

Šebelová, Markéta

The miraculous and Coptic Orthodox Christianity in Egypt : power relations in operation

Religio. 2019, vol. 27, iss. 2, pp. [221]-246

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/142221>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

The Miraculous and Coptic Orthodox Christianity in Egypt: Power Relations in Operation

MARKÉTA ŠEBELOVÁ*

On Tuesday April 2, 1968, at 8:30 in the evening, three Muslim workers saw a luminous female figure kneeling on the top of the roof of St. Mary's church (Coptic Orthodox church) in Zeitoun (now a part of the Greater Cairo), Egypt. While one worker rushed to call the fire brigade in an attempt to save the woman from a presumed suicide, others recognized the Virgin Mary as the figure rose to her feet. The apparition continued to occur irregularly for another three years and literally hundreds of thousands of Christians and Muslims came to Zeitoun to see the apparition. Many witnesses claimed to have observed the phenomenon,¹ one of them purportedly being the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser. After much investigation conducted by the Coptic Orthodox Church and the police, the recurring apparition was eventually accepted as genuine by both the Egyptian government and the Church.²

The subject of this article, however, is the accounts of miracles occurring about thirty years later during my studies at the American University in Cairo. The ethnographic present used in this text relates to fieldwork conducted from 2001 to 2003. The discussion henceforth is concerned only with miracles and the miraculous narratives in the context of Coptic Orthodox Christianity in Egypt.³ Miracles and stories about them consist

* ORCID: 0000-0002-1776-677X.

I would like to express my gratitude to two anonymous reviewers and Michaela Ondrašínová. This work benefitted immensely from their valuable comments. I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Ranay AbdelSayed. Your sense of humor is missed dearly!

- 1 Muslims recognize the Virgin Mary as the mother of one of the prophets Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus of Nazareth). However, as Cynthia Nelson reports, not all Muslims were convinced that the apparition was holy – some saw it as black magic. See Cynthia Nelson, "Religious Experience, Sacred Symbols, and Social Reality", *Humaniora Islamica* 2, 1974, 253-266.
- 2 Francis Johnston, *When Millions Saw Mary*, Chulmleigh: Augustine Publishing Co. 1993 (1st ed. 1980), 16; available online at <<https://www.zeitun-eg.org/pg0001.htm>>, [30 May 2019].
- 3 As explained below, other Christian ecclesial communities operating in Egypt also use the adjective Coptic, such as the Catholic Coptic Church, and some Protestant Christians like to refer to themselves as Protestant Copts, too. Further, in Sudan we can

of multiple layers and my interest in this text is to examine only one aspect of miracle narratives, namely power relations vis-à-vis the surrounding environment. The main aim of the article is thus to present an ethnographic account of how the discourse on the miraculous is socially and culturally constructed in a specific context from a political perspective⁴ and to portray this discourse as lived experience. This I intend to do by providing a socio-economic context and then portraying the miraculous together with an analysis of the communicative aspect of miracles, looking at them as narratives dealing with power relations.⁵

Methodological and theoretical framework

Perhaps fascinatingly for a Westerner, miracles and their narratives constitute an embedded, expected and to a certain degree frequent⁶ aspect of reality for believing Copts. Considering the circulation of the discourse on miracles within multiple contexts in Coptic society I attempted to reflect this in the design of my research. Although most of the research was carried out in different districts of Cairo, representing neighborhoods of various social classes, I also stayed for some time in Upper and Middle Egypt. Specifically, I participated in a celebration of St. George (*mouled* of *Mari Girgis*) in Luxor and I stayed in a convent in Middle Egypt. I also traveled with a church group to Red Sea Monasteries, St. Paul Monastery and St. Anthony Monastery. I took part in various Sunday schools, attended Holy Masses and Vespers, and conducted unstructured interviews with people holding a variety of positions within the Church and from different backgrounds throughout Egypt.

In my research, I elicited (from my research participants) narratives about miracles, stories about saints' lives, experiences of apparitions and tales about exorcism. However, various kinds of stories about recent miracles experienced by contemporary Copts are printed in literally hundreds

also find the Coptic Orthodox Church. Consequently, unless designated otherwise, the term "Church" refers to the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt.

- 4 In this context I use the terms "politics" and "political" in their broader sense to imply and describe power dynamics in particular settings. In this article, I specifically deal with power relations at the individual and group level, and not on a structural level (i.e. societal arrangement).
- 5 The reader should be aware that miracle accounts are extremely rich in analytical potential, impossible to be explored fully in the space provided. In this text, I focus solely on one dimension that miracle narratives encompass, i.e. on power relations.
- 6 Frequency, of course, is a relative term depending what it is compared with. In the context of Coptic Orthodox Christianity, miracles appear (for reasons enumerated later) as almost an everyday occurrence. In my fieldwork, every believing Orthodox Copt whom I have met either has had a personal experience with a miracle (or an apparition) or would know personally somebody who has experienced a miracle (or an apparition).

and hundreds of brochures and made available at churches, monasteries and important sites where they can be bought and subsequently are shared. In this study, I therefore present an assortment of collected miracle narratives which I deem relevant to the political dimension examined in this space, and I contextualize these accounts with the official stand of the Church on the matter, represented by positions on the miraculous taken by various Coptic priests⁷ whom I met and interviewed during my fieldwork, and by the writings of the late His Highness Pope Shenouda III. The methodological tools I employed in my research were participant observation and unstructured interviews.⁸

Theoretically, concerning power relations I follow Michel Foucault's understanding of power seeing it as embodied in various discourses and systems of knowledge existing in a society.⁹ In this sense, power is everywhere, diffused in various social bodies, be they different social apparatuses (such as political, economic, educational etc.) on a structural level or on a personal level, in individual selves. Further, Talal Asad¹⁰ argues that religious symbols do not exist independently of social life nor can they be analyzed separately from historical relations with non-religious sym-

7 Priests in the Coptic Orthodox Church are always called by the respectful title *Abuna* (father) before their Christian name. Thus, I keep this tradition and call all the priests whom I interviewed by this title and their first name, although all names are changed.

8 The unstructured interviews were in the form of recorded sessions which I held with the research participants and which I subsequently transcribed, or as unrecorded sessions. I use quotation marks when quoting the research participants directly. When it was not possible to record the meetings (such as Sunday school meetings or the trip to the Red Sea Monasteries), I only wrote them down as fieldwork notes (either directly in front of the research participants or later) and in such cases I do not use quotation marks as these notes are not verbatim. Likewise, whenever I relate a miracle recounted to me from a brochure I do not use quotation marks.

In addition, in an effort to protect the people who so generously and graciously spent their time with me, all names of the research participants have been changed to names of their choice. Names of official figures, such as the late His Highness Patriarch Shenouda III have of course remained unchanged.

It is perhaps noteworthy to realize that the topic of miracles seemed at first rather strange to many of my research participants; one of them explicitly called me "*magnuna*" (crazy) when he did not realize that I could hear him. Yet in spite of the initial disbelief, research participants generally approved of my topic, and considered it a "good choice", if only because they often thought of it as a means for my conversion to the Orthodox Church, since I identified myself as a Protestant. This fact undoubtedly had its impact on the narratives which I collected.

9 See Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power", in: Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books 1984, 51-75.

10 See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore – London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1993, and id., "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz", *Man* 18/2, 1983, 237-259.

bols in the particular socio-economic setting, abstracted from the context of the power domain. He claims that the meanings of religious practices are outcomes of historically specific forces and disciplines, and are to be analyzed in the historical context of specific forces and disciplines acting upon these symbols. Thus, an analysis of religious symbols (such as miracle narratives) should not separate these symbols from relations with non-religious symbols in social world. In other words, he asserts that many contemporary studies of religion disconnect the domain of religion from other social realms which, combined with a focus on the religious beliefs, conceptually situates religion outside power relations. Hence, in this study I wish to place the discourse on miracles precisely into the power context and provide a view on power relations in operation.

As mentioned above, miracles and narratives about them have a multi-faceted and multi-layered character and therefore in this article, I strive primarily to provide an ethnographic account of one dimension (power relations) of the discourse on the miraculous within the Coptic Orthodox Church and to describe this discourse as richly and broadly as possible. Consequently, in this work I attempt to explore ways in which it is possible to approach miracle accounts while keeping them “alive” and not reducing them to the dry dust of rationality as evidence for a theory.

The Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt: The context

The Coptic Orthodox Church¹¹ prides itself as being *the* indigenous Christian group in Egypt and traces its origin back to Pharaonic Egypt, deriving this descent from an assertion (made by a majority of Copts) that the word Copt comes from *Agyptos*. This claim contains two meta-messages.¹² First, this proclamation of indigeneity situates Copts as the original descendants of Pharaonic Egyptians in opposition to Muslims, who Copts imagine as Arabs from the Middle East who invaded Egypt and thus

11 For an excellent and in-depth discussion about the changes the Coptic Orthodox Church, its clergy and laity have undergone in history, please see Brigitte Voile, *Les Copts d’Égypte sous Nasser: Sainteté, miracles, apparitions* [online], Paris: CNRS Éditions 2004, <<https://books.openedition.org/editionscnrs/2471>>, [8 August 2019], where she carefully traces the historical development of the Church and provides much more detail than it is possible to do here.

12 Here I include only the bare essentials; for an extensive and excellent discussion on the importance of the positioning Copts as the “Sons of Pharaoh” on Coptic identity construction, please see Anthony Shenoda, *Cultivating Mystery: Miracles and a Coptic Moral Imaginary* [manuscript of a Ph.D. thesis], Cambridge: Harvard University 2010, 15-21.

have nothing in common with ancient Egyptian history.¹³ In addition, this origin is emically posited as the distinction from other Christian Churches operating in Egypt (identified as newcomers) and by extension it is understood as an evidence of the Church possessing the true faith coming from St. Mark (unlike the other Christian Churches). In short, the origin from Pharaonic Egypt serves as an identity marker and is seen as backing the claim of Copts as constituting a distinct ethnic group.

Although Jill Kamil in her book *Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs* notes that among scholars in the social sciences and humanities there appears to be confusion over what the term “Coptic” refers to,¹⁴ Orthodox Copts are clear on the question. Very obviously to them, to be a Copt means to belong to a certain religion, namely Coptic Orthodox Christianity. This way, Coptic identity is intricately intertwined with religious identity. While this may seem to the reader as a tautological statement, there in fact have been assertions, coming both from Copts themselves and social scientists too, about Copts being a separate ethnic group.¹⁵ However, in this context, AbdelSayed raises the question whether a Copt can be identified as such if s/he converts to another religion, such as Islam or another branch of Christianity.¹⁶ This inquiry certainly becomes relevant if we consider that a Copt is perceived as “lost” for the community if s/he converts to Islam or to other forms of Christianity. Although there would be significant efforts to bring him/her back, the person will, after a while, so to speak “cease” to be a Copt for the Orthodox Coptic community. This seems to be supported by Mark Gruber, who mentions that Copts who convert to another Church suffer from guilt because they feel they are weakening and undermining the (Orthodox) Church’s cohesion and resistance to Islamicization.¹⁷ This argument must

13 In this context, it is necessary to bear in mind that many Egyptian Muslims are comprised of the original inhabitants who converted (forcefully or voluntarily) to Islam. But in the identity politics, Orthodox Copts who understand themselves as the true descendants of Pharaonic Egyptians are then the only successors of those people who were pyramid builders, excellent astronomers, etc. The contention of their descent thus serves as a confirmation of their “superior nature” in comparison to Muslims (A. Shenoda, *Cultivating Mystery...*, 16).

14 Jill Kamil, *Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press 2002, 269.

15 Again, I refer the reader to A. Shenoda’s discussion in his Ph.D. dissertation: A. Shenoda, *Cultivating Mystery...*, 10, 15-23.

16 Ranya AbdelSayed, *Church Politics: A Modernist Approach to the Role of the Coptic Orthodox Church of the Sea of Alexandria in Constructing Group Identity among Egyptian Copts* [manuscript of M.A. thesis], Cairo: The American University in Cairo 2003.

17 Mark Gruber, *Sacrifice in the Desert: An Ethnography of the Coptic Monastery* [manuscript of a Ph.D. thesis], New York: State University of New York 1990.

be understood in the context of a society where active proselytization is strictly forbidden and thus members of other Christian Churches have been mostly recruited from Orthodox Coptic Church. In addition, as noted above, other Churches often call themselves, and are referred to, as “Copts” as well, if always with an identifying adjective, such as Catholic Copts or Protestant/ Evangelical Copts,¹⁸ and these Churches also experience their own miracles and accounts of miracles bloom in their congregations, too. In my research I have not encountered apologetic sentiments from the non-Orthodox Christians, but I certainly talked to many Orthodox Copts who viewed the drainage by Catholic and Protestant Churches on their human resources with unease and sometimes disdain. But for the purposes in this text, I leave the question whether “Copt” is an ethnic and/ or religious label aside and simply recognize the intimate link between Coptic identity and the Orthodox religious identity.

Another point in my outline of the situation of the current Coptic Orthodox community is the numerical supremacy of the Muslim population over the Copts. Although Copts constantly dispute and question the official figures that they form only circa 6 % of Egypt’s population (estimating rather 12-15 %),¹⁹ they are acutely aware of their numerical disadvantage. At the same time, the Coptic community consistently rejects the descriptor “minority”²⁰ on the grounds that Egypt is “their” land and they are the indigenous population of Egypt.

Moreover, the economic situation in the past thirty years in Egypt generally has become more difficult, and the upward social mobility possible in the mid-1970s under Sadat’s “Open Door” (*Infītah*) policy has become gradually harder to achieve especially considering the discrimination that

18 One way to understand these claims is to view them precisely in the context of linkage to ancient Egyptian history with perceived moral and intellectual superiority to current times.

19 The census of 1996 states that the total Christian population constitutes 5.7 % of the total Egyptian population (approximately 3.344 million people). However, Coptic representatives dispute these figures and give estimates of 12 to 15 % (approximately 8.6 to 10.8 million Christians), some even higher up to 20 %. For helpful and clarifying discussion on the reasons for these discrepancies and numbers, please see Cornelis Hulsmann, “Discrepancies between Coptic Statistics in the Egyptian Census and Estimates Provided by the Coptic Orthodox Church” [online], <<http://www.arabwestreport.info/sites/default/files/pdfs/AWRpapers/paper52.pdf>>, May 2012 [30 May 2019]. The census of 2006 did not make public data regarding religious affiliation.

20 Here the reader should realize that although this rejection may seem perhaps paradoxical to an outsider, emically it makes perfect sense. From the Coptic Orthodox point of view, they are not a minority (though a numerically disadvantaged community) precisely because they wish to evoke the distinct ethnic identity (and “moral superiority”) based on the claim of ancient history connected with Pharaonic Egypt. For a paper fully discussing the reasons why Coptic Christians reject being labeled as a minority, see R. AbdelSayed, *Church Politics...*

Copts face in the working environments.²¹ While such a statement is no doubt too simplistic and brief, here I would like to merely point out a growing disillusionment among mainly the lower middle class about possible upward mobility. The Church has tried to cope with the worsening economic situation by offering and providing more and more services, yet that in itself leads to further differentiation between Christian and Muslim populations,²² a divergence that can be seen from some of the narratives below.

Another aspect necessary to be considered is the increased “globalization” of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Because of factors not investigated in this article, a large Coptic diasporic community has grown up in the West since the 1960s. The Church has responded to the needs of its members outside Egypt by building Coptic churches and monasteries, consecrating bishops residing abroad, organizing papal visits, etc. At the same time, the diaspora represents a considerable source of income for the Church, which had been heavily taxed and restrained in generating income for centuries. The significantly revitalized financial situation of the Church means, of course, extended power for the Church and an increase in possibilities of missionary work outside Egypt. The Church has now the means to provide more services to its members,²³ which in turn helps to consolidate and retain its congregation. Moreover, diasporic Copts enjoy easier and less problematic access to the press, which Copts living in Egypt do not. Consequently, problems experienced by Egyptian Copts, if they reach the diaspora, can be (and are) publicized and, thus, thanks to the diaspora, the Church is able to draw international attention to its situation in Egypt if a need arises.²⁴

It is in this milieu of the second half of the 20th century when we can see rise of the miraculous within the Church. For instance, Otto F. A. Meinardus notes that:

21 For details, see Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “2005 Report on International Religious Freedom” [online], in: *U.S. Department of State*, <<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2005/51598.htm>>, [28 October 2018].

22 Again, for much more in-depth analysis and depiction, see R. AbdelSayed, *Church Politics...*

23 For example, Berit Thorbjørnsrud mentions nurseries, children’s homes, clinics, and social projects for children and adolescents all run by local churches in addition to religious activities such as Sunday schools, worship, etc. See Berit Thorbjørnsrud, “Born in the Wrong Age: Coptic Women in a Changing Society”, in: Nelly van Doorn-Harder – Kari Vogt (eds.), *Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, Oslo: Novus forlag – Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning 1997, 167-189: 168.

24 For detailed discussion, see B. Voile, *Les Copts d’Egypte...*

The period of the Coptic patriarchates of Cyril VI (1959-71) and Shenuda III (1971-) was marked by several unusual phenomena that were interpreted as signs of divine grace supporting the various efforts of the Coptic renaissance. At no other period in the recorded history of the Coptic Church do we see so many reports of unfamiliar and extraordinary events as during the second part of the twentieth century.²⁵

Similarly, Anthony Shenoda observes the same time period when mentioning the Coptic Church Renaissance, linking it with all the above and with two Coptic Popes, Kyrillos VI (Coptic Pope in 1959-1971) and Shenouda III (Coptic Pope in 1971-2012).²⁶ Both Meinardus and Shenoda suggest that the second half of the 20th century witnessed an increase in the occurrence of miracles among Orthodox Copts in contrast to previous times, and they confirm the relative frequency of miraculous occurrences which I want to argue for here.²⁷ In conclusion, the rise of the miraculous accounts in the second half of the 20th century as reported by Meinardus and Shenoda 1) coincides with the substantially improved financial situation of the Coptic Orthodox Church and thus, 2) with the growth of options for consolidating its congregation, and 3) thanks to the media and diaspora, with an increased ability to raise awareness of discrimination. As a result, the turn of the 21st century witnesses deepening differentiation between the Christian and Muslim communities.

The miraculous in the Coptic Orthodox Church

Perhaps problematically, during the fieldwork I did not propose my own concept of miracles but I let the research participants themselves specify what constitutes a miracle, what kinds of miraculous they have experienced or they knew of. Such delineation is of course not without problems, as it suggests that miracles are a homogeneous category “floating out there”. This is not true, and I am quite aware of it, if only because several times during the research an interpreter or a research participant in the

25 Otto Meinardus, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press 2002, 93.

26 Anthony Shenoda, “The Politics of Faith: On Faith, Skepticism and Miracles among Coptic Christians in Egypt”, *Ethnos* 77/4, 2012, 477-495: 479.

27 In addition, while the collection of miracles by churches, monasteries, and convents are a historical phenomenon, brochures recounting the miraculous stories that happened to people are of a rather recent origin. The beginning of the extensive publication of the miraculous narratives dates back only to the early 1960s directly linked to the rule of Pope Kyrillos VI. For further details, see B. Voile, *Les Copts d’Egypte...*, 63-86. The low prices of the brochures ensure wide circulation of thousands and thousands of miraculous stories, thus further increasing the awareness of miracles and consequently, although miracles are, by their nature, unique, they seem to happen extremely frequently and as a matter-of-fact.

recounting of a miracle (either from a book, or interpreting from someone) paused and inquired rhetorically: “But where is the miracle?” However, this approach enabled me to outline the contours of the miraculous discourse as perceived by the Copts and to portray the discourse by tying the Coptic understanding to that of Western Christianity so that the reader can better understand the everyday yet exceptional quality that miracles represent for Copts and what, in fact, constitutes a miracle for a Copt.

The miraculous and the wondrous play an important role in the Bible and thus Christianity from its beginning is tied to miracles. This is particularly true of the Coptic Orthodox Church, where a statement by a priest such as “from the first century until this moment the Age of Miracles didn’t end, it is going on, some saints were martyred in the fourth century, but their works are [seen and felt] until now” (*Abuna Istafarus*),²⁸ is nothing extraordinary and would not diverge from the rest of congregation’s viewpoint. Generally speaking, a miracle is an event in which the human relationship towards nature, other human beings and the transcendental is revealed, as these three levels intersect with each other.²⁹

Historically in Western Christianity, this juxtaposition has been approached from two directions. The first one is represented by one of the most influential figures in the Christian understanding of miracles, St. Augustine. St. Augustine recognized only one miracle, creation. All creation was miraculous because of its reflection of the nature of God. In this way, St. Augustine was able to maintain that the miraculous lay outside the human knowledge of nature and as such was *supra naturam* and not *contra naturam*, i.e. contrary to nature. This distinction between nature and miraculous is then posited, according to St. Augustine, in the explicitness of the wonder in the miracles and the miraculous. St. Thomas Aquinas, on the contrary, concentrated on the relationship between miracles and nature. For him miracles were events that occurred outside the course of nature.³⁰

28 I met *Abuna Istafarus* in Middle Egypt where his church is located. He belongs to a younger generation of priests, and in my estimate, he is in his late thirties. *Abuna Istafarus* was very enthusiastic about miracles, and more than ready to talk about the miraculous, taking it very seriously, trying to make me understand the discourse.

29 Anthony Shenoda in his writings about miracles among the Orthodox Copts employs Ludwig Wittgenstein’s view of a miracle as “a gesture which God makes”. Consequently, Shenoda uses the term miracle for occurrences involving divine intervention. See, for instance, A. Shenoda, “The Politics of Faith...”, 481.

30 There is a debate about the degree of essential difference between St. Augustine and St. Thomas, for ultimately neither of them viewed the miraculous as occurring against nature. Nature is God’s creation and as such miracles as works of God cannot occur against the course of nature. Yet, the perspectives of these two thinkers are generally taken as two alternatives in approaching miracles, and for further debate on the subject, I refer the reader to literature on the subject. Here I am indebted to Robert B. Mullin,

During my research, I found both attitudes present among the research participants. Mr. Hakim³¹ told me that “every day is a miracle, everything is a miracle”, suggesting that the divine is present constantly and continuously. On the other hand, during a church meeting pertaining specifically to miracles, the presenter stated: “Miracle is a thing that the mind cannot accept. Many people are explaining [them] in a wrong way, according to their minds. Science cannot explain miracles, but science can confirm that it *is* a miracle.” The inability of science to explain miracles is contained in the implicit assumption that science deals only with the laws of nature. In this reasoning, science can confirm if an event defies the laws of nature, i.e. it lies outside the course of nature, i.e. it is a miracle.³²

Robert Mullin in his study on Christian miracles in modern times comments on the difficulty of defining miracles, and on the lack of unanimity on such a definition.³³ Mullin chooses to use his own specification of miracles and defines them as events which 1) are understood as interventions of God, 2) must have a public character, and 3) can be linked in some way to the great miracles in Scripture. I found this definition too narrow for my purpose of contextualizing miracles within the Coptic Orthodox Church. Although there are many miracles that would “fit” Mullin’s definition, I collected others that would not. Whereas all miracles are connected with the divine, they can also be private events, not shared with others, and not linked to the miraculous in the Bible. As Gabriela³⁴ put it:

Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination, New Haven: Yale University Press 1996.

- 31 Mr. Hakim is a state official in his fifties from Upper Egypt. He had very strong views on a single woman studying abroad. In fact, so strong that my interpreter almost had a fight with him. Yet, I found Mr. Hakim very articulate, with a definite view on the miraculous and not afraid to impart to me views that perhaps others did not feel to be polite. Interestingly, his wife seemed to like the fact that I argued with her husband about appropriateness of a single woman studying a graduate school.
- 32 Science is often invoked within the Coptic discourse on miracles in order to support and affirm the miraculousness of an event. Precisely at a point when science fails to explain a phenomenon or can explain only parts of an event (e.g. it is possible that Jonah was literally swallowed by a whale, because it is scientifically proven that a “man can be without food for forty days and without water for three days” – *Abuna Istafarus*), the phenomenon can be declared miraculous.
- 33 This is not to suggest that there are *no* definitions of the term “miracle.” On the contrary, Mullin remarks that he has collected over forty-eight distinct contemporary definitions of the term (R. B. Mullin, *Miracles and the Modern Religious...*, 6).
- 34 Gabriela is in her early twenties, single, from Middle Egypt. She was instrumental in my research, enthusiastic about my project and to her I owe much. Gabriela serves as a Sunday school teacher for high school girls, and describes herself as close to the Church. In her civil job, she likewise works as a teacher, and in my view has a natural bent for it.

“I think there are two kinds of miracles, the ‘day-life’ miracles, and incredible miracles, like what *Abuna* Istafarus said, miracles that people’s mind can’t accept. The ‘day-life’ miracles happen every time. If I cannot find a bus, I say ‘*Baba* Kyrillos, St. George please help me’ and I find the bus. Or if I am late for someone, ‘please St. George keep him so I can find him in the church’, so with me it’s like this. ... And the incredible miracles are, for example, like curing ... when tumors are taken out before the operation and they found out during the operation. Or when people are disabled and then suddenly they can walk.”³⁵

This way, it would seem that both approaches towards miracles advanced by St. Augustine and St. Thomas can be equally valid for one and the same person.³⁶ The day to day miracles correspond to the view of Mr. Hakim (and by extension to that of St. Augustine), while what Gabriela meant by an “incredible” miracle was a miracle which would correspond to Mullin’s definition of the term (and to the view of St. Thomas).

The Coptic Orthodox Church recognizes certain common features of miracles and reinforces these among its congregation. Ultimately the power that allows for the occurrence of a miracle and miraculous, be it a miracle attributed to a saint or to an object, always comes from God. This is also the fundamental difference between miracles that Jesus Christ performed in biblical times and the wonders performed by saints. Jesus Christ performed miracles through His own power, while the saints are granted this power from God and are only the medium of this power. In this context, H. H. Shenouda III states:

The miracles worked by them [believers] might be very great, but it is not by their own power. It is by the power of the Lord which works within them, who said, “*Without Me you can do nothing*” (Jn. 15:5).
God’s Children are supposed to be powerful, provided that God be the source of their power. They should not depend on, or take pride in, their own power.³⁷

Thus, since a “miracle can be only from God, it is [always] something good”, as Gabriela put it. The assertion of the “goodness” (and “Godness”) of miracles serves as a distinction between miracles and magic. Miracles are *not* magic, a point emphatically and repeatedly stated, and in this way miracles are situated against ‘*amal*, which “is a work of devil, it is always

35 For the logic behind the unusual use of quotation marks in some of the block quotations in this article, please see footnote no. 8. This relates only to cases when the field data are cited.

36 This would bring us back to the debate over how fundamental the difference between St. Augustine and St. Thomas is, yet I am leaving this dispute to the theologians and here I just would like to note the distinct (or not-so-distinct) views, and their implications.

37 H. H. Pope Shenouda III, *So Many Years with Problems of People III: Spiritual and General Problems*, trans. Dr. Wedad Abbas, Cairo: Dar El Tebaa El Kawmia – Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate ³1999, 9-10; emphasis in the original.

something bad” (Gabriela). The opposition between miracles and magic is an important one for since its inception Christianity has distinguished between magic and true religion, severely condemning the former. Although the Bible does not deny the efficacy of magic, indeed it acknowledges it, it places magic in the sphere of false religion, discarding thereby any true divinity in it.³⁸ In this way, the positioning of miracles against magic is a way of demarcating the true interpretation of Gods’ message from false ones.

Through their nature as intersections of the divine and the mundane, miracles are connected with the notion of holiness (and by extension with saints). While the theme of Coptic saints and the relationship between Copts and their saints is a topic for another study, here I would like to simply suggest that miracles are perceived as a sign of the holiness of a person, or an object. Put differently, a work of wonder bestows sanctity on its immediate source although ultimately the power allowing for the miracle comes from God.

In addition, miracles in the Coptic Orthodox Church possess a certain “indisputable” quality, as they are not doubted or questioned publicly. During my research, on different occasions I met only three Orthodox Copts who openly admitted to me their incredulity towards miracles,³⁹ yet overall such misgivings about miracles are very rarely expressed publicly. Albeit particular miracles can be (and are) disputed (mainly privately), on a general level the existence of miracles and the interference of the transcendental in “our” mundane reality are accepted as given and true. For instance, it is telling that once, when Youannen,⁴⁰ during a translation of a miracle from a booklet, asked rhetorically “where is the miracle?”, he immediately apologized for the utterance and corrected himself, saying that of course there is a miracle, and that he is always ashamed of such thoughts because he feels it is diminishing the meaning of the miracle to

38 Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, 6-15.

39 Yet, the reader should bear in mind here that they confessed their disbelief to me – as a foreigner and a Protestant. Although I believe they would admit their disbelief if asked directly, in everyday life they do *not* doubt the occurrence of miracles openly and publicly.

40 Youannen lives in Cairo, is in his mid-twenties, is single and works as a computer lab technician, although originally a designer. He is an Orthodox Copt, but because his close friend started to attend Masses in a Protestant church and basically turned away from the Orthodox Church, Youannen was confronted with the Protestant faith, and started to search and learn more about the Coptic Orthodox and Protestant Churches. He sometimes attends (only because of his friend) the same Protestant Presbyterian church Mass where I had conducted research previously. Youannen was instrumental in this project as he enabled me to meet with other people, interpreted for me, searched for information, and fortunately for me became very involved with the project.

the recipient. Mrs. Fathi,⁴¹ a Coptic Orthodox lady in her sixties, succinctly summarized the situation, after admitting her unease with certain miracles: “You touch on sensibilities of many people” (if you openly question and doubt miracles). In the context of the previous argument, i.e. the dichotomy of the miraculous and magic, one way to interpret one’s refutation or questioning of the existence of miracles is to perceive it as coming close to heresy; and understandably so, for this position undermines the placement of the Coptic Orthodox Church as the true Church and approaches the viewpoint expressed implicitly or explicitly by other Churches (and some Muslims) questioning the veracity of some Orthodox miracles, interpreting them as magic.

The veracity of miracles pertains also to their authenticity. The miraculous can be understood metaphorically and/or allegorically as, for example, in the following instance: “It is not only miracles, like raising the dead, but the spiritual meaning of it – when I can bring somebody to God, I raise him from spiritual death. The real miracle is that people repent and believe in God” (*Abuna Istafarus*). But generally, miracles are taken literally. Miraculous narratives are *not* metaphors, and are *not* understood only symbolically, although there is often a symbolic value attached to them. Arguably, the most important (though simultaneously the most common) miracle in the context of Coptic Orthodox Christianity is the transubstantiation in the sacrament of the Eucharist, i.e. transformation of bread and wine into His Body and Blood. The Coptic Orthodox Church, unlike Protestant Churches, takes the miracle of transubstantiation literally. Similarly to the arguments offered above, to doubt the authenticity of transubstantiation is again to come close to questioning the veracity of the Church.

Further, some narratives show the link between the concept of authenticity and the transubstantiation miracle and other Churches (i.e. the Catholic and Protestant Churches):

One lady missed the Orthodox Mass, so instead she went to a Catholic church, which held the Mass later. She wanted to take Holy Communion but she got only “the biscuit”⁴² and no wine, and as such she was in great pain. However, the priest refused to give her the “Blood”. So, as she was on her way home from the church she met Jesus Christ and He gave her His Blood.⁴³

41 Mrs. Fathi works as a librarian and in my estimate is in her sixties, living in Cairo.

42 Here the term “biscuit” is a slightly derogatory term for the bread transformed into the Body. Orthodox Christians hold that “the biscuit” is ultimately wrong because it is not prepared from yeast (yeast symbolizing the sins of the people), and because the wafers are each prepared separately, i.e. as if the Body of Christ is not one.

43 This is a miracle related to me by a guide on a trip to the Red Sea Monasteries and I believe he told it to me for my spiritual benefit since I was introduced as a Protestant (but he was not aware of my research).

The story discloses not only an assurance that Jesus Christ keeps an eye on His “true” flock, but also the efficacy of the transubstantiation miracle in the Catholic Church, i.e. the transformation of bread and wine into His Body and Blood, is directly disputed. In addition, the narrative points out the perceived deprivation of the Catholics whose priests refuse to provide the whole communion (i.e. His Blood) to their congregation. However, transubstantiation is not the only miracle taken literally. During a Sunday school for high school girls, for instance, the priest drew a picture and showed where exactly in the whale Jonah (*Yunnan*) had been located when he had been swallowed by it.

The efficacy of a miracle is explicitly said to be ensured by the individual’s strength of faith. Gabriela made a point that during a miracle of curing “it all depends on the faith, if you want to heal and cure, you will!”. Similarly, Youannen, when we went together to Old Cairo district, *Masr ‘Adima*,⁴⁴ explained to me that “the miracle is not in the chain itself”, but “it is the power of the belief and the faith and God’s intention”. Later during an interview, he said: “Sometimes you have a miracle happening to the person next to you but not to you. Why? You don’t believe enough or it isn’t God’s intention.” Likewise, a monk in the Muharraq monastery is reported by van Doorn as saying: “Every request made in this church is granted immediately, on condition that it was made in true faith and does not contradict the will of God.”⁴⁵ A related point is made by the following miracle told to me by Youannen, which I find interesting not only because of the power that faith is assigned in the miracle, but also because of the relationship between the holy and the miraculous:

A thief wanted to steal the silver and golden dishes used for preparing the Holy Communion from a convent. So, he dressed up as a bishop known for the ability to cure people. In this disguise the thief entered a convent where all the nuns, not knowing the real bishop personally, served him the best food, and took great care of him. Now, in this convent, there lived a simple blind woman, who once heard that this bishop is present in the convent thought that he could cure her and return her eyesight. But being shy, she did not dare to ask for his blessing directly, and instead after washing the alleged bishop’s feet, she did not throw away the water but washed her eyes with it and indeed gained her eyesight back.

44 *Masr ‘Adima* refers to a walled district within Cairo with many old Coptic churches, a convent and a monastery. Copts also think of it as a historical place where the Holy Family stayed.

45 Nelly van Doorn, “The Importance of Greeting the Saints: The Appreciation of the Coptic Art by Laymen and Clergy”, in: Hans Hondelink (ed.) *Coptic Art and Culture*, Cairo: Netherlands Institute for Archaeology and Arabic Studies in Cairo – Shouhdy Publishing House 1990, 101-118: 116.

The late H. H. Pope Shenouda III also acknowledges the power of faith, and asserts that the performance of miracles depends on a person's faith: "This shows that God, in most cases, works miracles according to faith."⁴⁶ Yet, the explicit point of the relationship between faith and achieving the miracle is contradicted by many other miracles in which Muslims or other non-believers are cured or helped:

A friend of one my parishioners went to see his friends and as a present he brought them a large framed picture of late Pope Kyrillos VI, but due to some misunderstanding his friends were not home, so he had to leave. However, he did not want to carry the picture back, and so asked the neighbors if they could keep the picture and give it to his friends once they come back. The neighbors being Muslims agreed only reluctantly. They had a 15-year old son who was in a wheel-chair because of some accident. They put the picture near the door, as they did not really want it in the house but their son kept looking at the picture, as if it was calling him. And then, finally he touched the picture and heard a voice in his head saying that he would be cured. And the next morning when he woke up he could walk.⁴⁷

Likewise, when I went with Youannen to one of the churches in *Masr 'Adima* he tried to persuade me to put on the chains⁴⁸ in order to obtain *baraka* (blessing – loosely translated), which seems in light of his previous explanation futile, since I am of a different (and for him wrong) faith. The apparent disparity (between the explicit assertion of the primacy of faith for a miracle to happen and some miracles happening without faith) is explained by H. H. Pope Shenouda III in the following manner: "However, in some cases, God works a miracle so that we may believe. Hence, in both cases, faith and miracles are connected; but a miracle may precede faith or follows it as a result."⁴⁹ Anthony Shenoda, in this context, argues that

46 H. H. Pope Shenouda III, *Life of Faith*, trans. Dr. Wedad Abbas, Cairo: Dar El Tebaa El Kawmia – Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate ³2000, 16.

47 This is a miracle account recounted to me by *Abuna* Rufayil. He is a priest in his thirties serving in one of the more affluent churches in Cairo. I am afraid that *Abuna* was at first a little reluctant to talk to me. I guess he did not really believe that indeed I was conducting research on miracles. Yet, after starting our conversation, when he became convinced of my sincerity, he enthusiastically started narrating to me various testimonies with a speed that I almost could not catch.

48 There are two churches in *Masr 'Adima* dedicated to St. George, one Coptic Orthodox and the other Greek Orthodox. They both own chains which St. George had been locked in before he became a martyr. People put the chains up or wrap themselves in the chains, as the chains have miraculous power and putting them on is purported to bring *baraka* (blessing). Usually during the weekend or on other "busy" days there is a person who actually puts the chains on each person for ten to twenty seconds, first around the neck, then the waist, and finally knees, and then proceeds to another person as there is a line of people waiting their turn. But on slower days, such as during a weekday, I noticed two girls sitting on the floor, just wrapped up in the chains and quietly talking.

49 H. H. Pope Shenouda III, *Life of Faith*..., 16.

doubt and skepticism on the part of non-believers (in his article he specifically talks about the Muslim Other, but I would argue that they can be embodied by any Other) constitute a necessary trope in miracle narratives. The miracles that happen to the Other despite their apparent lack of faith, in fact, prove the superiority of the Coptic Orthodox faith (and consequently the superiority of the Coptic Orthodox Church). Hence, while for Copts the faith seems an essential condition for having their wish come true, for followers of other religions doubt and skepticism are permissible and expected only to be later shown untrue.⁵⁰

As can be seen from some of these miracles, touch is very important in the Coptic Orthodox Church as it is a vehicle for miraculous power. *Anba Bishoi's* body (St. Bishoi) is said to be preserved intact in the Monastery of *Anba Bishoi*, because he carried Jesus Christ on his back, and thus his body is not subject to decay. Similarly, the two previously mentioned instances (Youannen's insistence on my putting on the chains, and the Muslim boy touching the picture of *Baba* [Pope] Kyrillos) allude to the importance of touch in the transmission of the miraculous. On some level, it can be then argued that objects performing miracles are in some tangible way associated with the holy.⁵¹ Hence, not only objects that touched or were touched by the saint are considered to have some of the miraculous power, but also icons and glass reliquaries are touched and then the hand is kissed so that the person is blessed.

The accounts of miracles and of the miraculous have been kept by churches, monasteries, and convents throughout the centuries, and since the second half of the 20th century the narratives of miracles have not only been collected but also compiled in little brochures, printed and put on sale in the bookstores associated with the particular institution. The narratives are descriptions of miracles that happened to people who afterwards wrote them down and gave them to the institution as an expression of their thanks and appreciation to the saint who performed the miracle and who is affiliated with the institution (e.g. his relics are there, the icon in front of which the person prayed for a miracle is located there, etc.) Thus, for example, a convent of *Mari Girgis* (St. George) in *Masr 'Adima* collects miracle accounts from people for whom *Mari Girgis* performed a miracle, or his chains that the convent owns, did. There are literally hundreds and hundreds of these brochures,⁵² and in this way, the circulation of miracle

50 A. Shenoda, "The Politics of Faith...".

51 In this context, it is interesting to consider the miracle with the character of the false bishop, where touch was important and considered as connected with the holy, while in fact it was not. At the same time, this type of miracle is the only one that I collected.

52 If a miracle is about curing, oftentimes the incurable situation of a patient is confirmed by a copy of a medical certificate. In this context, I would like to highlight the fact that

narratives is widespread, contributing to the Coptic sense that the miraculous is almost an everyday occurrence within Coptic Orthodox Christianity⁵³ and that the Coptic Orthodox faith (or more precisely the Coptic Orthodox Church) is superior to all other religious systems. In other words, we can link this perception to the dichotomy mentioned above: the true interpretation of God's message versus a false one.

However, narratives of miracles are shared among people not only through the brochures. They are often used as a didactic aid in teaching religion to children, teenagers, and even adults. I attended religion classes in a kindergarten where the age varied from two and a half years to three years and nine months old, a Sunday school for girls ten to thirteen years old, a Sunday school for high school girls (14-18 years old), youth (post-high school) meetings, and graduate meetings (for graduates from universities). Certainly, my sample is not representative as I did not have the chance to attend regularly; nor are these taken from one area, but I attended them in different parts of Cairo and in Middle Egypt. In all these contexts, miracles and the miraculous form an essential part of the curricula. More specifically, in the kindergarten, religion classes are held one hour per week – one week the teacher recounts stories about saints (including some of their miracles), and the next week she chooses a story from the Bible. Both Sunday schools that I attended were for girls, and both dealt directly with saints, mentioned their miracles, and provided the girls with moral points they should take from these stories.

During one of the Sunday school meetings, the story of Jonah (*Yunnan*) was discussed and used to point out the way the miracles happened, the scientific evidence⁵⁴ of these miracles, what is the morals of this story, etc. The same week during a youth meeting, people were asked to distinguish how many miracles the story about Jonah contains, and each miracle was discussed and elaborated on afterwards. In this particular interpretation (I am not sure whether this is general understanding), the story about Jonah contains four miracles: the sea storm, Jonah's stay in a whale, the fast and complete repentance of the people of Ninevah, and the plant God sent for

the miracles described in such brochures typically contain the full name and frequently the place of residence of the recipient of the miracle.

53 I would like to ask the reader to recall the words of *Abuna* Istafarus whom I quoted at the beginning as saying "from the first century until this moment the Age of Miracles didn't end ...".

54 As mentioned above, science is used in the Coptic discourse on miracles to confirm the wonder of the event. In *Abuna* Istafarus's words, "science makes sure that the words of the Bible are true". In this particular context, the scientific affirmation consisted of the scientifically proven fact that a person can stay without food for forty days and three days without liquid, and that it is in the nature of a whale to swallow everything and then to throw up what is in its throat, i.e. a place where Jonah was.

Jonah. Yet, I would like to stress again that it is *not* the miracle itself which is the point of the teaching, but it is the morals of the miracle, the lesson which can be learned, or the implications of it. The wonder of miracles is *never* the purpose of the teachings, but rather a way to illuminate, explain, or approach certain problems and/or situations. In a similar vein, miracles are sometimes narrated during sermons by priests, though again not for their “miraculousness”, but for their “aftereffect”. In other words, what is stressed by priests during the recounting of a miracle is the transformation it might (or might not) have brought about upon the person, or the situation, and the lesson that can be learned from the miracle.⁵⁵

Consequently, although intercession is a recognized and encouraged practice, miracles are not positioned as a permanent personal aim. Miracles by themselves do not guarantee anything, and in this context, the late H. H. Pope Shenouda III asserts that: “As for miracles, they do not necessarily redeem the soul. Many of those who have done miracles have perished and likewise miracles have been attributed to Satan and his followers.”⁵⁶ From this perspective, the miraculous becomes a little tricky and thus requesting the ability to perform miracles from God is actively discouraged by the Church on the grounds that such wishes might be induced by Satan in order to lead the person astray. The miraculous, or “gifts of the Spirit” in theological jargon, are distinguished from the “fruits of the Spirit” specified as “... ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ...’”. These fruits are of advantage to your eternal life ...”.⁵⁷ Thus, the “fruits of the Spirit” are mainly seen along the lines of virtues, though not only that, and are perceived as more important and beneficial for a person’s development and striving for salvation.

Finally, miracles happen so that Christianity could and can continue spreading in the world. The late Patriarch Shenouda III stated that “Lord Christ referred to His miracles as a cause that might lead people to believe in Him”.⁵⁸ *Abuna Ibrahim*⁵⁹ also suggested that miracles make people fol-

55 Other times, miracles are mentioned on trips organized by churches to monasteries around Egypt. When I participated in one of these trips three miracles were recounted by the leader of the tour for everyone’s benefit (interestingly the miracles were not connected with the saints of the monasteries) and being a foreigner and a Protestant, I was told two more miracles for my own benefit (the person did not know about my project).

56 H. H. Pope Shenouda III, *So Many Years... III...*, 105.

57 *Ibid.*

58 H. H. Pope Shenouda III, *The Divinity of Christ*, trans. Dr. Wedad Abbas, Cairo: Dar El Tebaa El Kawmia – Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate ³2000, 143.

59 *Abuna Ibrahim* is a priest in his late fifties, serving in one of the poorer districts in Cairo. He possesses in my view a distinct charisma, and in fact I met some members of his congregation who proudly recounted how *Abuna* displayed *shafafeya* (clairvoyance – loosely translated) in regards to their son, knowing his name and problem in

low the Church, as people “have to follow something that they can see and they can touch”. Moreover, miracles not only serve as a proof of His Divinity, as H. H. Pope Shenouda III argues, but also “miracles occur so that His words were proven true” (*Abuna Ibrahim*). Thus, since miracles are granted by Jesus Christ (as His is the power that allows for them), the miraculous then becomes evidence for the living Church of Jesus Christ’s presence and concern for His true flock, thus proving the legitimacy and veracity of the Church where such miraculous occurs so frequently.

This article deals only with the way Coptic miracle narratives are positioned vis-à-vis the Other (be it Muslim or other Christian faiths). Nevertheless, the miraculous narratives also have a political dimension inside the Church.⁶⁰ However, with myself being identified as a Protestant, and focusing on multi-sited research, data and information, this topic remained for most of the time off limits for me. Therefore, I have decided not to include this aspect of power relations except for a few observations on the power dynamics between saints and Copts. Perhaps obviously, a relationship between a saint and a believing Copt is of vertical nature: saints, being explicitly recognized as more perfect than living human beings, are unmistakably positioned on a “higher” plane than living Copts. In addition, the help, comfort, advice, etc. (though not communication) always flows only from the saints’ side to living people and thus is “uni-directional”. Nonetheless the verticality of the relationships between saints and believing Copts is also modeled after family ties, and the designation of a saint is sometimes expressed in kinship terms, *Abu* or *Baba* (e.g. *Abu Saifein* or *Baba Kyrillos*), both terms meaning father. Such a notion suggests care and intimacy in the relationships and implies a sense of duties, responsibilities but also rights for *both* parties.

The power relations in operation

The importance of positioning miracles against magic has already been stressed above where I pointed out that historically, the dichotomy has served as a demarcation of the authentic interpretation of God’s message against false interpretations. In short, miracles bestow legitimacy on the

advance. *Abuna Ibrahim*’s remarkable eloquence, and somehow characteristic “evasiveness”, has made interviews with him an extremely enjoyable experience, though ultimately I have remained unconverted.

60 For a delightful description of how this works, please see Mark Gruber, “Coping with God: Coptic Monasticism in Egyptian Culture”, in: Nelly van Doorn-Harder – Kari Vogt (eds.), *Between Desert and City: The Coptic Orthodox Church Today*, Oslo: Novus forlag – Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning 1997, 53-67. Likewise, B. Voile, *Les Copts d’Egypte...*, describes the way miraculous has been used among Copts themselves.

Coptic Orthodox Church, affirming its authenticity. The Coptic accounts of almost incessant contact with the transcendental, together with the claim of possessing the true faith coming from St. Mark, provides Copts with a foundation for the claim that they possess the true interpretation of God's message.⁶¹ In other words, the frequent occurrence of miracles demonstrates to believing Coptic Orthodox Christians the presence of the divine in their Church, and thus the narratives of miracles prove the Church's veracity and authenticity.

The affirmation of the Coptic Orthodox Church as the true Church is, of course, situated in contrast to Islam, and there are many stories recounting miraculous healings of Muslims; however, it is also set against other Christian Churches⁶² that have been coming to Egypt to proselytize for some time. For instance, above I presented a miracle about a Coptic woman attending a Catholic Mass because she had missed the Orthodox one and was thus deprived of full communion. The narrative reveals the sentiments that many Orthodox Copts hold towards not only Catholic but also other Christian faiths. For example, Egyptian Protestant Christians too recognize the existence of post-Biblical miracles and have "their own" miracles.⁶³ When I told some of the research participants who were Orthodox Copts that Protestants in Egypt acknowledge post-Biblical miracles and experience the miraculous as well, Orthodox Copts not only expressed their surprise and disbelief (reactions unheard of when talking about Orthodox miracles) but demanded examples of such miracles. Invariably, when I gave them some (based on the research I did among Egyptian Protestant Christians), the miraculous in the story would be dismissed; either the miraculous itself would be rejected as not miraculous (e.g. slaying the spirit, speaking in tongues) or the miracle would be coined as the work of the devil and thus designated as magic. The latter happened when I discussed with Youannen a Protestant miracle in Nigeria where an evangelical preacher had been raised from the dead. In this context, it is interesting to note that the Coptic Orthodox Church recognizes raising the dead as a valid category in the miraculous (and thus it is in a different

61 In a similar vein, miraculous healing can be seen as an assertion of religion being more powerful and efficacious than science.

62 Catholic and Protestant missionaries who come to Egypt address not only Muslims but of course Coptic Orthodox Christians as well. While conversions happen on both sides, the majority of Catholic and Protestant Egyptians are "recruited" from former Orthodox Copts.

63 Historically, the existence of post-Biblical miracles has been renounced by Protestants, although the Protestant position in the past hundred and fifty years underwent serious revisions and nowadays many Protestant denominations recognize post-Biblical miracles, particularly those denominations originating in the charismatic movement. See R. B. Mullin, *Miracles and the Modern Religious...*, 1-3, 138-178.

category than slaying the spirit or speaking in tongues, which are not recognized as miracles, but generally as a pretense). But still Youannen would not acknowledge the “miraculousness” of the event and denied it with rather surprising ferocity. Anthony Shenoda likewise confirms that all his interlocutors were reluctant to acknowledge the fact the Muslims could have miracles. According to him, the most they were ready to concede was that Muslim miracles have “a demonic source” or that in fact they were Christian miracles.⁶⁴ Again this struggle over the veracity of miracles needs to be seen from the perspective of demarcating true religion from magic.

Conversely (in a little digression), Protestants also question the efficacy of Orthodox miracles as can be seen from the following remark by one research participant, Mr. Fahmi⁶⁵ (Protestant), who told me how “Copts pray for help only to saints, but once they have a problem and their problems gradually become worse, they [Copts] come to us to pray for them”. One of the most open remarks I heard came from one Protestant preacher who told me that:

“No, there is no difference [in miracles between the Coptic Orthodox and Coptic Protestants]. Though, of course, there is a lot of imagination running in these [Orthodox] stories. And some stories, like the one where the saint stopped his [someone else’s] arm from grabbing, that’s junk!” [Said with emphasis and a dismissive gesture.]

This way, miracles are a site of contestation between different religious institutions about the presence of the divine in them or in other words, miracles give authority, legitimacy and power to those who possess them. At the same time, we can see that the “supernaturality” of the events is frequently not disputed, but it is explained in terms of magic, and thus attributable to the devil, as in the case of raising the dead in Nigeria. Nelson in her article on the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Zeitoun in 1968 notes a rejection by some Muslims of the appearances as manifestations of the sacred, yet at the same time acknowledging the supernatural.⁶⁶ Consider the following comment explaining the events in Zeitoun by one Muslim student that Nelson recorded: “The priest of the church is known for being a good medium of spirits, and he called upon the spirit of a nun and put on this whole farce, saying it was the Virgin so as to convert Muslims.”⁶⁷

64 A. Shenoda, “The Politics of Faith...”, 491.

65 Mr. Fahmi is a Protestant Presbyterian preacher in his mid-forties practicing in Cairo with a very definite views on whose faith is closer to God.

66 C. Nelson, “Religious Experience, Sacred Symbols...”.

67 *Ibid.*, 262.

Here again, we can see that the demarcation is posited in terms of miracles and magic. This way, miracles serve as an identity boundary marker, i.e. “we” have miracles (i.e. the work of God), and “they” have magic (i.e. the work of the devil) bestowing the recipients with authority and empowerment.

Located in Egypt and surrounded by a Muslim majority, Coptic Christians perceive themselves as often being discriminated against and persecuted precisely on the basis of their religion.⁶⁸ Given the perceived persecution, there is a strongly felt pressure, among some of the Copts I talked to, to convert to Islam, for supposedly their lives would become easier. In the light of my earlier assertion that miracles are seen as a confirmation of the Church’s holiness, we can see that miracles provide a rationale for *not* converting to Islam, notwithstanding the discrimination. The following is the story of a miracle recounted to me by a young man from the Lower Delta holding a governmental job as an accountant:

“There are lots of miracles in my life. When I started to work, my boss was a Muslim, and a very fanatical one. I was very new in my work, and he tried to pretend that I made a mistake and behind my back, he made a paper and send it to [a higher authority]. So, they [the authority representatives] came several times. [At last] the paper went to the final authority, and now they could make a real punishment for me. (M. Š.: What could they do?) They could take some money out of my salary, cut out my vacation days and kida [and so on]. And although the person who was to make the decision was not Christian, God worked through him. He was a lawyer, and said: ‘But where is the evidence against [this person]? There should be a third group, an independent group that would investigate this.’ When my boss heard about this, he got an attack and blood came out of his mouth. And I will never forget this! This third group was to come on March 17, but he died on March 7, on the way to the hospital. But the person who became the boss instead of him, was his friend and he was not Christian either, and he was against me too. But his father-in-law was very sick for years, and so they prayed for him to die, because he was so sick, but for years he stayed with them. So, this third group was supposed to come on Sunday, so I told my priest to do the Mass and pray for me. So, on the day when the group came ... (M. Š.: Why are the boss and his friend so important?) Because when the group comes they [the boss and his friend] would put their people inside the group and they [the boss and this friend] themselves would become the leaders of the group. So, on the day when the group came, the man [the new boss] did not come, because his father-in-law died early in the morning and he had to go to bury him. See here, when your relative dies you have to go to bury him, you cannot excuse yourself. God will do everything for people who love Him.”

68 Although there are many opinions on whether Copts really *are* being discriminated against or whether it is a direct consequence of their minority status, the point made here is different. Copts intensely *feel* and describe themselves as discriminated against; the veracity of the fact, whether they really *are* discriminated against or not, is not a subject of this paper, and I leave it for others to determine, although there seems to me to be rather convincing evidence for such a conclusion.

While the miracle in itself is rich (as any other) in analytic potential, I include it here mainly for two aspects: first, the strong sense of persecution on the basis of the young man's religion, implicitly hidden in the second sentence stating that his boss was a very "fanatical" Muslim (thus by extension hating all Christians) or in the sentence that the new boss "was not Christian either" (implying again that the boss was a Muslim hating all Christians); second, the theme of justice that lurks behind the story. The young man had no "worldly" resources with which to fight his unjust and corrupt superiors, only to turn to the highest authority that there is, the divine; the ultimate authority that can provide the highest form of justice that a human being can ever hope for.⁶⁹

Similarly, some of the narratives reflect the perception that attacks by Islamic fundamentalist groups on Coptic churches became more prominent in recent years. In other words, Copts are intensely conscious of the tensions between Muslims and Copts, as for example the following miracle illustrates:

"It happened in Minya last year [2002]. A man was a volunteer, and he went to Minya to bring back to God former Christians [i.e. converts to Islam]. And everything went fine. But then on his way back, as he was waiting at night at the train station he met men with half of their face covered – the Muslim terrorists. They put a knife behind his back and said, "Come with us." And of course, the man got very frightened. Suddenly a soldier appeared. He jumped over a fence to get to them and ran towards them – so the men [Muslim terrorists] got afraid and ran away. And then the soldier stood with the man, and waited with him until the train arrived and put him on the train. And then he disappeared. Who was he? Of course, *Mari Girgis* [St. George]."⁷⁰

The implicit assumption of the story is that a soldier (presumably a Muslim) would not jump over a fence and would *not* wait until the arrival of a train just to protect a Christian. Considering that Minya is located in Middle Egypt, an area that is said not only to contain many extremists, but also to be somewhat beyond governmental control, the story reflects a view that the government would not (and/or is sometimes helpless to) protect a Christian and the Coptic perception of continuous persecution of Christians. Yet the narrative also portrays a sense of divine authority overseeing His flock and recasts everyday reality of perceived helplessness into empowerment. Further, the narrative also notes bringing former

69 Notice that although the person who established a committee investigating the true nature of the accusation "was not Christian", this fact is explained away as "God worked through him".

70 This miracle was told to me by Nancy who I met in Upper Egypt during a *Mari Girgis mouled* (a celebration). Nancy is in her mid-twenties and attended the *mouled* with her future mother-in-law, who had experience with exorcism.

Christians (i.e. converts to Islam) back to God, thus implicitly expressing where the true interpretation of the God's message is.

Conclusion

As shown above, the local discourse on the miraculous provides Copts with a sense of the veracity of their own faith and consequently with the conviction of legitimacy as the miraculous narratives illustrate and present plentiful examples of the authority which the Coptic Orthodox Church and faith offers. Taken together with the particular socio-economic context of being a numerically disadvantaged community, and a heightened perception of discrimination on the basis of one's religion, the discourse endows the faith with a sense of authenticity further connected with experiencing empowerment due to the external circumstances. Michel Foucault links truth directly to power, where for him, truth does not exist outside power relations or does not lack power, but on the contrary truth produces (and is a product) of power.⁷¹ The perceived and publicly unquestioned veracity of the miraculous narratives places, then, the Coptic Orthodox Church in a superior position over other religious institutions.

In this way, the discourse situates the Coptic faith in a web of power relations vis-à-vis the Other (regardless of whether it is a Muslim or other Christian faith Other) as it unequivocally stipulates where the true religion is located, and the narratives provide explicit proofs of the superiority of the Coptic Orthodox faith. In other words, the Coptic discourse on miracles supplies Copts with conceptual tools to recast and reformulate existing power relations to their perceived, and consequently experienced, benefit.⁷²

Furthermore, the way the Coptic discourse on the miraculous is sustained via teachings in Sunday schools, Church meetings and sermons etc., and via thousands of brochures, helps to generate boundaries of community identity. The accounts of miracles are (among other things) also narratives restoring justice to a population under continuous threat of discrimination, where the divine authority oversees His flock. The sense of empowerment through experiences of miracles (albeit by different people but of the same faith) and positioning Copts versus all the other faiths support the production of a distinct community identity. The narratives bring the rest of the community to the awareness of the consumer (listener, reader or Mass participant) of the miraculous narratives, making him/her a

71 M. Foucault, "Truth and Power...", 51-75.

72 As, for instance, in the story of the young man suffering from discrimination at work from his superior where certain events were interpreted and experienced as divine intervention on behalf of the young man.

part of a wider community, the Orthodox Copts. As mentioned above, the overwhelming majority of stories of miracles in the circulating brochures state the name of the miracle recipient (e.g. Samuel Nosseir, above) and/or the place this person comes from and where the miracle occurred, thus clothing the miracle narratives with aura of factuality. Through the narratives, an Orthodox Copt can “imagine” being a part of a wide community which has similar experiences, faces similar obstacles in life and encounters similar miracles, thus reinforcing identity in an environment that is perceived as hostile.⁷³

73 I would like to express my gratitude to Ranya AbdelSayed who brought my attention to the “imagined community” character of the Coptic population much inspired by Benedict Anderson’s role of novel in constitution of a nation as a community. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London – New York: Verso 1983.



SUMMARY

The Miraculous and Coptic Orthodox Christianity in Egypt: Power Relations in Operation

This article, based on data gathered during long-term ethnographic fieldwork, presents an ethnographic account of the miraculous discourse among Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt with an analysis of the communicative aspect of miraculous narratives, specifically from the perspective of power relations between Orthodox Copts and the Other. The study argues that the narratives of miracles convey authenticity, veracity, legitimacy and authority of the Coptic Orthodox Church, thus providing a strong basis for individual and group identity.

Keywords: miraculous narratives; the Coptic Orthodox Church; Egypt; power relations; Coptic identity.

Department of Ethnology
Faculty of Arts
Charles University
nám. Jana Palacha 1/2
116 38 Prague 1
Czech Republic

MARKÉTA ŠEBELOVÁ
marketasebelova@yahoo.com