence of the Bounded Field-Site." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13:17-184.
 -----2010. *Corsican Fragments: Difference, Knowledge, and Fieldwork*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Cannell, Fenella. 2005. "The Christianity of Anthropology." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11(2): 335-356.
 -----2013. "The Blood of Abraham: Mormon Redemptive Physicality and American Idioms of Kinship." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.): S77-S94.

- Carsten, Janet and Stephen Hugh-Jones. 1995. *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Casey, Edward. 1997. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Christian, William A. 2018. "Epilogue: Not-Orthodoxy / Orthodoxy's Others." In *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice*, edited by Sonja Luehrmann, 242-250. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Clarke, Morgan. 2008. "New Kinship, Islam, and the Liberal Tradition: Sexual Morality and New Reproductive Technology in Lebanon." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (1): 153–69.
- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Coleman, Simon. 2010. "An Anthropological Apologetics." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109(4): 791–810.
- 2019. "The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage: The Broadening Out of a Field." *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 11: 25–38.
- Comaroff, Jean and John L. Comaroff. 1999. "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony." *American Ethnologist* 26(2): 279-303.
- Connolly, William. 2005. *Pluralism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Couroucli, Maria. 2012. "Saint George the Anatolian: Master of Frontiers." In *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries*, edited by Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli, 118-140. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 1992. *The Mystic Fable*. Vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Deeb, Lara. 2006. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Deleuze, Giles. 1994. *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1992. "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'" In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Carlson, 3-67. London: Routledge.

- de Vries, Hent. "In Media Res. Global Religion, Public Squares, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies." In *Religion and Media*, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, 56-93. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Dowell, Anna. 2015. "Landscapes of Belonging: Protestant Activism in Revolutionary Egypt." *International Journal of Sociology* 45(3): 190–205.
- Dresch, Paul. "Placing the Blame: A Means of Enforcing Obligations in Upper Yemen." *Anthropos* 4(6): 427-443.
- Dumont, Louis. 1986. *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dunlop, Anne. 2009. *Painted Palaces: The Rise of Secular Art in Early Renaissance Italy*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen Fields. New York: Free Press.
- El Gendi, Yosra and Marco Pinfari. 2020. "Icons of Contention: The Iconography of Martyrdom and the Construction of Coptic Identity in Post-Revolutionary Egypt." *Media, War and Conflict* 13(1): 50-69.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard Trask. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Engelke, Matthew. 2010. "Past Pentecostalism: notes on rupture, realignment, and everyday life in Pentecostal and African independent churches." *Africa* 80(2): 177–199.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1940. *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fadil and Fernando. 2015. "Rediscovering the 'Everyday' Muslim: Notes on an Anthropological Divide." *HAU* 5(2): 59-88.
- Fernandez, James W. 1986. *Persuasion and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fernando, Mayanthi. 2014. *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16(1): 22-27.
 -----1990. *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction*. New York: Penguin Random House.

- Frick, David. 2013. *Kith, Kin, and Neighbors: Communities and Confessions in Seventeenth-Century Wilno*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1971. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1996. "Afterword." In *Senses of Place*, edited by Steven Feld and Keith Basso, 259-262. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Georgy, Joshua. 2015. *Fragmented Geographies: The See of Alexandria, Its Following, and the Estrangements of Modernity*. PhD diss., Columbia University, New York.
- Gilsenan, Michael. 2016. "Lying, Honor, and Contradiction." *HAU* 6(2): 497-525.
- Gluckman, Max. 1955. "The Peace in the Feud." *Past & Present* 8(1): 1-14.
- Goffman, Erving. 1974[1955]. "On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction." In *Language, Culture, and Society: A Book of Readings*, edited by Ben Blount, 224-49. Cambridge: Winthrop Publishers.
- 1981. *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Guirguis, Laure. 2017. *Copts and the Security State: Violence, Coercion, and Sectarianism in Contemporary Egypt*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Guirguis, Magdi, and Nelly van Doorn-Harder. 2011. *The Emergence of the Modern Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership from the Ottoman Period to the Present*. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Gran, Peter. 2004. "Upper Egypt in Modern History." In *Upper Egypt: Identity and Change*, edited by Nicholas Hopkins and Reem Saad, 79-96. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Gruber, Mark. 2003. *Sacrifice in the Desert: A Study of an Egyptian Minority through the Prism of Coptic Monasticism*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Hamilton, Alastair. 2006. *The Copts and the West, 1439-1822: The European Discovery of the Egyptian Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hammond, Marlé. 2018. "Isnād." In *A Dictionary of Arabic Literary Terms and Devices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Handman, Courtney. 2011. "Israelite Genealogies and Christian Commitment: The Limits of Language Ideologies in Guhu-Samane Christianity." *Anthropological Quarterly* 83(2): 655-678.
- 2014. *Critical Christianity: Translation and Denominational Conflict in Papua New Guinea*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Hann, Chris and Hermann Goltz. 2010. *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Harding, Susan F. 1987. "Convicted By the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion." *American Ethnologist* 14(1): 167-181.
- 1991. "Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other." *Social Research* 58(2): 373-393.
- Harkness, Nicholas. 2014. *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hasan, Sana. 2003. *Christians Versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heo, Angie. 2018a. "Imaging Holy Personhood: Anthropological Thresholds of the Icon." In *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Spirituality in Practice*, edited by Sonja Luehrmann, 83-101. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 2018b. *The Political Lives of the Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1985. *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics in Egypt*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ibrahim, Mina. 2019. "A Minority at the Bar: Revisiting the Coptic Christian (In-)Visibility." *Social Compass* 66(3): 366-382.
- Ibrahim, Vivian. 2015. "Beyond the Cross and the Crescent: Plural Identities and the Copts in Contemporary Egypt." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38(14): 2584-2597.
- Ingold, Tim. 2020. "On Opening the Book of Surfaces." In *Surfaces: Transformations of Body, Materials and Earth*, edited by Mike Anusas and Cristian Simonetti, 14-28. London: Routledge.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1984. *An Ethic of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jamous, Raymond. 1992. "From the Death of Men to the Peace of God: Violence and Peacemaking in the Rif." In *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*, edited by J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers, 167-192. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jebens, Holgar. 2011. "Beyond Globalization of Localisation: Denominational Pluralism in a Papua New Guinea Village." *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 12(1): 91-110.

- Johnson, Paul Christopher. 2021. *Automatic Religion: Nearhuman Agents of Brazil and France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kapchan, Deborah. 1996. *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and The Revoicing of Tradition*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Keane, Webb. 1995. "The Spoken House: Text, Act, and Object in Eastern Indonesia." *American Ethnologist* 22(1): 102-124.
- 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lemon, Alaina. 2000. *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Poststructuralism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 2009. "Sympathy for the Weary State?: Cold War Chronotopes and Moscow Others." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51(4): 832-864.
- Lempert, Michael. 2008. "The Poetics of Stance." *Language in Society* 37(4):569-592.
- Levinson, Stephen. 1988. "Putting Linguistics on a Proper Footing: Explorations in Goffman's Concepts of Participation." In *Erving Goffman: Exploring the Interaction Order*, edited by Paul Drew and Anthony Wootton, 161-227. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- 1991. "Maison." In *Dictionnaire de l'Ethnologie et de l'Anthropologie*, edited by P. Bonte and M. Izard. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Luehrmann, Sonja. 2010. "A Dual Quarrel of Images on the Middle Volga: Icon Veneration in the Face of Protestant and Pagan Critique." In *Eastern Christian in Anthropological Perspective*, edited by Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz, 56-78. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2016. "The Politics of Prayer Books: Delegated Intercession, Names, and Community Boundaries in the Russian Orthodox Church." *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2(1): 6-22.
- 2018. *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lukasik, Candace. 2020. *Transnational Anxieties: Coptic Christians as Martyrs and Migrants*. PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley.

- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 2012. "Sectarian Conflict and Family Law in Contemporary Egypt." *American Ethnologist* 39(1): 54-62.
- 2015. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Makdisi, Ussama. 2000. *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2019. *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mann, Michael. 1986. "Ideology transcendent: The Christian ecumene." In *The Sources of Social Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 301-340.
- Masters, Bruce. 2001. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maya Mayblin, Kristin Norget, and Valentina Napolitano. 2017. "Introduction: The Anthropology of Catholicism." In *The Anthropology of Catholicism: A Reader*, edited by Maya Mayblin, Kristin Norget, Valentina Napolitano, 1-30. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mayeur-Jaouen, Catherine. 2012. "What Do Egypt's Copts and Muslims Share?" In *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries*, edited by Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli, 148-173. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 2019. *Voyage en Haute-Egypte : Prêtres, Coptes et Catholiques*. Paris: CNRS Editions.
- Mead, George H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Edited by Charles W. Norris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Meinardus, Otto. 1999. *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press.
- 2006. *Christians in Egypt: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Communities Past and Present*. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Meyer, Birgit. 1998. "'Make a Complete Break with the Past': Memory and Postcolonial Modernity in Ghanaian Discourse." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28(3): 316-49.
- 2011. "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of Medium." *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 19(1): 23-39.
- Michka, Aaron. 2021. "Baptism in the Plural: Ethnographic Notes from a Coptic Ecumene." *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 13.

- Mikhail, Maged S.A. 2014. *From Christina Egypt to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity, and Politics after the Arab Conquest*. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Mittermaier, Amira. 2008. "(Re)Imagining Space: Dreams and Saint Shrines in Egypt." In *Dimensions of Locality: Muslim Saints, Their Place and Space*, edited by Georg Stauth and Samuli Schielke, 47-66. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- 2011. *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mueggler, Erik. 2001. *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nagib, Tharwat Maher Nagib Adly. 2019. *A Historical Perspective on Pentecostalism in Egypt*. PhD diss., Regent University.
- Oram, Elizabeth. 2004. *Constructing Modern Copts: The Production of Coptic Christian Identity in Contemporary Egypt*. PhD diss., Princeton University.
- Ouspensky, Leonid. 1999. "The Meaning and Language of Icons." In *The Meaning of Icons*, by Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, 23-50. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Peristiany, J.G. and Julien Pitt-Rivers. 1992. "Introduction" In *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*, edited by J.G. Peristiany and Julian Pitt-Rivers, 1-17. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. 1968. "Pseudo-kinship" In *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. New York: Crowell Collier & Macmillan.
- 2017. "The Law of Hospitality." In *From Hospitality to Grace: A Julian Pitt-Rivers Omnibus*, edited by Giovanni da Col and Andrew Shryock, 163-184. Chicago: HAU Books.
- Pfössl, Eva and Will Kymlicka. 2015. "Minority Politics in the Middle East and North Africa: the Prospects for Transformative Change." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38(14):2489-2498.
- Purcell, Mark. 1998. "A Place for the Copts: Imagined Territory and Spatial Conflict in Egypt." *Ecumene* 5: 432-51.
- Ramzy, Carolyn. 2014. "To Die is Gain: Singing a Heavenly Citizenship Among Egypt's Coptic Christians." *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 80(5): 649-670.
- 2017. "Singing Heaven on Earth: Coptic Counterpublics and Popular Song at Egyptian Mulid Festivals." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 49(3): 375-394.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2007. "Painting in the Text." In *The Future of the Image*, 69-89. London and New York: Verso.

- Riesebrodt, Martin. 1999. "Charisma in Max Weber's Sociology of Religion." *Religion* 29(1):1-14.
- Robbins, Joel. 2004. *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2007. "Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity." *Current Anthropology* 48 (1): 5-38.
- 2009. "Pentecostal Networks and the Spirit of Globalization: On the Social Productivity of Ritual Forms." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 53(1): 55-66.
- 2020. *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Salama, Victor and Basma William, Nader Shukry, Michael Victor, and Miriam Rifaat. 2014. "Anba Mikhail (1921-2014)." *Watani*, November 26, 2014, <https://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/coptic-affairs/anba-mikhail-1921-2014/12542/>
- Sauneron, Serge. 1983. *Villes et Légendes d'Égypte*. Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire.
- Scheele, Judith, and Andrew Shryock. 2019. "Introduction: On the Left Hand of Knowledge." In *The Scandal of Continuity in Middle East Anthropology: Form, Duration, Difference*, edited by Judith Scheele and Andres Shryock, 1-25. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Schieffelin, Bambi. 2014. "Christianizing Language and the Dis-placement of Culture in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea." *Current Anthropology* 55(S10): S226-S237.
- Schielke, Samuli. 2012. *The Perils of Joy: Contesting Mulid Festivals in Contemporary Egypt*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- 2015a. *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 2015b. "Living With Unresolved Differences: A Reply to Fadil and Fernando." *HAU* 5(2): 89-92.
- Schmitt, Carl. 2005. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sedra, Paul. 1999. "Class cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10(2): 219-35.
- 2011. *From Mission to Modernity: Evangelicals, Reformers, and Education in Nineteenth Century Egypt*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- 2014. "Copts and the Millet Partnership: The Intra-Communal Dynamics Behind Egyptian Sectarianism." *Journal of Law and Religion* 29(3):491-509.
- Shami, Seteny. 2009. "Aqalliyya/Minority in Modern Egyptian Discourse." In *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon*, edited by Carol Gluck and Anna Tsing, 151-73. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Sharkey, Heather. 2008. *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shenoda, Anthony. 2010. *Cultivating Mystery: Miracles and the Coptic Moral Imaginary*. PhD diss., Harvard University.
- 2011. "Reflections on the (In)Visibility of Copts in Egypt." *Jadaliyya*.
<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24007> (accessed on May 7, 2021).
- 2012. "The Politics of Faith: On Faith, Skepticism, and Miracles among Coptic Christians in Egypt." *Ethnos* 77(4): 477-495.
- Shils, Edward. 1972. *The Constitution of Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shryock, Andrew. 1997. *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2004a. "Other Conscious/Self Aware: First Thoughts on Cultural Intimacy and Mass Mediation." In *Off Stage/On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- 2004b. "The New Jordanian Hospitality: House, Host, and Guest in the Culture of Public Display." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (46): 35-62.
- 2012. "Breaking Hospitality Apart: Bad Hosts, Bad Guests, and the Problem of Sovereignty." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (18): S20-S33.
- 2019a. "Dialogues of Three: Making Sense of Patterns that Outlast Events." In *The Scandal of Continuity in Middle East Anthropology: Form, Duration, Difference*, edited by Judith Scheele and Andrew Shryock, 27-51. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 2019b. "Keeping to Oneself: Hospitality and the Magical Hoard in the Balga of Jordan." *History and Anthropology* 30(5):546-562.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1987. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, Georg. 1950 "The Secret and the Secret Society." In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Kurt Wolff. Glencoe: The Free Press: 330-331
- Singerman, Diane. 1995. *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Swanson, Mark. 2010. *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641-1517): The Popes of Egypt: A History of the Coptic Church and Its Patriarchs*. Vol. 2. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Tambar, Kabir. 2014. *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and The Demands of History in Turkey*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Taussig, Michael. 1999. *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

- Tomlinson, Matthew. 2012. "The generation of the now: denominational politics in Fijian Christianity." In *Christian politics in Oceania*, edited by Matthew Tomlinson and Deborah McDougall, 78-102. New York: Berghahn.
- Tsing, Anna. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tweed, Thomas. 2006. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- van Doorn-Harder, Pieterella. 1995. *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- 2017. *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Vološinov, V.N. 1986. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society*, 2 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Westermarck, Edward. 1968[1926]. *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*. Vol. 1. New York: Routledge.
- Wirtz, Kristina. 2016. "The Living, the Dead, and the Immanent." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6(1): 343-369.
- Wissa, Hanna. 2000. *Assiout: The Saga of an Egyptian Family*. Revised edition. Sussex: Book Guild.
- Wissa, Myriam. 2016. "Together on the Way to the Monastic Church of Mīt Damsīs: Copts and Muslims at the Mūlid of Saint George in Medieval Islamic Egypt and Beyond." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 7(2): 229-234.