

# POPULAR RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST (MIRACLES IN MUSLIM AND COPTIC EGYPT)

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The close relationship between religion, official and popular alike, and politics have been frequently manifested through history. Speaking about the region of the Middle East and North Africa we may refer to such well-known cases from the history of recent years as the stories about the keys which Iranian soldiers were reported to wear in the Iraq-Iran war to be able to enter Paradise more easily after they suffered martyrdom. Or we may recall the October war in 1973 when a pamphlet was circulated among Egyptian soldiers before crossing the Suez Canal and it allegedly stated that the Prophet Muḥammad appeared to Vice-President Ḥusayn aš-Šāfi'ī in a dream encouraging him with this word: *u'burū*, that is "Cross!". As another example from a third type of Islamic countries the case of the late President Sekou Touré's Guinea may be cited where the anti-imperialistic propaganda was underlined by the statement that imperialism is identical with the Dağğāl, the Antichrist who must be resisted and fought with every means.

The present paper, however, does not aim at collecting a group of similar cases which may occur quite accidentally but wishes to examine several phenomena of the religious sphere which have a broader significance and which, in our view, seem to have heralded important changes or even turning points in Islamic and Christian movements, consequently in the history of the Middle East in general.

If we look at the history of this area we might be tempted to discover certain periodical changes in the rise of Islamic and nationalistic ideas which reveal a kind of tide-like course<sup>1</sup>. More or less the same can be said in connection with the history of Coptic Christianity. Accord-

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<sup>1</sup> For the case of Egypt, see e.g. Vatikokis 1980.

ingly, the last century witnessed the emergence of Pan-Islamism while most decades in this century were overwhelmed by the preponderance of the ideas of Arab nationalism which arrived at its peak with the Nasserist ideology. The latter suffered a devastating defeat in 1967 which gave way to the rise of the Islamic trend in general and Islamic fundamentalism in particular. Quite obviously, the logical reaction to the trauma caused by the Six-Day War was to emphasize that while an ideology connected to a certain person could be defeated but Islam, which is a greater unifying factor than Arab nationalism, never.

As the long history of Islam shows, the offensive of the religious trend has been frequently accompanied by an eager wish to recover the lost strength by proving the truth in Koranic statements. A sign of this effort in the seventies might be the news about the discovery of the Cave of *Ahl al-Kahf*, the People of the Cave, the Koranic legend of the Seven Sleepers. It is well-known that *Sūrat al-Kahf* (*Sūra XVIII*) had an enormous importance in Muḥammad's efforts to justify his claims to prophethood<sup>2</sup>. The Egyptian semi-official daily, *al-Abrām* published the news about the archaeological discovery of the Cave on the 4th of June in 1976, so practically on the eve of the ninth anniversary of the Arab-Israeli war. The year 76 could be more than pure coincidence, since a certain tentativeness can be found in its choice, namely in the fact that if we change the tens and units in the number, we get 67, the year of the war as if to suggest that Muslims received this great reassurance in the year of their political and military defeat. The news about the Cave appeared in *al-Abrām* on the page called *al-fikr ad-dīnī*, "The Religious Thought" which column was a characteristic sign of the Islamic revival in Egypt under President Sadat in the seventies.

One week later another article in the same column cited religious authorities who emphasized that the discovery proved the eternal miracle of the Koran. One of them pointed out the importance of discovering sites of other Koranic events in order to strengthen the Muslims'

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. the different commentaries on *Sūra XVIII*. For the Seven Sleepers in general, see Jourdan 1983 with a long bibliography.

faith. They also stressed that Muslim youths could draw strength from the parable of the youths of the Cave who were regarded as the symbols of firm faith.

In the same year, the Kuwaiti monthly, *al-ʿArabī* published a longer article in November which refuted the views of Massignon and other scholars who identified *Ahl al-Kahf* with the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (al-ʿUmrānī 1976). The cave mentioned by the article in *al-Abrām* was located in ar-Raqīm, a place lying about 8 kilometres from the Jordanian capital, Amman. The man who initiated archaeological excavations on the site of the cave was Muḥammad Taysīr Zubayān, the Chairman of the *Rābiṭat al-ʿulūm al-islāmiyya*, the Union of Islamic Sciences in Jordan. He gave a detailed account of his efforts to start excavation work in the cave<sup>3</sup>.

Actually he went to the spot at first in 1953 and visited the cave. He, however, tried in vain to convince the English director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities to excavate the site<sup>4</sup>. It was only in 1963 that the new Director of the Department gave his consent to carry out the necessary works in the cave and in its neighbourhood. Among the finds in the cave there were eight tombs and the jawbone of an animal, possibly of a dog. The drawing of the figure of a dog was also discovered on a wall inside the cave. The archaeologists also found the ruins of two mosques, one of them converted from a Byzantine church which stood above the cave (Zubayān 1978:73f).

On the basis of this archaeological evidence Zubayān came to the conclusion that the cave must be identical with the cave referred to by the Koran. He also considered the similarities in the topography of the excavated cave and the description of the cave of *Ahl al-Kahf* in the Koran as decisive for establishing the identity of the two caves. Accordingly, the eight tombs could not have been anything else than the resting place of the Seven Sleepers and their dog, Qiṭmīr. After the excava-

<sup>3</sup> Zubayān 1978:39ff. See also Lescot 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Lescot 1968:5 knows only about six tombs.

tions a new mosque was built in the vicinity of the cave and King Husayn of Jordan was also invited to attend the opening ceremony in 1970 (*ibid.* 78f). The Jordanian Department of Antiquities erected a commemorating tablet by the cave which stated that this was the Cave of the Seven Sleepers mentioned in the Koran (*ibid.* 69). In 1977 the neighbouring village of ar-Rağib was officially renamed ar-Raqīm to be in harmony with the Koranic text (*ibid.* 170).

According to Zubayān the Seven Sleepers lived in the time of Traian and slept until the reign of Theodosius (*ibid.* 34f). He also tried to show that the Cave has been known by the Arabs as the Cave of ar-Raqīm since ancient times (*ibid.* 103). The fact that the site has been a place of worship stands beyond doubt as a small event related incidentally by Zubayān corroborates it. Speaking about the remains of an olive tree from Roman times he mentions that several years ago an old *ḥağğ* cut out the fruit bearing tree because people visited it regularly to get *bara-ka*, "blessing" from it and he feared that this custom would turn into *'ibāda*, "veneration" (*ibid.* 115).

Apart from the encouragement given to the archaeological work, Zubayān did his best to spread the news about the discovery of the Cave of ar-Raqīm in the whole Islamic world. Although he had already published an article about the cave in Damascus in 1953 (*ibid.* 109) his real activity started in the seventies. In 1971 he went to see the Sheikh of al-Azhar and informed him about the discovery. In the same year he gave a lecture on it in the *Ġam'iyat aš-Šubbān al-Muslimīn*, the Society of Muslim Youths in Cairo (*ibid.* 116f). In 1978 he published his book about the discovery of the Cave and referring to other Muslim scholars' views he summarized the significance of the event in the following comparison: the Seven Sleepers lived in an age of oppression which characterized the situation of Muḥammad's followers in the early Meccan period and which characterizes the present situation in which governments are afraid of the Islamic *da'wa* (*ibid.* 201f).

It cannot have been a sheer coincidence that Islamic religious circles took a real interest in the story of the Cave of ar-Raqīm only in the seventies, that is more than a decade later than the real discovery took

place. These years were a period of political frustration for the Arab and Islamic countries. An Indian Muslim theologian characterized it as the struggle between belief and materialism represented by the Jews and Christians (*ibid.* 177-183). Failures on the political scene must have led logically to the conclusion that these can be compensated and corrected on the religious level by bolstering the standard of faith among Muslims.

Looking back to the long history of Islam to demonstrate the attempts to prove the reality of Koranic revelations we may refer to such well-known stories as the journey of Sallām to the wall of Yāğūğ and Māğūğ or the expedition of Muḥammad ibn Mūsā to find the Cave of the Seven Sleepers. Both of these events occurred in a time when the Caliphate was engaged in a bitter struggle against the Muʿtazilites and wanted to prove the reality of Koranic miracles wishing to defeat them with their own arms (Arkoun et al. 1978:211). Besides, it was also the time when Turks appeared on the Muslim scene, so Sallām's journey was of paramount importance in this respect, too (*ibid.* 212f). All these circumstances show that both journeys had an ideological and political significance as well.

As another example of the efforts to show the trustworthiness of Koranic references, the numerous stories about the discovery of the legendary city of Iram may also be cited<sup>5</sup>. These obviously fit in the picture of the eagerness of Southern Arabs to demonstrate their cultural superiority over their Northern brethren (Vadet 1969).

If we return to examine the appearance of the Islamic trend in recent years we may also refer to another article in the same issue of *al-Abrām* already mentioned. This article speaks about the efforts of religious authorities in the Governorate of Šarqiyya to purify the *mūlids* from innovations and jugglery. Practically, this would have meant the abolition of traditional processions which accompany *mūlids*.

A similar attempt can be registered from Libya. Islamic revival here also appealed to the community as a whole but it was also encouraged

<sup>5</sup> For this, see e.g. *EJ*<sup>1</sup> and *EJ*<sup>2</sup> "Iram".

to make use of Qaddafi's "Third Universal Theory". So, it is not surprising at all that this kind of Islamic movement has taken a hostile stand towards the different forms of popular religion. According to the Libyan weekly, *az-Zahaf al-Ahdar*, the revolutionary forces in Sūq al-Ġum'a attacked the nests of jugglery and swindle<sup>6</sup>. The newspaper rejected what it called "yellow traditional culture". By this expression, the article seemingly meant the culture of those who sit in the *zāwiyas*, beating the drums, practising swindle and leading the life of dervishes.

After examining the responses of Islam which were given to the challenges of the age in a special sphere, let us turn our attention to the reactions of the Egyptian Copts, the biggest Christian community in the Middle East. As a matter of fact, on the level of religion they reacted to the defeat in 1967 more quickly than the Muslims. In the spring of 1968 the Egyptian press gave great publicity to the miraculous apparitions of the Virgin Mary in her church in Zaytūn, a suburb of Cairo. The events started on the 2nd of April when workers in a neighbouring garage caught sight of a figure who moved slowly around the domes of the church. These apparitions<sup>7</sup> occurred until 1969 and usually took place among the following circumstances: the Virgin appeared at night for different periods of time and the apparitions were usually accompanied or preceded by such phenomena as the appearance of strong light, pigeons, clouds.

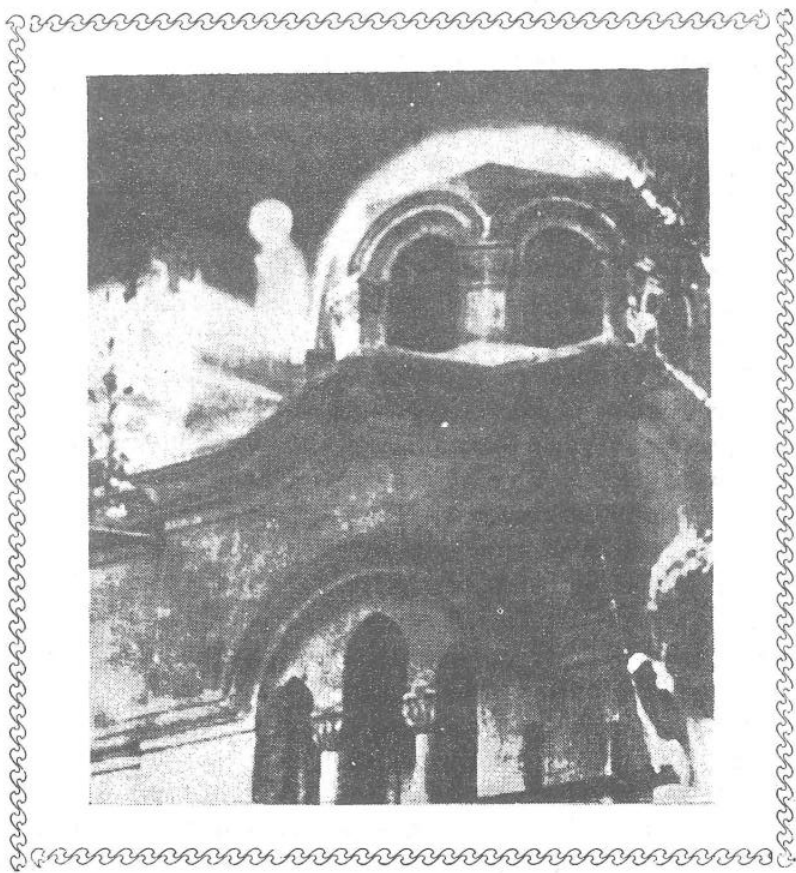
The Coptic Orthodox Church published a little book on this miraculous event which contained the whole story and the testimonies of eyewitnesses together with the report of the fact-finding commission sent out by Pope Kyrillos VI<sup>8</sup>. First of all, the book stated that in these difficult times the apparition had a message to the nation, the countries of the Middle East and the whole human race (Gregorios 1969:57, 65).

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<sup>6</sup> See, *az-Zahaf al-Ahdar*, 24 February 1986, no. 334, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Usually the term *tağallī* is preferred to *zuhūr*.

<sup>8</sup> See Gregorios 1969. For a rather sceptic account of the apparitions, see Meinardus 1970:264-269.



The apparition of Virgin Mary in Zaytūn in 1968 (photo).

Special emphasis was laid upon the claim that God will not leave the Egyptians after their national catastrophe and will help them to victory. In addition to these interpretations, the *mu'ğiza*, "miracle" was also expected to boast religious feeling among the believers and to cause miraculous healing in several cases. The apparition must have reminded the Egyptians of the journey of the Holy Family and that Egypt has been sharing divine blessings since two thousand years.

The booklet also disclosed a more concrete cause of the apparitions when it said that Christian pilgrims, who could not visit now the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem because of the Israeli occupation, could come to see her in the Church of Zaytūn (*ibid.* 34). This sounded quite logical since the apparitions started before Easter, in the period when Christians usually prepared themselves to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Pope Kyrillos VI did not go personally to the Church but declared the apparition of Virgin Mary a reality. *al-Abrām* published the Pope's statement together with a picture of the Virgin above the Church on its front page and it was given a special attention in the Egyptian press (*ibid.* 43). As a characteristic of general national enthusiasm, even the ruling Arab Socialist Union took part in the arrangements to facilitate the access of visitors to the Church (Şādiq 1986:40). In short, according to the opinion of the Coptic Church, the miracle of the apparition and its message concerned the whole Egyptian nation.

There were also reports about cases of miraculous healing which occurred during the apparitions but this point was not particularly stressed<sup>9</sup>. This attitude might have been in accordance with the attempt to give priority to the idea of a united nation rather than to emphasize the importance of the believer as a member of a religious community.

After these general traits it will be worth to examine some specific features of the apparitions. The Virgin appeared in ten different forms (Gregorios 1969:77-110) among which two showed her over a tree. An eyewitness claimed that he saw her on a tree among the branches (*ibid.* 80f) and another one insisted on seeing her over a palm-tree (*ibid.* 82,

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<sup>9</sup> al-Anbā' Gregorios' book does not contain such stories.

106ff).

This peculiar form of appearance may suggest the survival of some elements of the ancient Egyptian tree-cult. As is well-known the ancient sky goddesses like Hathor, Nut and Isis played a major role in this cult<sup>10</sup>. They were usually represented sitting among the branches of trees. The most important sacred trees were the date-palm, acacia and sycamore. The age-old veneration accorded to the famous tree in the Cairene suburb of Maṭariyya offers a good example of how the object of an ancient tree-cult became Christianized.

To show the popularity of these ideas about the close relationship between the Virgin and the tree reference may also be made to a famous icon in the church of the Virgin Mary in Ḥāret Zuweyla in Cairo which depicts the Virgin among the branches of a tree<sup>11</sup>. Only the upper part of her body can be seen as if she were growing out of the tree. Actually, the iconography of this form, irrespective of its present interpretation, seems to be in complete harmony with the usual representations of the ancient tree-goddesses.

As for the pigeons accompanying the apparitions of the Virgin they also deserve some remarks. In the interpretation of the author of our booklet, they could be the souls of saints because the pigeon symbolizes the lightness of the soul and its quickness (Gregorios 1969:120). He also referred to the well-known fact that the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a pigeon at the river Jordan. What is more interesting for us, is his claim that the ancient Egyptians represented the souls in the form of pigeons on the tombs and in the temples. By this, he practically expressed a wish to include the heritage of the ancient Egyptian past among the components of the apparition, so he accepted this as an important factor in creating national unity and strengthening the consciousness of national identity.

As a third motif of ancient Egyptian origin we may allude to the

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Buhl 1947.

<sup>11</sup> For a picture of the icon, see e.g. *Coptic Egypt* 40f. The tree here represents the tree of Jesse, the "Tree of Prophecies".

descriptions which present the Virgin as radiating immense light<sup>12</sup>. This figure resembles very much the woman dressed in the Sun who appeared in the revelations of St. John and whose origin can ultimately be traced back to ancient Egypt (Boll 1914:98ff).

The next important apparition of the Virgin Mary occurred in the church of Dumyāna in the Cairene suburb of Šubrā. Her first appearance above the church was observed on the 25th of March in 1986. So, again the apparition took place in the period preceding Easter. Similarly to the events in 1968, the apparitions continued after this for a number of months. To emphasize the interrelatedness of the two events, the official report prefaced by Pope Šenūda III himself, indicated the hidden numerical connection between 1968 and 1986 explaining that by changing the numbers 8 and 6 we get 68 which necessarily points to the year 1968 (Šādiq 1986:31).

The outward circumstances were really the same as in 1968 with the difference of the Virgin appearing this time not only over the church but also inside under the cupolas and on the altar-screen and not only at night but also in day-time.

The political situation has, however, completely changed. Egypt has been stricken by sectarian conflict between Muslims and Copts, the unifying ties of Egyptian nationalism have loosened, the two communities seemed to have taken their own paths<sup>13</sup>. The interpretation of the Coptic Orthodox Church considered the apparition as a possibility to strengthen the faith of the believers and like in 1968 saw in it a good opportunity for pilgrims to see the Virgin in Cairo without the necessity of visiting Jerusalem (Šādiq 1986:129).

In contrast to the report about the apparitions in 1968, the official

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<sup>12</sup> This motif actually appears in every description of the apparitions.

<sup>13</sup> In these years clashes between the two communities have become daily events. The atmosphere is well characterized by the so-called "war of stickers" in which both Muslims and Copts wanted to demonstrate their religious identity by placing stickers on cars. Finally, the government put an end to these openly provocative acts by banning the use of stickers in 1985. For the Muslim-Copt conflict in general, see e.g. Ansari 1984.

report this time particularly stressed the occurrences of miraculous healings<sup>14</sup>. We may discern a definite tendency in this to raise the religious morals of individual believers first of all and then to increase their level of faith and their feeling of identity. Also, in contrast to what happened in 1968, Muslim mass media have remained silent and have not published reports about the apparitions. This again suggests that on this occasion the event has not become a national cause but remained the internal affair of the Copt community.

Finally, if we want to make a comparison between the attitudes of official Muslim and Copt circles towards such miraculous events as the discovery of the Cave of *Ahl al-Kahf* and the apparitions of Virgin Mary, the following common traits should be pointed out:

1) In both cases official circles were ready to approve and accept phenomena which basically belong to the sphere of popular religiosity.

2) To make, however, the official control felt, Muslim authorities emphasized the conformity of the archaeological finds in the Cave to the Koranic evidence. The Copts on their part stressed that the Virgin appeared in her form familiar from the icons and devotional pictures, besides the apparitions always took place in the churches<sup>15</sup>.

3) Their attitude to other phenomena of popular religion, which possibly could not have been kept under control was complete rejection. This is why certain Muslim circles tried, as we have seen to restrict practices related to the *mūlids*<sup>16</sup> and in a parallel way, the Coptic report on the apparition in the church of Dumyāna affirmed that the event was not a *bid'a* "innovation" and it has nothing to do with *mūlids* (Şādiq 1986:88).

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<sup>14</sup> The main part of Şādiq's book is made up by the descriptions of such cases.

<sup>15</sup> The latter point was especially stressed by Pope Şenūda III (Şādiq 1986:7).

<sup>16</sup> As a possible change in policy I was surprised to hear on CNN International on the 27th of November 1994 that Egyptian government lifted a ban on Sufism imposed several decades ago because it prefers Sufism to politically motivated extremism. The report may not be completely accurate in this form but it certainly shows the existence of the dilemma.

If we look back to the history of the last decades it becomes evident that these miracles could not serve as unifying bonds between Muslims and Copts in Egypt after the national catastrophe of 1967 but they rather heralded the emergence of religious extremism and even contributed to its growth.

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