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THE VIRGIN MARY AS MEDIATRIX BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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In spite of deep-seated christological and soteriological differences between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, there are some areas in which Christian and Muslim prayer converge which could be the basis of dialogue. In the popular piety of the Egyptians, the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, can play the role of mediatrix between Muslims and Christians. The subject is diverse and voluminous, so I will limit myself to a few aspects of the theme. Because of my long stay in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, I can describe some of the ways in which a devotion to the Virgin Mary brings together Christians and Muslims.

The profound and deep esteem of the Orthodox Christians in the East for the Virgin Mary is well known. Their devotion to her as the *Theotokos* constitutes an integral part of their liturgical life and popular piety. The affection which the Muslims express for the Virgin Mary is derived from the references to Mary in the Qur'an.

The Virgin Mary, the "golden bridge" between Christians and Muslims, has special significance in popular religion, beginning even in the pre-Christian periods. For several thousand years, the *fellahin* of the Nile Delta and Valley venerated the presence of their deities in caves, grottoes, springs and trees. It is not surprising, then, that the Virgin Mary, the prototypical mother and virgin, should also be remembered in these same places. There

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are many sites for Marian pilgrimage in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, where Christians and Muslims pray to receive divine grace. To this day, the Egyptian *mawâlid* play a significant role in the religious life of Christians and Muslims.¹ At official civil meetings and communal occasions where Christians and Muslims are present, the Virgin Mary serves as the "golden bridge," by means of the biblical and Qur'anic references which are cited on such occasions. Moreover, the recent mariophanies of Zeitûn, in the spring of 1968, and of 'Ard Babadeblu Shûbra, in 1986, were experienced by Christians and Muslims alike.²

The Roots of Popular Devotion of the Virgin Mary

Neither the christological teachings of the fourth- and fifth-century Oriental Orthodox councils nor the more recent mariological doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church provide grounds for convergence between Christians and Muslims in Middle East. For Christians, the revelation of God is invariably related to the person of Jesus Christ. For Muslims the final and ultimate source of divine knowledge is the infallible Word of God, the Qur'an. Both revealed religions exclude each other from the realms of salvation. Only the woman "whom all generations shall call blessed" (Lk. 1:48) can serve as the "golden bridge" uniting these two patriarchal, Abrahamitic and monotheistic religions. Neither the formal theologies nor the exhortations of their religious leaders and clergy are able to establish the kind of mutual confidence that will bring believers of these various theological persuasions together. This is as true of the hierarchs and theologians of the Oriental Churches, as it is of the *ulema*, the custodians of the Islamic faith.

For centuries, doctrinal fanaticism, inquisitions, religious wars, crusades and persecutions have been used for political purposes and the acquisition of power. Unfortunately, the customary expressions of mutual understanding have remained

¹Joseph William McPherson, *The Moulds of Egypt (Egyptian Saints-days)* (Cairo: Ptd. N. M. Press, 1941).

²Otto F. A. Meinardus, "A Note on the Apparition of the Holy Virgin in the Spring of 1986," *Ostkirchliche Studien* (Wurzburg) 25, 4 (1986): 337f.

merely flowery speeches, with very little change of basic attitudes. Even the attempts at a constructive dialogue are frequently viewed as threats to orthodoxy.

However, in popular religion, deep-seated prejudices can be overcome. The practices of popular religion sometimes have roots in pre-Christian forms of devotion and piety. Only the outward expression reflects the new religious form.

Two examples can illustrate this transfer of cult. To demonstrate the victory of good over evil, pre-Christian Egyptians used the representation of the equestrian Horus spearing Seth in the form of a crocodile. This image served as prototype for those popular Coptic warrior saints—like George, Mercurius or Theodore—who are shown lancing either a dragon or an Avar.³ Especially significant for our theme is the cultural transformation of the mother-goddess Isis into the Christian *Theotokos* or the Islamic mother of the messiah. For several thousand years, the Egyptians venerated and prayed to the “great mother,” a principal figure in both theology and devotion. As sister and wife of the royal God Osiris, she conceived her son Horus in an unnatural manner from her assassinated husband. The Egyptian triad, in which the murdered Osiris is resurrected in his son or in which Isis suckles her son Horus, are religious images which maintained their cultic significance even in early Coptic art. There are the frescoes of the *Maria lactans*, the *Galactotrophousa*, in the sixth-century Coptic desert monasteries of Bawît and Saqqâra.⁴ These are reflections of the prototypical love of the mother-goddess Isis for her son Horus.

Marian Devotion

The theology and piety of the Coptic Christians show deep Marian characteristics. Mary is the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, the perpetual virgin (*al-'Adbra*); she is the mistress or *Sittna Miriam*. Although Mustapha happens to be an exclusively Islamic masculine name, Copts refer to Mary as *Mustafiyya*,

³Philip David Scott-Moncrieff, *Paganism and Christianity in Egypt* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1913), 137–40.

⁴Kamal S. Kolta, *Von Echnaton zu Jesus: auf den Spuren des Christentums im alten Ägypten* (München: E. Wewel, 1993), 64f.

the elected or chosen one. The *Theotokia*, poetical praises honoring the Virgin Mary, are an essential part of the Coptic liturgical life. Coptic mariology sees her as the tent of the congregation, because the cloud, the divine presence, abode there (Ex. 40:35). She is also the true ark of the covenant which remained for three months in the house of Obededom before David brought it into his city (2 Sam. 6), just as the Virgin Mary remained for the period of three months in the home of Elizabeth (Lk. 1:56). Mary is also the pure golden vessel of the hidden manna which is the bread of life (Jn. 6:49-51), as well as the candlestick of pure gold which carried the eternal life. Like all orthodox Christians, the Copts see in her the "the burning bush" that was not consumed, a symbol of the Immaculate Virgin. The Virgin is also identified with Aaron's rod which brought forth buds and blossoms and yielded almonds (Num. 17:8), another symbol of virginity. She is identified with the ladder of Jacob, the great mountain (Dan. 2:35), Ezekiel's gate (Ez. 43:1), the swift cloud upon which the Lord rides and comes into Egypt (Is. 19:1), and the New Jerusalem (Apoc. 21:2).

The Egyptian Christians commemorate Mary's falling asleep on January 29 (Tûbah 21); at that time she was fifty-eight years, eight months and three days old. The Annunciation to Joachim and Anne, the parents of the Virgin Mary, is commemorated on August 13 (Masrî 7), the Nativity of the Virgin on May 9 (Bashons 1), the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple on December 12 (Kîhak 3), the arrival of the Holy Family in Egypt on June 1 (Bashons 24), the building of the first Church of the Virgin in Philippi on June 28 (Baûnah 21), the Assumption of the Virgin on August 22 (Masri 16), and the Mariophany of Zeitûn 1968 on April 2 (Barmahat 24). There are more than 300 Coptic churches in the dioceses of Lower and Upper Egypt dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

The Islamic view of the Virgin Mary is primarily presented in the christocentric and mariological surahs of the Qur'an, especially 2, 3, 4, 5, 19 and 25. Mary is the mother of the messiah (S. 3:45, S. 4:156), whom she miraculously conceived, without human assistance (S. 3:47). The two surahs which provide the most detailed reports about the Virgin Mary appeared at different times. Surah 19 belongs to the very early revelations of

the Qur'an. According to a tradition, even the Negus of Ethiopia was informed by Islamic travellers of the wonderful conception which Mary experienced. On the other hand, the Marian passages of Surah 3 are part of the later revelations. The prophet is said to have received this revelation following a theological discussion with a delegation of Arabian Christians of Najran (Yemen).

There are many Islamic theologians who have written about the various traditions related to the Virgin Mary. Thus, Muhammad Abû 'Alî Zayn al-'Abidîn, the fifth Imam of the Twelver Shi'a (676-736) mentions that Mary sent her nine-month-old son to school in the Upper Egyptian town of al-Bahnasa. Because of his superior knowledge, the child was asked to take the place of the teacher who said to Mary: "Take your son and watch over him, for God has bestowed upon him wisdom and he does not require a teacher."

One of the better-known Yeminite storytellers was the eighth-century Wahb ibn Munabbih. He relates that the Holy Family stayed at a hospice for the poor in al-Bahnasa. There, Mary was accused of having stolen the *diqân's* treasures. The child Jesus played the role of the master detective and unmasked the thieves—a blind and a lame man. This was the trick of the thieves. The blind man used his strength and the lame man his eyes. The stolen treasures were restored to the *diqân*. The town of al-Bahnasa near Beni Suef served as a site for several Marian traditions. These were also mentioned by the fifteenth-century Islamic historian Taqî ad-Dîn Ahmad al-Maqrizî.⁵

With words which are reminiscent of Meister Eckhart's "birth of Christ in the soul," his near-contemporary Jalal ad-Dîn Rûmî reminds us of the necessity of suffering and travail. The great Mevlana refers to the pangs of childbirth of the Virgin Mary which drove her unto the trunk of the palm tree (S. 19:23). This pain led the tree to bear fruit. For the great Sufi mystic, the body is like Mary: every one of us carries Jesus in him- or herself; whenever pain sets in, Jesus is born in us.⁶

⁵O. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt, Ancient and Modern* (2d rev. ed.; Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1977), 630-31.

⁶Annemarie Schimmel, *Rumi. Ich bin Wind und du bist Feuer, Leben und Werk des grossen Mystekers* (München, 1995), 141.

Traditional Sites of Marian Piety: Grottoes, Springs and Trees

For many centuries, grottoes, springs and isolated trees have served as pilgrimage sites where both Christians and Muslims have venerated the Virgin Mary. Grottoes and caves, as sites of divine revelation, have played important roles in the Abrahamic religions. Moses experienced the hand of the Lord in a cleft of the rock (Ex. 33:22), and, nearby, Elijah lodged in a cave where the Lord spoke to him (1 Kgs. 19:9). Jesus was born in a cave which served as a stable, and Muhammad received his call in the night of power, the *laylet al-qâdi*, in the cave at the foot of Mount Hira (S. 97:1-5).

In view of these traditions, it is not surprising that the Virgin repaired to grottoes and caves. For example, there is the Saiyideh al-Mantara, or Notre Dame de la Garde, south of Saida (Sidon). Originally, this cave served a Phoenician deity; later, Astarte was worshipped there. Christian traditions identify this cave as the place where Mary rested while waiting for her son who was at Sidon (Mt. 15:21). In spite of the Islamic prohibition of the veneration of icons, I have repeatedly observed Muslims venerating there the miraculous icon of the Holy Virgin. Christians and Muslims see in her the mother of all mothers, especially in view of the biblical confession: "Blessed is the womb that bore thee and the paps that thou has sucked" (Lk. 11:27). Irrespective of their religious identity, women in travail repair to the different Marian grottoes and caves in which they expect blessings for lactation, be it in Saiyidah ad Darr near Bšarre in northern Lebanon or in the Maghârat as-Saiyidah, the well-known Franciscan "Milk Grotto" in Bethlehem.

The significance of water, be it a spring or a well, is generally related to life and fertility. Moses smote the rock in Sinai and water came out of it (Ex. 17:6). Jesus spoke about the rivers of living water (Jn. 7:38), and, in the Qur'an, Mary is being comforted with the words: "Grieve not! Thy Lord hath placed a rivulet beneath thee (S. 19:24). Since the thirteenth century, Christian pilgrims have gone to St. Mary's Well at Matariyah near Cairo, which used to be under the custody of the Mameluke sultans. The visit of the Holy Family to this site is attested by the apocryphal Gospel of St. Matthew and the Coptic and Ethiopic *Synaxaria*. Here, so it is said, the child Jesus dug

with his hands a well and there flowed from it water which had an exceedingly sweet odor. And Jesus took some of the water and watered therewith the pieces of Joseph's staff which he had planted. And they took root and put forth leaves, and an exceedingly sweet perfume was emitted by them . . . and they called them "Balsam." Muslims used to identify this well with the above-mentioned Qur'anic rivulet.⁷

In the Kidron Valley, outside the city-walls of Jerusalem, Muslims and Christians visit St. Mary's spring. According to medieval Christian tradition, Mary is said to have bathed and to have washed the swaddling clothes of her son here. On the other hand, Muslims of the nearby village of Silwân named the spring after Sitt al-Badrîya, a descendant of 'Ali, another cult-transfer.

Taqî ad-Dîn Ahmad al Maqrizî (1304-1442), a noted Islamic historian, refers to a Coptic tradition about the sojourn of the Holy Family at al-Bahnasa. In this upper Egyptian town, the waters of the spring were known to heal pilgrims from their infirmities. An Islamic tradition identifies this spring with that mentioned in the Qur'an: "And we made the son of Mary and his mother a portent, and we gave them refuge on a height, a place of flocks and water-springs (S. 23:50). However, the Arab traveller Ibn Batuta (1304-1377) located this Qur'anic spring on the slopes of Gebel Qasiyûn, just outside of Damascus.

As springs and wells are sites of divine-human encounters, so also isolated trees have been regarded as places of special revelations. The Qur'anic verses of Surah 19 have served as a foundation: "And the pangs of childbirth drove her [Mary] unto the trunk of the palm tree (23)." Samuel E. Zwemer reports that at the Shi'ite Mašhad Husain in Kerbela, southwest of Baghdad, there are two palm trees under which Mary is said to have delivered her son. Numerous communities in the Islamic world claim to possess such palm trees. In Matariyah, just outside of Cairo, the Emir Yashbek built, around a special tree and the above-mentioned spring, a resort to entertain Qait Bey (1467-1496) and other wealthy Mamelukes. The waters were believed to be "holy and medicinal."

⁷Meinardus, *Christian Egypt*, 623-25.

A tradition related that the Holy Family on their flight to Egypt found refuge in the tree which miraculously opened to conceal them. According to Pero Tafur (1435-1459), only five pilgrims at a time were permitted to enter the Garden of Balm, and none were allowed to pinch off leaves to take away with them. All medieval pilgrims are unanimous in their observation that the Garden of Balm was tilled by Christians only. The balm was used medicinally as well as for the preparation of the holy myron, the chrism that is used for baptism. The trees received water from the well of the Holy Virgin.⁸ Today the Tree of Natariyah is a popular excursion site administered by the Egyptian Tourist Administration.

At springs, around caves, and on the branches of trees—wherever pilgrims go to pray and pour forth their pains, sorrow and distress—there are attached knotted scraps of cloth or paper. People come to these sites for a variety of purposes. Some await healing, by attaching a piece of their clothing; others hope for economic benefits; students attach amulets to receive passing grades in their examinations. I have heard Christians and Muslims offer the following prayer to the Virgin Mary: "O Miriam, I have thrown my pains and sorrows upon thee, help me in my distress."

Also, there are icons of the Virgin Mary which are believed by Christians and by Muslims—despite Islamic iconoclastic teachings—to have miraculous powers. People turn to these icons in churches and chapels, irrespective of their particular faith. Abû 'l-Makarim (13th century) reports that Khamârawaih, the ninth-century Tulunid ruler of Egypt, "used to stand especially before the picture of the Lady Mary, so that he built a *manzarab* for himself at the Melkite Monastery of al-Kusair south of Cairo."⁹ Significant numbers of Christians and Muslims still visit the blood-weeping picture of the "Mater Dolorosa," the *al-Hazina*, in the Church of St. George in the village of Wâdî 'n-Natrûn between Cairo and Alexandria. In the northern apse of this new church (1987), there is a large color-print (85 x 85 cm.) of the

⁸Ibid., 624-25.

⁹*The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt . . . , Attributed to Abû Sâlih, the Armenian*, ed., and trans. Basil T. A. Evetts (Oxford: Clarendon, 1895), 49a, 50b, 51b.

popular painting of the "Mater Dolorosa" by the Florentine master Carlo Dolci (1616-1685). Copies of this painting have been widely disseminated and distributed in Coptic churches and monasteries from Alexandria to Aswar, and attract visitors irrespective of their religions. According to the testimony of the local Christians, the picture of the "Mater Dolorosa" began weeping tears of blood on Wednesday, May 17, 1989. This continued for two weeks. There are numerous other Coptic churches with miraculous icons, especially in Upper Egypt, to which Christians and Muslims alike turn in time of trial.¹⁰

Christian and Islamic Places of Devotion

During the fifteenth century, Christians and Muslims offered prayers in the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord in Bethlehem. The Egyptian Mameluke Sultan Abû Said Gaqmaq (1438-1453) ordered that, in the process of repairs, a *mibrab* (an Islamic prayer niche) be installed in the basilica.¹¹ Furthermore, in Gethsemane, Muslims visit the Crusaders' Church of the Tomb of the Virgin Mary, which belongs to the Greeks and the Armenians. To the right of the tomb of the Virgin Mary, there is a *mibrab*, where I have seen Muslim women offer their prayers.

Even more impressive a symbol of ecumenical piety is the Chapel of the Virgin Mary, *Panaya Kapula*, on Bulbul Dag at Efes (Ephesus) in western Turkey. According to an ancient local tradition (and the visions of the nineteenth-century Augustinian Sister Catherine Emmerich), the Virgin Mary had followed the Apostle St. John to Ephesus, where she spent the last days of her life on Bulbul Dag or Nightingal Mountain. Some seventy years ago, a two-room chapel was constructed upon the original early Byzantine foundations. To the left, in the chapel, there is an altar which serves the Roman Catholics for the celebration of the Eucharist. To the right, under the same roof, there is an Islamic place of prayer. Here the walls are cov-

¹⁰O. Meinardus, "Ein koptischer Kult-Transfer: Von der 'Immaculata' zur 'Mater Dolorosa,'" *KEMET* 3, 2 (1994): 25-27.

¹¹Stanley Lane-Poole, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1925), 340.

ered with the well-known Marian citations from the Qur'an. Often I have witnessed Christian women praying the rosary in the Catholic chapel, while at the same time Muslims recite the *al-Fâtihah* in their prayer room. Christians and Muslims visit this Marian shrine to pray, to offer a candle, and to drink from the therapeutic water of the spring (*Hazreti Meryem Ana Suyu*). Pilgrims leave scarves or other strips of clothing and tie them on the trees and bushes around the sanctuary.

In Upper Egypt, in October 1963, three Muslims built a grotto above a spring next to the Franciscan Church in Bensi Suef. They dedicated the grotto to the Virgin Mary, and pilgrims, both Muslims and Christians, from near and far gather there to pray and to be healed through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

Marian Pilgrimages: Testimonies for a Common Purpose

The Egyptian *mûlid* (birthday anniversary festival, lasting for several days) is an important event in the lives of many Egyptians. There are Coptic and Islamic *mawâlid*, and, whereas many Muslims attend the Marian *mawâlid* of the Copts, especially those in Upper Egypt, it is seldom that Christians participate in the Islamic *mawâlid*.

Apart from the purely religious popular feasts, there are those pre-Christian festivities that to this day Christians and Muslims alike celebrate. It is remarkable that Egyptian Muslims observe certain customs at particular periods of the religious calendar of the Christians. For example, the period of the *khamsîn* (fifty days), when the southerly winds are of frequent occurrence, is designated as beginning the day after Coptic Easter Sunday. *Khamsîn* ends on the day of the feast of Coptic Pentecost (forming a period of forty-nine days). The Wednesday before this period is called "Arba'a Aiuyûb" or "Job's Wednesday." Many Egyptians wash themselves on this day with cold water and rub themselves with the creeping plant known as *raarâa Aiyûb* (*Inula Arabica*), because in this manner Job restored his health. This custom used to be peculiar only to the Copts, but later it was also adopted by Muslims. *Shemm an Nessim*, the annual "smelling of the Zephyr," is a national

holiday which is observed on the first day of *kbamsîn*, on Coptic Easter Monday. Christians and Muslims celebrate this day by having picnics, often breaking an onion to smell it. Not too long ago, Egyptians—both Christians and Muslims—celebrated the *leylet an-nuktab*, the “night of the drop,” on the 11th of Baûnah or the 18th of June. It was believed that a miraculous drop then falls into the Nile and causes its waters to rise. Since the construction of the Aswân Dam and subsequent regulation of the Nile waters, however, many of the ancient customs related to the life-giving waters of the Nile have become obsolete.

Popular religion, or rather the religion of the common people, finds its expression also in the Marian *mawâlid*. The structure of these festivities, which often last a week or longer, provides for the participation at eucharistic celebrations and the hourly offices by the Christians. At this time, baptism is administered by the Coptic priests and monks. Since many pilgrims ascribe their diseases to various forms of demon possession, the Virgin Mary as well as the popular warrior saints—George, Theodore, or Mercurius—are often implored. In the realm of popular religion, demons and angels, blessing and curses are regarded as being of a tangible nature. While the Virgin Mary retains her identity as mediatrix between humans and God, some of the Christian saints adopt Islamic names. I have heard Muslims refer to St. Dimiana, one of the popular female saints in the Delta, as *Sitt ya btnt al-walî*, and St. Barsum the Naked, of Ma’asara near Helwân, as *Siddi Muhammad al-Tryan*.

The Marian *mûlid* is embedded in a variety of secular affairs, which are attended by both Christians and Muslims. There are the various kinds of amusements and games, swings and merry-go-rounds, fire-eaters, magicians and the tatoopers (who nowadays employ electric needles). There are stalls selling devotional literature and cheap prints of the Virgin Mary, the popular equestrian saints, and, of course, of Pope Shenûdah III. Other stalls offer *ta’mityya* (chick peas), *libb* (pumpkin seeds) and *fûl sûdânî* (Sudanese beans).¹²

¹²During the last years, the atmosphere at the *mawâlid* has changed considerably. Neither the traditional storyteller (*al-haakt*) nor the once-popular “Punch and Judy”

Pigeons flying in cross-formation over the general area are regarded as a divine confirmation of the *mûlid*. Shadows of figures that people see in church windows are similarly interpreted, sometimes as visitations of the Holy Virgin or St. George, whereas, in actuality, they are just people who happen to pass by. Much attention is given to certain vows people have made to the Virgin Mary. Both Christians and Muslims will sacrifice an unblemished sheep or a goat—sometimes even a *gamûs* (water-buffalo) or a camel—as a votive-offering for healing. Again and again, one can hear the prayer, “O sitt al-’Adhra, Lady Miriam, should my child recuperate, I shall offer thee a flawless sheep.”

The most popular Marian pilgrimages take place from August 7th to August 22nd, climaxing with the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. These pilgrimages take place in the Coptic churches at Musturud, north of Cairo; at Bayad an-Nasara, on the east bank of the Nile opposite Beni Suef; at Gebel ’t-Tair, on the east bank of the Nile north of Minya; at the Dair al-Muharraq (Monastery of the Virgin Mary), north of Asyût; and at Durunka, a few kilometers south of Asyût.

The Cairene Mariophanies

About an hour after sunset, on April 2, 1968, two local mechanics saw a “lady dressed in white” walking on the dome of the Church of the Virgin Mary at Tumanbay Street in Zeitûn, a suburb of Cairo. Both workmen were Muslims. Afraid that the lady might fall down, they shouted, “Take care, you may fall down.” As the dome is curved, no person can walk on it. The woman appeared in a luminous body, moved about and knelt before the cross on the dome. The traffic in Tumanbay Street stopped, and a large crowd gathered to watch the apparition. These mariophanies occurred many times; sometimes, as on April 30th, they lasted for two hours. Thousands of visitors—Christians and Muslims, educated and simple people—have seen the apparition, either as a bust or at other times as a person in full length. Pope Cyril VI (1959–1971) ordered Anbâ

shows have survived. Many Copts used to identify Punch with Pontius Pilate and Judy with Judas Iscariot, who presumably betrayed his sex as did his master Toby, being no other than Tobias.

Gregorius, Bishop of Higher Coptic Studies, to issue a statement according to which the mariophanies of Zeitûn were described in detail and consequently officially attested. Several times, I witnessed these apparitions between 10:00 and 11:30 p.m. The silhouette of an orange bust or a light blue-colored standing person appeared on the dome of the church or between the belfries. Whenever there occurred an apparition, crowds of spectators joined in almost ecstatic prayer of *kyrie eleison*. Some people knelt; others fell to the ground; while others just shouted, "Sitt Miriam, al-'Adhra." Similar mariophanies took place from March 25 to April 27, 1986, on the roof of the Coptic Church of St. Dimiana in the 'Ard Babadeblu in Shubra, Cairo. Again, Christians and Muslims saw a woman move about the roof between the two belfries of the church. It is significant that although a pontifical commission attested the veracity of the reports of the apparition, this Marian manifestation did not receive the same degree of official approval as the mariophanies in Zeitûn. In both instances, Coptic iconography has presented the mariophanies of Zeitûn and 'Ard Babadeblu in the form of the well-known image of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, received by Catherine Labouré in 1830. Again, both Christians and Muslims have been witnesses of these phenomena.

The Virgin Mary at Civic Functions

On official occasions that include representatives of Christian and Islamic communities, it is customary for the *sheikh* to recite the suret Miriam. For example, at funeral receptions of certain dignitaries, the *muqrtg* will read the suret Miriam as a sign of mutual respect when it is known that Christian representatives are also present. At legal proceedings and lawsuits, the Virgin Mary is often called upon by Christians and Muslims. She is the *ballât al-hadîd*, the "one who liberates from chains."

On one of the last evenings of Ramadan, H.H. Pope Shenûdah III, the 117th successor of the Evangelist St. Mark, invites distinguished Islamic officials to the pontifical residence for *iftar*. Among those invited are the Sheikh of al-Azhar, H.E. Gad al-Haqq 'Ali Gad al-Haqq, and the Grand Mufti, H.E. Dr. Muhammad Sayyed al-Tantâwî, as well as ministers and secretaries of

state. In the traditional speeches by the Christians and Muslims, there are always references to the Virgin Mary, the “golden bridge” between the two religious communities. At the pontifical Christmas celebration in the Cathedral of St. Mark, the government is always represented by one of its senior cabinet ministers. On the local level, Christmas is the one occasion when Christians and Muslims join in common festivities. The Virgin Mary is, indeed, a significant bridge between Christians and Muslims.