

An apparition that provoked large religious, political and social debates among all classes

The Virgin of Zeitoun

Cynthia Nelson

In the early days of April, 1968, ten months after the Six-Day War, in a district some fifteen miles north of Cairo there occurred an event that for several months became the focus of attention not only for thousands of Egyptians of different religions and social backgrounds but also hundreds of foreigners, members of the international press, resident scholars and diplomats, representatives of Western Christianity and the perennial tourists. This event, known locally as the Apparition of Zeitoun, involves the alleged multiple appearances of the Virgin Mary on the dome of a Coptic Christian church in the district of Zeitoun. The Copts are an Egyptian Christian minority who are descendants of the original Egyptian population at the time of the Arab conquest in the seventh century and who were never converted to Islam.

I would like, first, to describe the events surrounding the apparitions, particularly during the initial months; second, to seek an understanding of how Egyptians construct their social world by asking the Egyptians themselves how they perceive and interpret the apparition of the Virgin Mary; and third, as an anthropologist, to examine this phenomenon in the context of its broader implications to people's perceptions of reality, to relations between Christians and Muslims, to the role of the supernatural in the everyday lives of Egyptians and the manner in which they cope with stress—in general, to the sociopolitical setting of contemporary Egypt.

On Tuesday evening, April 2, 1968, around midnight, two workers leave the garage facing the Church of the Holy Virgin. One of them, a Muslim, notices "a figure dressed in white on top of the dome of the Church. I thought she was going to commit

suicide and shouted to her to be careful. My friend called the police and I woke up the doorkeeper. He comes out and looks and cries 'It is the Virgin,' and runs to call the priest." This is the testimony of the worker as reported in the major newspapers as accounts of the apparition increased over the next weeks.

According to those I later interviewed who were present during those first hours and days, the police did arrive on the scene, and the *ma'amur* (police chief) attempted to disperse the crowds, saying that the so-called apparition was but the reflection of the lights from the streetlamps, and commenced to break the lights. "The light of the dome remained, and the vision of the Virgin became even clearer. The *ma'amur* became frightened and said that he wanted nothing more to do with this; while others came closer to be sure of what they saw." Thus reported a Coptic woman in her early fifties who witnessed the apparition along with her two teen-aged daughters.

I first became aware of the "apparition story" two weeks later, through students at the American University in Cairo where I have taught for nine years. They were excited and asked if I had heard about the miracle of Zeitoun. It was at this time that I first went to the district. To describe more fully what transpired, I shall quote field notes taken during these initial months.

On April 15 I arrived at the church around 10:00 P.M. with a Coptic friend and her sister-in-law. There were a thousand to fifteen hundred people quietly milling about the streets around the church. It was difficult, but still possible, for cars to navigate. Several private cars were parked along the side of the street and people were gathered outside the church waiting for "something to happen." Most people had come by car to Zeitoun that evening and, judging from the manner in which they were dressed (Western business suits and fashionable dresses),

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they represented the urban middle and upper classes. The atmosphere was subdued and reverent. There were several Europeans from embassies and foreign businesses, who had come mostly out of curiosity. While waiting, using colloquial Arabic, I engaged some Egyptians near me in a conversation about the apparition. Many claimed to have seen her and had returned to see her again; others had come in hopes of seeing her. One informant, who had been present on April 2 and had returned each night for the past two weeks, said the Virgin usually appears after midnight. (I was reminded of having read somewhere that midnight marks the center of time for Christendom!) As we were talking, a white-shirted figure appeared in one of the windows of the church, and the crowd broke into shouts, but soon realized that it was nothing but a human figure.

On another visit a week later, toward the end of April, the crowds had multiplied by the thousands, and a particular side street next to the church had been described "as where the Virgin is more easily seen." Talking with a woman in her late fifties, the daughter of a very famous Cairo surgeon, I learned that her own daughter, an honor student in chemistry at Cairo University, who had seen the Virgin on April 12, insisted that her mother accompany her again to Zeitoun. She described her experience: "She was like a statue, hands folded in front, head veiled and bent. She rose up in the sky completely and was illuminated. I first saw the halo, then I saw the Virgin completely. She came down between the palm tree and the dome on this side street here." As we were talking, the crowd began pointing to the palm tree and exclaiming "It's the Virgin—she looks like a nun, and she is swaying to and fro as if she were blessing us!"

When I looked to where the crowds were pointing I, too, thought I saw a light through the branches of the trees, and as I tried to picture a nunlike figure in those branches, I could trace the outline of a figure. But as I thought to myself that this is just an illusion of the light reflecting through the branches, the image of the nun would leave my field of vision. Still, there was no doubt in my mind that there was a light and that if I looked for the image it would come into focus. I immediately "explained" this perceptual experience as an illusion caused by reflected light. But the source of the light was a mystery, for the streetlights had been disconnected all around the church for several days. And within another week all the trees around the church would be cut. The woman beside me was convinced it was the Virgin, which reveals once again that what the eye sees is the consequence not so much of psychological processes but of intellectual, emotional and ideological concerns.

By the first week in May the apparition had become a national as well as international event. On

May 4 representatives of the Coptic Patriarchate of Egypt and All Africa called a news conference for the 150 newsmen gathered from all over the Middle East and Europe. The following are excerpts from the conference published in *Al Ahrām* on May 5. (I might point out that the Patriarch had not personally seen the apparition.)

Immediately after the phenomenon of April 2, a committee was designated by Kyrillos VI, Patriarch of Egypt and All Africa, to undertake investigations and determine whether or not the Virgin had been appearing at Zeitoun Church. This committee stationed itself at Zeitoun for days without interruption. Bishop Athanasius of the Beni Suef Diocese has personally seen the apparition on April 30, when the shining full-sized Virgin Mary appeared from 2:45 A.M.-5:00 A.M. The extraordinary visions of the past weeks have been attested to by thousands of people from all walks of life, Egyptians and foreigners of various nationalities, and groups of them had agreed on time and place of the apparition. With the facts collected, we have concluded that the apparitions are not false individual visions or mass hallucinations, but are real. The apparition has been followed by two important factors: (1) a revival in faith in Almighty God, as many people became true Christian believers after witnessing the apparition; and (2) the occurrence of a number of miracles, as several people suffering incurable diseases were healed after seeing the apparition of the Virgin.

The statement in conclusion prayed Almighty God to make the apparition a sign of peace for the region.

During the question-and-answer period following the news conference, Bishop Samuel expressed his hope that the apparition would be a good omen and that Almighty God would realize victory for the Arabs against the Israelis, who have occupied the holy places in the Holy City of Jerusalem, considered the most sacred city by the Copts and, after Mecca and Medina, by the Muslims as well.

Following this announcement Zeitoun became the center of religious fervor, drawing thousands of people from every corner of the country and many from neighboring countries. I remember talking with the BBC Middle East correspondent, who had been dispatched to Cairo to do a story on the apparition, and he remarked that the Lebanese newspapers had been carrying the story weeks before it appeared in the Egyptian press and that the Lebanese had no doubts that the Virgin is appearing. Interestingly, one year later, on April 12, 1969, during a period of great civil unrest between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Lebanese government, the following news item appeared in the Egyptian press:

Thousands of people flocked again to a small Syrian Orthodox Church in Beirut after news spread about a reported apparition of the Virgin Mary. As dusk fell, the halls of the rooms of the adjacent parish school were jammed. Scores of school boys climbed to the roof of the Church to be close to the dome, where the Virgin is said to have appeared. The parish priest declined to confirm or deny the apparition report. He said, however, that it was reported to him by about 60 schoolboys. Some students said that they had seen the Virgin dressed in white with a glittering white crown on her head. Others maintained the Virgin appeared as a soft light for periods of several minutes, arms outstretched.

Despite the fact that the police had set up roadblocks at Zeitoun, the crowds were so overwhelming that it was impossible to walk. The garage of a private villa had been converted into a refreshment stand, and the area had taken on all the aspects of a *moulid* (a popular religious festival celebrating the birth of a saint). On every side there were small kiosks in which hung pictures of the Virgin and photos of the apparition itself. Vendors were selling incense as *baraka* (blessing). By this time the crowds included peasants who had come from Upper Egypt and the delta regions as well as the traditionally *galabeya*-clad urban dwellers from the non-Westernized sections of old Cairo, who had come to Zeitoun prepared to stay until they had seen the apparition.

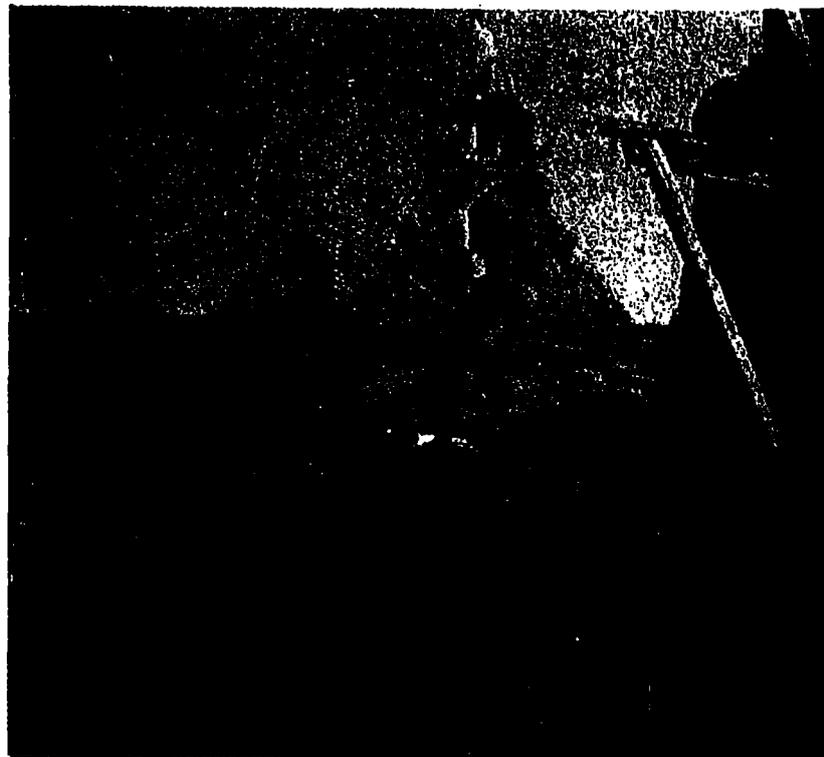
As one moved closer to the church the crowd became so thick that one could not move. Bands of youths periodically came crashing through the crowds, arm in arm, shoving women as well as men. Stories circulated of the attempts to molest women by these groups of young men. In fact, jokes began circulating at this time describing the Virgin as blushing at seeing such behavior on the part of the crowd. One story describes the Virgin pulling her veil across her eyes to conceal her shame. Another describes the Virgin striking down a man when he began to molest a woman in the crowd.

A week after the Patriarchate's news conference one of my Muslim students who had failed to show up for a makeup exam came to my office to apologize. She told me that she had been sick for the past several days "for no apparent reason." She related to me how she and her friends, when they first heard the stories about the Virgin's appearance, had dismissed and mocked the whole idea as nonsense. "I was perfectly healthy the day before, and then last week I and several of my friends were criticizing and making fun of this whole story, and the very next day (for no reason) I came down with a very high fever. And I know about twenty persons, all of whom made fun of the Virgin's

appearance, who came down sick for no reason. I don't know what to make of it."

The climax to the events surrounding the Virgin's appearance came tragically on May 20, when ten thousand people tried to force their way into St. Michael's Church in Shubra, another district near Cairo, after rumors swept the quarter that the vision of the Virgin Mary had been seen there. Fifteen people were killed in the stampede. This prompted the Ministry of the Interior, in collaboration with Church officials and the Arab Socialist Union (the country's sole political party), to set out formal procedures to guard against the recurrence of such an event. This involved cordoning off the area around Zeitoun, charging an entrance fee of 10 piasters (25 cents), an additional 15 piasters (30 cents) if one wished a chair, and 100 piasters (\$2.43) if one wished to enter the church itself. The proceeds from these fees are shared equally by the state and the church of Zeitoun. In addition, the Patriarchate issued a statement warning people "not to believe any rumors until the Patriarchate officially authenticates what people are saying and until it has been proved by decisive and unequivocal evidence." People were encouraged "to report all miracles but not to believe anything until the Patriarchate issues an official statement."

By June the apparition of Zeitoun had been sanctioned by the Ministry of Tourism, which published pamphlets narrating the events of the past months. All Egyptian embassies abroad, as well as foreign diplomatic missions in Cairo, were sent copies. At



THE CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN

Zeitoun itself the atmosphere had changed once again from the *mouldid* quality of early May to a more spiritual group "pray-in."

Quoting from my field notes of June 1, 1968:

I arrived at Zeitoun at 10:00 P.M. and stayed until 2:00 A.M., accompanied by three Egyptian woman friends, two Muslims and a Copt. There were intermittent flashes of light—perhaps headlights, I inquired? I was told by the crowd that for the past two weeks there had been no buses or cars allowed near the area. The crowd's response to these flashes of light was electric. They clapped and shouted "There She is! There She is!" On the whole the atmosphere seemed more subdued, reserved, than in the early days of May. Throughout the evening there were Coptic chants, newly composed songs in honor of the Virgin (e.g., *Fahartin Ya Adra . . .*), poetry of a political slant emphasizing the Virgin leading the Egyptians to victory. Priests led the group in prayer, hymns, and made announcements over the public address system about the most recent miracles. People sat quietly in their chairs talking, eating sandwiches and drinking cold soda pop. One woman sitting next to me told me that she had been at Zeitoun for the past three days and nights, but tonight (the anniversary of the Holy Family's visit to Egypt in the first century) was the first time she had seen anything. She kept praying to the Virgin and thanking Her for coming to Egypt. She kept referring to the Virgin as *Umm-i-nur* (Mother of Light) or *Ya Habibi* (an affectionate phrase meaning O my dearest one and used by both Copts and Muslims in addressing God). The crowd was definitely more middle class, and I overheard a great deal of French spoken around me as well as Arabic. There was about an equal distribution of men and women and a great many children. In fact, it was much like the night in early April when stories of her appearance first began to circulate.

From that spring of 1968 to the present scores of apparitions have been reported and thousands of people have visited Zeitoun—Muslims as well as Christians, Egyptians as well as foreigners, scholars as well as theologians, urban bourgeoisie as well as peasants, men and women, young and old. Sometimes the Virgin is seen as a full figure, her face with downcast eyes and her body enveloped in blue light. At other times she is seen as a bustlike figure surrounded by a golden halo. Sometimes she moves and walks around the domes, bending her head in front of the Cross or facing the multitudes below and blessing them. She also has been seen carrying the child Jesus or an olive branch. Always preceding and accompanying her appearance are large white birds flying at great speed, and the air fills with incense.

Sundays and Tuesdays, as well as her feast days, are particularly favored times for seeing her. But never has she been described as talking or giving an oral message to the people. The only exception to this is reflected in a popular joke with political overtones that circulated through Cairo during the initial months. On March 30, 1968, Nasser delivered what subsequently became known as the "March 30 Manifesto," outlining the policies and plans for the country since the 1967 defeat. The country was to vote on this Manifesto in the future. Amusingly, the significance of the Virgin's appearance just three days after Nasser's speech to the people of Egypt was seen as that of delivering the one-word message: "YES!" What disturbed many intellectuals at this time was the fact that there was more excitement over the Zeitoun phenomenon than over the political implications of the March 30 Manifesto.

In the minds of most Egyptians the apparition is connected to the Six-Day War of June, 1967, in which Egypt suffered a military defeat that left the country in despair and its people confronting perhaps the severest crisis in their contemporary history. Since 1967 Egyptians have lived through the war of attrition and the massive Israeli retaliations; the influx of Russians with SAM missiles and then their abrupt dismissal in July, 1972; the death of Nasser in September, 1970, the emergence of Sadat and abortive coups; Black September and student riots; the Tripoli pact and the prospects of a new state with Libya; the renaissance of sectarian rifts between Copts and Muslims and the ever-present threat of another outbreak of the Middle East war.

To understand how Egyptians cope with the universal task of creating order out of chaos, an order that endows their existence with meaning in terms of ends divine and human, we must now turn to the subjective interpretations given to the apparition phenomena by Egyptians themselves. From an analysis of these interpretations, what can we learn about the manner in which Egyptians perceive and construct their social worlds? What can we learn about the broader dynamics of Egyptian society, the competing worldviews of religion and science, the images of classes, of man and woman, of sacred and secular power?

To most Egyptians the appearance of the Virgin was initially a sign of hope (*bishara kheir*—good things will happen in the future). Specifically, the Virgin had to come to the Egyptians to restore faith in God and give hope and moral support to the defeated, perhaps even to lead the Egyptians to victory over the modern-day Herods. That is, during the initial months the Virgin was seen as a collective symbol for all Egyptians. The attitude of those who went to Zeitoun at this time was one of organized communal supplication toward the supernatural of a people seeking divine guidance

at a time when there seemed to be no visible way out of a hopeless situation.

How might we account for the fact that it was the Virgin that appeared as a symbol of God's not forsaking the Egyptians? Why not the Prophet Mohammed or a Muslim saint? Certainly there are ample historical precedents of religious visions describing the Prophet, particularly during the period of the black death in Egypt. I think the answer lies in the fact that the Virgin, as the Magna Mater, the Madonna, the Mother of Light, symbolizes for the Egyptians—both Christian and Muslim alike—a succoring, protective mother, the great prototype of the universal human experience, who has the power to banish chaos and restore the benign shape of the world. That Muslims accept Christians in the collection of saints and divine messengers is attested to by the fact that a special surah (XIX) of the Koran is devoted to the Virgin Mary, stating: "Allah has chosen you. He has made you pure and exalted you above all women." The history of Sufism in Egypt shows that Christians and Muslims have made exchanges when it comes to divine presences. In al-Jabarti one can read that when Mustafa al Bakri, who was regarded as a Sufi saint, came to Egypt in the 1740's and 1750's, he was surrounded by both Muslims and Christians. One Muslim informant, a poet and wife of a university mathematics professor, who had seen the apparition at Zeitoun, expressed this view:

We Muslims believe that the Virgin is in fact a Muslim. There is a passage in the Bible in which Christ is talking to his disciples and saying—We are all Muslims [meaning, in this context, surrenders to God]. There was a girl in Beirut some four or five years ago who had a vision of Mari Guirgis [St. George] and He told her that the Virgin Mary would come to Egypt. "Tell the Egyptians not to worry, I am near them and I won't forsake them."

According to a commonly held belief, the Holy Family escaped from the prosecution of Herod in Jerusalem nearly twenty centuries ago and fled into Egypt, where the Virgin is reputed to have rested several days under a large sycamore tree that stands a few miles from Zeitoun. The tree is considered sacred, and many Egyptian women, Muslim and Christian, who are unable to bear children make pilgrimage to it and place votive offerings on the branches, hoping to become fertile. Muslims have been known to bury their dead under this tree. It is also believed that the Virgin ate the fruit of this tree; and there is a popular saying that if one eats this fruit (*gimez*) one must return one day to the country. The Virgin is believed to have spent three years traveling throughout Egypt, as the many shrines honoring her historical presence attest. Wherever she rested there is believed to have appeared abundant water and green, fertile land.



THE VIRGIN'S TREE

Another prophetic story that circulated through Cairo during this early period linked the present phenomenon with an earlier apparition of the Virgin in Portugal, at Fatima. (The name Fatima—the name of Mohammed's favorite daughter, the only one, it is said, to raise children in his name—may well have helped draw Muslim attention to the Zeitoun apparition.) According to the Egyptian interpretation, the Virgin appeared at Fatima to a little shepherd girl and gave her a special message that was to be sent to the Pope in Rome with the stipulation that it not be opened for fifty years, that is, until 1967; and when the letter was opened in that year it prophesied that Egypt would experience a great defeat and suffer much, but that the Virgin would now protect Egypt as Egypt has protected the Holy Family when they fled into Egypt.

Why the Virgin should appear at this particular church is also embedded in prophecy. According to one Copt:

Ibrahim Pasha Khalil, a wealthy Copt landowner, was building a villa on some land in Zeitoun many years ago. One night he had a dream and the Virgin appeared to him and told him to stop building his villa and instead build her a Church. She promised to return in fifty years and appear at this Church for one year and perform miracles. April 2, 1968, the date of the first witnessing of the Virgin, also coincided with the fortieth day following the death of the original landowner's daughter. For most of us Copts this was a sign of the fulfillment of sacred prophecy.

After the first few months, however, one sensed a shift in the priority of interpretations given to the apparition of 1968. The predominant theme over more recent years reflects more the tensions intensified by the war between religious and social groups within Egyptian society than a collective despair at the defeat of 1967. This is more acutely brought out when examining interpretations given by Copts. For many Copts the apparition of Zeitoun was a sign for the fulfillment of a fervent though unexpressed millennial dream in action—the conversion of the Moslems of Egypt. Typical of the interpretations rendered by Copts of all ages are those of a seventeen-year-old girl studying at the Goethe Institute in Cairo:

There is a written prophecy that one day the Virgin will appear in Egypt, and will do so for a long time, then she will disappear gradually. Seven years after this apparition the majority of Egyptians will be Christians, leaving the Muslims a minority. At this time the flag of Egypt will bear the Cross.

And those of a fifty-year-old male surgeon:

The most beautiful thing to do is to go to Zeitoun and watch the people of all religions participating in Coptic prayers. Imagine, this is the first time in history the Copts could sing their hymns in the streets of Egypt among all the Muslims and shout aloud, "*Umm el Mokhaless* (Mother of the Savior)." This phenomenon has taken place because we Copts are not very united and cooperative among ourselves. We have been oppressed for so many years that finally we are getting the message to unite and for the Muslims to be converted. This moment in time is most significant because the people are starting to lose their faith in God after all the hardships we have suffered. The message came to the Muslims at the right time when they had lost their faith.

These quotations express the whole Coptic position in Egypt. Of today's population of some 35 million Egyptians the official estimate of the Coptic population is 3.5 million. According to the Coptic Church census, the number is close to 7 million. As "the lonely minority," Edward Wakin says in his book of that title, their position in Egypt since the 1952 revolution, and particularly since the 1967 defeat in which many Christians were accused as spies, has not commanded serious economic or political respect.

Many Copts, particularly the urban middle and upper middle classes in Cairo, primarily because of their Western orientation, have felt especially insecure during the rise of the socialist regimes in Egypt. During the 1967 war, which was hailed over Voice of the Arabs as a *jihad*, a Holy War of liberation,

Copts expressed the feeling of great alienation. During the summer after the war, as Egyptians searched their souls and hearts for explanations for the defeat, tensions between Muslims and Copts intensified to such a degree that Nasser made a public speech about the bravery and courage and patriotism of the Christian soldiers to discourage the Muslim Brotherhood from casting blame on the Copts. Even close friends, as I was told by one informant, began to doubt each other when it came to the question of religion.

Over the past years there have been a series of incidents involving Muslim-Christian conflict and hostility in the major cities of Alexandria, Mansoura and Damanhour. The most recent of these occurred in Khanka, a small suburb twelve miles from Cairo. On November 5, 1972, the first day of the important Muslim feast marking the end of Ramadan, someone lobbed a Molotov cocktail into a tiny thatch-and-wood structure that housed the local Coptic church. The building, officially registered in the name of "The Society of Friends of the Holy Bible," was used Sundays for Coptic services. A week later 160 Coptic Church leaders headed by the new Patriarch, Shenouda III, decided to make an issue of it, and held a protest service (a pray-in) at the damaged building, where over five hundred Copts gathered. This provoked Muslim counterdemonstrations which led to arson, looting and the slight injuring of three persons. Nine Muslim demonstrators were arrested, and the government appointed an official commission to investigate the increasing intensity of the incidents.

The commission report traced recent frictions to what it saw as a series of misrepresentations going back to the alleged conversion of some Muslims to Christianity in recent years—since the Apparition of Zeitoun—and specifically involving the sons of highly placed government officials.

Last year, at the fourth anniversary of the Apparition of Zeitoun, and apparently in an attempt to heal sectarian rifts, the new Coptic Patriarch delivered a speech emphasizing the religious sympathy of the Copts for Anwar Sadat and Moamer El Qaddafi. He announced that Sadat had recently made a decision to grant the Coptic community the right to purchase land at 40 per cent reduction, and Qaddafi recently gave a church in Libya to the Copts of Egypt. In reference to the apparition, the Patriarch said:

Religion is the first pillar of the homeland and the Virgin's appearance was a great blessing for the entire country because she made men aware that religion is stronger than their laws. The Virgin is the great exemplar of the pure and sacred life, the ideal mother. Our revolution has forbidden monopoly, therefore we shall not monopolize the Virgin.

On one level, as exemplar of the sacred, the Virgin

serves as a symbolic political unifier—uniting Muslims and Copts against the Herods; uniting Egyptians with other Arabs in confrontation with the technologically advanced West. However, on another level, the Virgin serves as a charismatic figure for a group that has long felt itself “the lonely minority.”

Another theme emerging from the interpretations is the concern among university graduates to accommodate a “rational, positivistic, scientific” outlook with one which could be described as religious. Many university professors and students I interviewed about the apparition dismissed the whole phenomenon as the result of the overactive imagination of “lower class peasants who are very superstitious and are easily convinced.” Interestingly, however, the great majority of people who have gathered at Zeitoun over the past five years have not been Upper Egyptian peasants but rather middle-class workers and semiprofessionals, many of whom are highly educated but who are also highly disillusioned by the 1967 defeat and by continued uncertainty within the country. They have turned to religion, the principal moral benefit of which is that it permits a confrontation with the age in which one lives from a perspective that transcends the age. However, there are those for whom the apparition does not make sense and for whom an admission of its validity would threaten their taken-for-granted world. One prominent Cairo surgeon expressed this existential dilemma in the following narrative:

A patient of mine upon whom I had operated two years ago for cancer returned to my office three weeks ago for a check-up. Upon examination I discovered that the man had another tumor. I actually felt the tumor during the internal examination and removed a piece of tissue for biopsy. When the test showed it was malignant I recommended an immediate operation, but the man refused, saying he did not have enough money, and left the office. Two weeks later he returned and asked for another examination. To my astonishment I could not find the tumor, but only some white scar tissue. The man told me he had gone to Zeitoun and prayed to the Virgin for help. I do not believe in such miracles, but I cannot explain the disappearance of the tumor and *it is driving me mad.*

A Muslim-Marxist sociologist at one of the national universities and I were discussing the Zeitoun phenomenon, and he stated that he was extremely disturbed by the fact that the apparition was “being witnessed” by highly literate, educated and cultured people, i.e., people whom he identified as an “intellectual elite,” and this was threatening his taken-for-granted world.

It would be more understandable if such a thing had occurred in Upper Egypt, where it is known that the peasants are great believers in supernatural phenomena like this—but physicians, scientists, professors—*these people are more rational!* They must have to compartmentalize their thinking, or else they are schizophrenic.

However, he mentioned that the only other phenomenon similar to what is occurring at Zeitoun is what sometimes happens in the cemeteries when people visit the tombs of the dead. He recalled once when he was a boy visiting his father’s village in Upper Egypt, going to the cemetery and seeing vapors that had a luminescent light coming up around the tombs. “At that time I was scared because I didn’t have an explanation.”

Curiously, this sociologist, like several other educated Egyptians who did not believe in the phenomenon, refused to go to Zeitoun to see for himself what was going on, perhaps not wishing to have his own rational, secular view of the world shaken even further. A prominent Coptic-Marxist literary critic of *Al Ahram* bemoaned the whole Zeitoun phenomenon as “a living myth debased by light” and stated ironically “that if God is sending us a sign that he is on our side I would much prefer that he would materialize as Athena leading the Arabs to victory.”

The most important issue to grasp here is that the apparition of the Virgin also symbolizes the conditions of modern pluralism in Egyptian society. By pluralism I mean a situation in which there is more than one worldview available to the members of society, a situation in which there is competition between worldviews.

How people cope with the stress of national disaster tells us much about what is essential to their identity, their cultural premises as to what is real; what their specific modes of interpreting events in history are; what sorts of societal tensions are intensified under threat of disaster. The Six-Day War did not create these reactions; it was a catalyst which exposed the pulsing nature of the society itself. For a people frustrated and made anxious by the contemporary circumstances of history, the Apparition of Zeitoun expresses the yearning for salvation from suffering, the hope of a millennial dream. Where people are seeking answers to fundamental questions they choose value systems and personalities that express their yearnings. And it seems to me that the appearance of the Virgin symbolizes the disillusionment with secular political explanations and a turning toward the religious—to a deeper level of existence in terms of which it all makes sense.