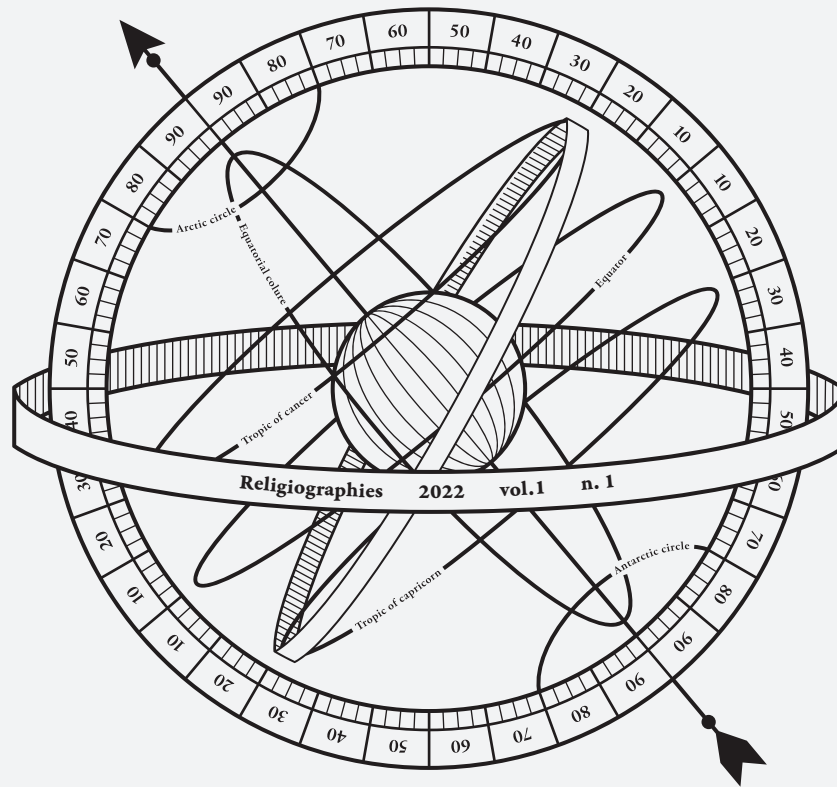


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# *Miracles and Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Lebanon: the Proof is in the Eyes of the Other*

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CENTRO STUDI  
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*Abstract*

On 21 August 2004, the small Maronite village of Beshwāt in the Beqaa plain of Lebanon was the site of a miracle of the Virgin Mary. In the weeks following the event, an interreligious and interconfessional pilgrimage, consisting of devout Christians (Maronites, Melkites, Greek Orthodox, and Armenians) and Muslims (Shiites and Sunnis), started coming to the site, with the press estimating that over one million pilgrims descended upon the tiny village from August 2004 to January 2006. This article discusses Virgin's essential indeterminacy and its impact on interreligious relations.

1

Emma Aubin-Boltanski, "Notre-Dame de Béhouate. Un 'objet-personne' au cœur d'un dispositif culturel," *L'Homme*, 203-204 (2012): 291-320; "Fondation d'un centre de pèlerinage au Liban. Notre-Dame de Béhouate," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 151 (2010): 149-168; "La Vierge, les chrétiens, les musulmans et la nation," *Terrain*, 51 (2008): 10-29.

2

This essay was initially presented in a seminar organized in 2007 by Jacques Cheyronnaud and Elisabeth Claverie, then published afterwards in French on the website of the Centre Norbert Elias (EHESS). As this electronic version of the article has now disappeared, I warmly thank the editors of this special issue for having agreed to publish a revised English version.

3

I take up the definition of the situational disposition proposed by Elisabeth Claverie and Albert Piette, which brings together enunciations and material objects; see Elisabeth Claverie, "Voir et apparaître," *Raisons pratiques* 2 (1991): 157-176, and Albert Piette, *Le fait religieux* (Paris: Economica, 2003), 38.

On 21 August 2004, the small Maronite village of Beshwāt in the Beqaa plain of Lebanon was the site of a miracle of the Virgin Mary. In the weeks following this miraculous event, an interreligious, interconfessional pilgrimage, consisting of devout Christians (Maronites, Melkites, Greek Orthodox, and Armenians) and Muslims (Shiites and Sunnis), started coming to the site, with the press estimating that over one million pilgrims descended upon the tiny village from August 2004 to January 2006. In August 2005, I started a long-term investigation in Beshwāt which led to several publications<sup>1</sup>. First in a series, this essay<sup>2</sup> aims to analyze the role of the Muslim witness in attesting to the veracity of apparitions and miracles of the Virgin Mary. It will show:

- A vertical relationship that was created and then recreated between the faithful and the invisible being known as the Virgin. On this point, the main issue is also to consider the local economies of the divine, given that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, with some nuanced differences between them, offer up a transcendent and distant deity; the issue of the accessibility of and contact with that deity is an important matter, and one that is often problematic for these faiths. At Beshwāt the situational apparatus allowing for the presence of the Virgin was characterized by a precarious and unstable equilibrium.<sup>3</sup> The Virgin's presence was at the center of an essential indeterminacy: hesitations and questions accompany the reciprocal encounter between the supernatural being (the Virgin) and ordinary individuals (Christian and Muslim believers) every step of the way. Because this apparatus is fragile and unstable, the faithful are continually led to critical reasonings and justifications. The "holding as true" that defines religious faith does not mean that the various actors fell prey to some kind of hallucinatory presence; instead, there was *constant* work on their part to

understand the event.<sup>4</sup>

- A horizontal link between the faithful of different religions, with particular attention to the specific Lebanese context where interreligious and interconfessional relations are extremely tense. During my two research trips, which occurred during the massive interreligious pilgrimage to Beshwāt, I discovered an exclusively Maronite village.<sup>5</sup> At certain times of the year, especially during the week from 15 to 21 August, Beshwāt opens some of its sites – the chapel, the market of devotional objects, and restaurants – to Christian and Muslim “foreigners.” In Lebanon, religious identity generates a strong pressure upon religious actors. Yet the individuals who came to Beshwāt as pilgrims did not fit into a series of specific and exclusive confessional identities. Their journeys responded to a number of different objectives, from the religious (addressing a prayer to the Virgin Mary and attending mass), to the political (celebrating national unity around the Virgin), to tourism (a family getaway, purchasing souvenirs from the Beqaa, listening to Maronite hymns). These individuals oscillated between the postures and identities of pilgrims, citizens, and tourists. As a result, the horizontal link that was formed in this emergent pilgrimage took on very different shades. The lack of fixed meaning to the pilgrimage and the relative flexibility in the motivations for the trip itself was a way to avoid conflicts and social disruption.

This essay focuses mainly on the impact on interreligious relations rather than on the political or touristic implications of the pilgrimage to Beshwāt.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, it aims to look at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical links that took shape in this Marian shrine by showing that in the apparitions of the Virgin Mary, the figure of the “Muslim” plays a central role by representing a reference point from which to create the presence of the figure of the invisible. In the process involved in miracles and Marian apparitions, the Other constitutes, in a way, a proof of “authenticity.”

#### *Beshwāt, a Maronite Village of the Beqaa Plain*

Beshwāt, located at an altitude of 1,200 meters on the western face of Mount Lebanon, dominates the Beqaa plain. Since 2003, the village has been administratively connected to the governorate (*muhāfaẓa*) of Baalbeck-Hermel, which corresponds to the northern part of the Beqaa. The incorporation of the Beqaa into Lebanon is a relatively recent event; it was only in 1920, when the Lebanese state was formed, that it was added to “Little Lebanon,” the area formed around Mount Lebanon in 1860-61. Before that, the Beqaa was governed by a number of interior Syrian cities, mainly Homs (for the northern part of the plain).<sup>7</sup> The Beqaa extends from north to south between two mountain chains that structure the country and form a shared border with Syria. Characterized by a relatively underdeveloped population density – it makes up 40% of the national territory but holds only 15% of the country’s population – the Beqaa is seen as a poor, rural and agricultural periphery neglected by the economic center. Yet the area is geopolitically strategic because of its closeness to Syria and the relatively unsecured border. As the “soft underbelly” of the Lebanese territory, the Beqaa is in the first line of attack for any Syrian power moves.<sup>8</sup> After the Syrian evacuation of Lebanon in April 2005, the Beqaa was used as an offensive rear base for Hezbollah.<sup>9</sup> Even if the vast majority of the Beqaa’s population consists of Shiites, the plain, like



Fig. 1. The village of Beshwāt in the Beqaa valley.

4

Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. 3: *Le temps raconté* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 271.

5

Maronites are the largest Christian community in Lebanon. They are Oriental Catholics; their Church recognizes the primacy of the Vatican.

6

On that issue, see also Aubin-Boltanski, “La Vierge, les chrétiens, les musulmans et la nation,” 10-29.

7

Karine Bennafla, “La Bekaa, une zone libanaise stratégique au voisinage de la Syrie,” in E. Picard and F. Mermier, ed., *Liban, une guerre de 33 jours* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007); and “La Bekaa (Liban): un espace géostratégique,” *Mappemonde* (2007).

8

Ibid.

9

Ibid.

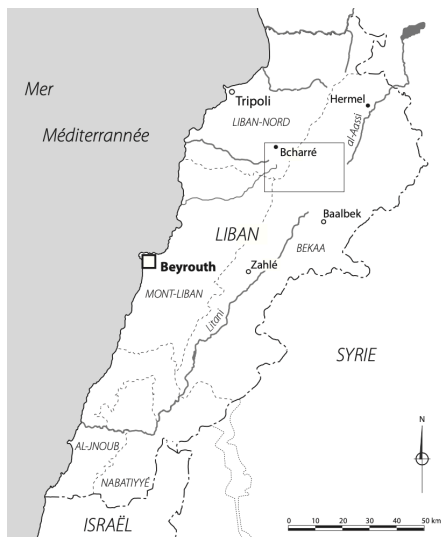


Fig. 2. Map of Lebanon.

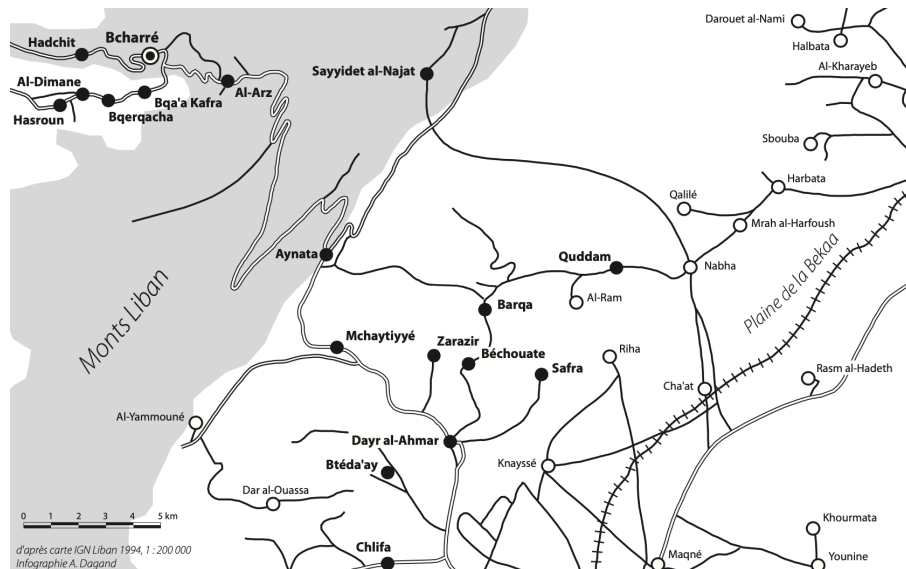


Fig. 3. Map of the Beqaa Plain, in *Terrain*, 51 (2008).

10

The Jacobites are also called Western Syrians. They are Monophysites who split from the Roman church by refusing the definition of the person and the two natures of Christ formulated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. They were organized as a separate church by Jacob Baradaeus in the sixth century.

11

Issam Farid Karam, *Tārikh sayyida Bichū'at mazāriḥa wa 'ajā'ibihā* [History of the Sanctuary and the Miracles of Our Lady of Beshwāt] (Beirut: n.p., 2006).

Lebanon, is a communitarian and confessional hodgepodge, containing Christians (Maronites, Greek Catholics and Armenians), Sunnis, Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

Beshwāt has around 250 inhabitants and is situated at the center of a cluster of around 14 exclusively Maronite villages. This Maronite area is called Dayr al-Ahmar, after the most important city and the seat of the Maronite bishopric in the region. At the outskirts of this Maronite pocket of around 20 square kilometers there are a few mixed villages (Maronite and Shiite), which have been largely deserted by their Christian population since the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990).

Beshwāt is inhabited by a single family: the Kayrouz. According to Issam Farid Karam, who has written a history of the region, the Kayrouz were originally from Ayn Halya in Syria. They first settled in Beshwāt at the end of the 18th century, after an “alliance” with the Shiite Emir of the region, Jahjah Harfush. At that time, the village was inhabited by Jacobite Christians, several Shiite families, and “an icon of the Virgin.”<sup>10</sup> The Kayrouz appropriated this image through violence in order to construct a church for “her” in 1790. Several years later, after a bloody massacre, the Kayrouz allegedly expelled the Jacobites and Shiites from the village.<sup>11</sup>

In this village, which is today exclusively Maronite, a distrust towards the “confessionally Other” dominates: “For us,” as the mayor of the village told me with a gesture of disdain, “Muslims, Shiites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, they are all the same.” He then added: “No stranger, even Maronite, can settle in the village. That is the rule here. They can live in Dayr al-Ahmar, but not here.” These words are especially significant since, for over ten years now, the pilgrimage to Beshwāt has developed significantly, representing an important financial boon that has mainly profited the Kayrouz in the village.

Furthermore, like many of the surrounding Maronite villages, Beshwāt is a stronghold of the Lebanese Forces (LF). The LF, which were first a Christian militia that played a major role throughout the long civil war, were founded in 1976 by Bashir Gemayel. After the Taif peace accords in 1989 they became a “political party” with a hardline attitude against the Syrian occupation. This position resulted in the arrest of the LF’s leader Samir Geagea in 1994 and the dissolution of the party by the Lebanese



Fig. 4. The old and the new churches.

government. During the civil war, the LF distinguished themselves from other militias by the extensive use of symbolic markers in the territories they controlled. These included not only numerous posters of their leaders but also inscriptions placed on homes and buildings of their two emblems: a cedar tree in a red circle symbolizing the blood of the martyrs, and a red cross in the shape of a sword.<sup>12</sup> During the eleven years that their leader was imprisoned these symbols were outlawed. After the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005, and Samir Geagea's release from prison in July, they began reappearing in pro-LF neighborhoods and villages. In Beshwāt, in the immediate aftermath of Samir Geagea's release, every house in the village had a poster of the LF leader and the young men proudly wore the LF's red cross around their necks.<sup>13</sup>

Beshwāt has two churches, an "old" one and a "new" one (Fig. 4). The former, which became a central site for the pilgrimage, is also called in Arabic *mazār* (literally, sanctuary or chapel); I will use the term "chapel" to refer to it. But let us begin with the "new" church, an imposing structure that was built in the 1990s. It is one of the many "church fortresses" that have been built (and, in many cases, continue to be built) since the 1980s in the Dayr al-Ahmar region. Since 2013, the "largest rosary in the world" has been under construction. It stretches over 625 meters, and its 59 beads can each accommodate two to three people. Those that correspond to the recitation of the Our Father will become confessionals<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 6, next page). Visible from a radius of several kilometers, these massive structures give a Catholic character to the surrounding landscape. With the exception of Dayr al-Ahmar and Aynata, two towns with around 2,000

12

Régina Sneifer-Perri, *Guerres maronites. 1975-1990* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), 141.

13

On that issue, see also Emma Aubin-Boltanski, "Samir Geagea : le guerrier, le martyr et le za'im," in *Leaders et partisans au Liban*, ed. Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin (Paris/Beirut: Karthala-IFPO-IISMM, 2012), 57-80.

14

Emma Aubin-Boltanski and Anna Poujeau, "Culte des saints, renouveau monastique et pratiques religieuses contemporaines," in *Les Chrétiens du Proche-Orient* (exhibition catalogue), (Paris: Gallimard IMA, 2017), 178-187.



Fig. 5. The church fortress of Safra.



Fig. 7. A shrine dedicated to Saint Charbel on the road leading to Beshwāt.



Fig. 6. The largest rosary in the world.



Fig. 8. An ex-voto at the entry to the village of Safra.

inhabitants each, the other villages of the region are sparsely populated, with anywhere from 100 to 150 inhabitants. Despite these small populations, every village has a “new” church, which is usually huge, on top of an “old,” usually much more modest, church (Fig. 5). Every locality also has a number of small glass shrines with statues of the saints or other devotional objects in them (Fig. 7). There are also, since the 2000s, gigantic ex-votos which take the shape of statues, usually located at the outskirts of the villages. These statues are financed by believers who wish to thank the saint represented for having fulfilled their wishes (Fig. 8). In the last few years, memorial monuments have appeared for young men who died prematurely, whether as martyrs or victims of accidents or disease. All of these religious symbols – churches, glass windows holding relics, ex-votos, memorials – provide a Catholic stamp to this Maronite stronghold otherwise situated in a largely Shiite area.

#### *The Chapel and the Statue of Our Lady of Beshwāt*

The new church is a devotional space exclusively attended by Christian worshippers where the Muslim faithful rarely enter (and when they do, it is usually by mistake). The church hosts masses and sacraments, which are especially numerous during the “months of the Virgin” in April and May. Outside of these services, its doors remain closed. It is thus towards the chapel, the “old” church, that the Christian and Muslim pilgrims go. Much smaller, without even a bell tower, the chapel dates from 1910. It was constructed on the ruins of the original 1790 church, which was destroyed in a fire in 1905. Unlike the new church, which is a strict devotional space where the faithful are meant to sit in tightly-bunched rows facing the altar, the chapel is a relatively sparse devotional space. On days with many visitors, the Sisters of the Maronite Order are present,

but only to oversee the movement of the people inside the chapel.

After walking in through a small door, one enters a nave that is about 10 meters long and five meters wide. To the immediate left are two trunks for donations and alms. On the wall, above a tiny alcove, is a painting of the Assumption of Mary. At the bottom of the nave, there are two statues of the Virgin on each side of the altar. On the right wall a piece of pink marble is placed in a basin. While all of these objects have their own level of importance and signification, with the faithful looking, touching, kissing, and caressing them, the pink marble stone and one of the two statues hold a special meaning. They play a central role in the apparatus that signals the presence of the Virgin Mary, constituting the two principal visual and tactile supports for the construction of that presence and in so doing helping to establish contact with her.

To begin with the statue of the Virgin: the altar is framed by two “Virgins,” the *sayyidet Lūrde*, Our Lady of Lourdes, and, on the other side, the *sayyidet Beshwāt*, Our Lady of Beshwāt (Fig. 9). If there are numerous examples of the statue of Lourdes in the Middle East, there are very few of Our Lady of Beshwāt, which is a representation of an apparition of the Virgin in 1871 in the small French village of Pontmain (Mayenne department).<sup>15</sup> The apparition at Pontmain concluded a series of so-called attested or verified apparitions.<sup>16</sup> It took place in a specific political context, with the invading Prussian army at the doors of Laval, ready to enter Brittany. The Virgin appeared in front of five children with a message of hope several days before the armistice and the withdrawal of the Prussian army, which has led to it being interpreted in political and nationalistic terms: the mother of Jesus had protected France and repelled the Germans. The Virgin of Pontmain has some distinctive traits: appearing as an “animated icon,” she is dressed in a long night-blue tunic ornamented with star constellations, her head covered with a dark veil and a golden crown.<sup>17</sup> In her hands she holds a bloody crucifix. Her eyes are fixed to the ground; her facial expression is severe. This is a far cry from the classical Western iconography of the Virgin, and the contrast with the well-mannered Virgin of Lourdes is striking. The Byzantine aspect of this particular Virgin requires further exploration.

How this statue made its way into Lebanon remains a mystery. Several competing explanations have been offered. In an interview, the mayor of Beshwāt claimed that after the chapel fire in 1905 a French ambassador had it transported to the village because “he wanted to thank the Virgin for having cured his sick daughter.” According to a former parish priest, Fadi Bassil, the villagers wanted a “French statue” to decorate their church. They passed on their request to a Jesuit priest who sent on a copy of Our Lady of Pontmain. A third explanation claims that an immigrant to the village who had lived for many years in South Africa brought the statue to the village.<sup>18</sup> Since the publication in 2006 of a book on the history of the sanctuary of Beshwāt an official version has prevailed: a Jesuit priest, Father Goudard, who had written a book on the Virgin in Lebanon,<sup>19</sup> was “so impressed” by the beauty of the village and its inhabitants that he gave them the statue as a gift.<sup>20</sup>

In Lebanon today, this statue has come to “personify” Our Lady of Beshwāt. I use the term “personify” because it is common to hear the believers employ the term *al-shakhs*, a polysemic term which in Arabic designates an individual, a person, and a stone statue.<sup>21</sup> The statue can, in fact, be called an “object-person”: the product of an operation to make it



Fig. 9. The statue of Our Lady of Beshwāt.

15

To my knowledge, there are only two such statues in the Middle East; the other is at the Church of Saint Anne in Jerusalem.

16

She followed the apparitions in Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1858). On the invention of the verified apparition, see Joachim Boufflet and Philippe Boutry, *Un signe dans le Ciel: Les apparitions de la Vierge* (Paris: Grasset, 1997), 127-163.

17

Ibid., 159.

18

This final story is not as fantastic as it seems; the cult of Our Lady of Pontmain was spread by the congregation of Oblates of Mary in South Africa starting in the late 19th century.

19

Joseph Goudard, *La sainte Vierge au Liban* (Beirut: Dār al-Machrek, 1993 [1908]).

20

Issam Farid Karam, *Tārikh sayyida Beshwāt mazārāha wa 'aja'ibāha*, p. 9.

21

Kazimirski (1860): “dark object seen from far away. Person, individual”; Dozy (1927): “medal, piece of metal created in honor of someone, an absent person. Role, character, what an actor must play. Representation of an object, figure, statue”; Mounjed (1986): “the darkness of an individual (or another) visible from far away. Also could mean the individual. In contemporary usage: a statue made of stone or another material”; Hans Weir (1980): “individual, person, character (in a play), image of someone.”

Emma Aubin-Boltanski, "Notre-Dame de Béchouate. Un 'objet-personne' au cœur d'un dispositif culturel," 291-320.

On the principle of individuation over the production of "god-things," see Jean Bazin, "Retour aux choses-dieux," in *Corps des dieux*, ed. C. Malamoud and J.P. Vernant (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 351-381.

I take up the analysis here from Albert Piette on the wafer; see *La religion de près: L'activité religieuse en train de se faire* (Paris: Métailié, 1999), 253-255.

particular, it is itself unsubstitutable and unique.<sup>22</sup> At first the statue was a simple object, a copy of the Virgin of Pontmain, but then a process of individualization transformed it into a singular "thing," Our Lady of Beshwāt.<sup>23</sup> It has a *name*, Beshwāt, to distinguish it from other statues of the Virgin of Pontmain. A *signature*, that of sculptor Pierre Machard, is engraved on the underside of its base. Loaded with history, a number of *dates* are attached to the statue: 1871, 1976 (apparition in the skies of Dayr Ahmar at the start of the Lebanese civil war), and 2004. The statue is not a raw, inanimate, unchanging material object. It undergoes the effects of the erosion of time and is constantly being remodeled by the action of the faithful. The dress has become lighter, pieces of stone fall out ("Her dress needs to be fixed on a regular basis," a church official in charge of the sanctuary told me), and her crucifix seems to change frequently in size and shape (red at first, it has been replaced by a series of crosses in light wood). The statue breathes, moves, expresses itself.

These attributes of being animated, of being a person, do not take away the statue's status as an object. The representatives of the Church regularly remind the faithful that it is "only" a stone statue. To return it to its status as a simple object, an image of an image, the parish priest placed a glass in front of the statue in July 2006 so that believers and pilgrims could no longer touch or kiss it. The statue could thus only be seen from a distance. As an "object-person," the statue is a locus of tension between the affirmation of a presence ("it is the Virgin") and its negation ("it is not that," "it is only an object"). The faithful oscillate between these opposing views. No extreme position is taken up: the Virgin is neither literally absent nor completely present. This indeterminacy and the constant movement of hesitation the statue arouses in the faithful play an essential role in creating the space for the Virgin's presence.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Virgin Mary in Islam*

In the chapel Christian and Muslim believers are found side by side. They walk together and touch and kiss the same objects. A single ritual gesture – the sign of the cross made upon entering and exiting the chapel – differentiates the Christians and the Muslims. Muslims do not make the sign of the cross, but they do sometimes dip both hands in the holy water before dabbing their faces. These gestures are not ostentatious and are quickly made. It sometimes happens that a Muslim might ask to be given enough space for the ritual prayer that consists of two bows in the direction of Mecca and two others in the direction of the statue, but that is a rare event. More generally, with the exception of the veil of some Muslim females, it is rather difficult to determine who among the pilgrims are Muslim and who among them are Christian.

"The Virgin is for everyone," a Shiite woman from Baalbek tells me as justification for her trip to Beshwāt. The expression *al-'adra' la-l-ku'll* is frequently heard in Lebanon to explain the devotion of both Christians and Muslims to the Virgin. Who is the Virgin for Muslims, though? Without claiming to exhaust the subject, it should be noted that the Qur'ān and the hadiths reserve an exceptionally prominent place to Mary (*Maryam* in Arabic).<sup>25</sup> In the Qur'ān, which devotes an entire surah to her (19), she is exalted "above all women in the world" (3:42). Mary is considered to be a sign of God, announcing Muhammad's future divine mission to mankind. When God invites the chosen ones to enter Paradise, it is Mary who will be the first one to go inside. She, along with her son, was the only person

A thorough study on the Virgin in Islam can be found in Michel Dousse, *Marie la musulmane* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005).

spared any contact with Satan (*shaytān*) from her birth, and Muhammad vouches for her perfection. While the Virgin is generally considered by most Qur'ānic interpreters a *siddīqa*, a truthful one (the *siddiqīyya* constitute the most elevated form of sainthood), theologians like Ibn Hazm or Al-Qurtubi go even further and call her a prophet. The Virgin thus constitutes the ultimate model of saintliness for females.<sup>26</sup>

Mary holds a particularly important role in the Shiite tradition. The devotion to her in this branch of Islam is reinforced by the devotion to Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet, wife of Ali and mother of Husayn and Hasan. Fatimah shares a number of qualities with the Virgin, making her in a way a double of her. According to a hadith, the mother of Jesus aided the Prophet's wife Khadija in giving birth and transmitted her charisma to the new-born child.<sup>27</sup> In Shiite hagiography, Fatimah is, like the Virgin, "above all the other females in the world."<sup>28</sup> Despite her children, she has conserved her virginity. This leads Shiites to call her *al-batul* (the virgin), and she is even sometimes called *umm 'abihā* (mother of her father).<sup>29</sup>

It is also important, when discussing the Virgin Mary in Islam, to consider the particular status of objects and images representing her. Islam is often presented as a visually neutered or even iconophobic religion.<sup>30</sup> In mosques, for instance, images are often rejected in favor of abstract designs like arabesques or calligraphy: the word is always preferred over the image, and abstraction over figurative representation.<sup>31</sup> Yet when it comes to the representation of saints and prophets, scholarly work has shown that Islam has adopted contrasting positions in different historical periods, in different geographic spaces, and with regard to various traditions.<sup>32</sup> To take up Jack Goody's phrase, Islam contains "cognitive contradictions" when it comes to representations, rather than a definitive, single attitude that is unquestioningly transmitted from one generation to the next.<sup>33</sup> This ambivalence towards representation is even more pronounced when considering that the Qur'ān lacks a genuine theology of the image.<sup>34</sup> The Qur'ān only proscribes the adoration of pagan idols and the production of images in three dimensions that "create shadows" (which are seen as failed attempts to imitate God's power of creation). It was only in the ninth century, with the composition of the hadiths, that all forms of figurative representation, whether of statues or two-dimensional objects, were banned. Even within this case, though, striking contradictions appear when it comes to painted images of the Virgin. A famous hadith reports that while Muhammad ordered the destruction of the idols of the Kaaba, he refused to allow anyone to touch an icon of the Virgin and Child, protecting it with his own hands.<sup>35</sup>

The history of the diffusion of images of Christian saints in the Middle East shows the ambivalent and contradictory attitude of Islam towards figurative representation. Bernard Heyberger has argued that the few icons and the sometimes complete absence of religious images in Christian sanctuaries in the region before the 17th century can be explained by the "hatred and incomprehension of Muslims towards them."<sup>36</sup> Yet, starting in the 17th century, Catholic missionaries began to import statues and images of the saints into the region, and these diverse representations came to be adopted not only by the region's Christians but also by Muslims, who asked the missionaries for these images so as to make amulets. The portraits of Mary gained great popularity in the area.<sup>37</sup> The cult devoted to images of Jesus's mother remains important even now,

26

Michel Chodkiewicz, "La sainteté féminine dans l'hagiographie islamique," in *Saints orientaux*, ed. D. Aigle (Paris: De Boccard, 1995), 99-115.

27

Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fatima in Qur'ānic exegesis," *Islamochristiana* 17 (1981): 19-28.

28

*Ibid.*

29

Louis Massignon, "La mubālaha de Médine et l'hyperdulie de Fatima," *Opera Minora*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Maaref, 1963). In the same volume see also "La notion du vœu et la dévotion musulmane à Fâtima."

30

On Islam as an "iconophobic" religion, rejecting representations of the human figure, see Valérie Gonzalez, "Réflexions esthétiques sur l'approche de l'image dans l'art islamique," in *L'image dans le monde arabe*, ed. G. Beaugé and J.F. Clément (Paris: CNRS éditions, 1995), 69-78.

31

Jean-François Clément, "L'image dans le monde arabe: interdit et possibilités," in *L'image dans le monde arabe*, ed. G. Beaugé G. and J.F. Clément (Paris: CNRS éditions, 1995), 11-42.

32

*Ibid.*

33

Jack Goody, *Representations and Contradictions: Ambivalence towards Images, Theatre, Fiction, Relics and Sexuality* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997).

34

Clément, "L'image dans le monde arabe."

35

Ernst Diez, *L'art de l'Islam* (Paris: Payot, 1966); Clément, "L'image dans le monde arabe."

36

Bernard Heyberger, "Entre Byzance et Rome: l'image et le sacré au Proche-Orient au XVIIe siècle," *Histoire, économie et société*, 8-4 (1989): 527-550, at 532.

37

*Ibid.*

although it continues to be at the center of a fraught, unresolved debate over images in Islam. Throughout churches in the Middle East, it is not uncommon to see the Muslim faithful make the ritual prayer facing a painting of the Assumption or the Immaculate Conception. When a statue is transported in a procession, the Muslim faithful will join the crowd of Christians. In numerous households, especially in Shiite ones, images of Maryam can be found. She is often depicted in a pictorial vocabulary that is strikingly Catholic: statuettes of the Sulpician Virgin decorate living rooms, framed by engravings where golden letters on a black background inscribe the names of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. Mary's presence is normally more understated – tiny vignettes in a purse, often given by a husband or brother. Nevertheless, the veneration towards representations of the Virgin can sometimes lead to violent execration and rejection, as a Shiite inhabitant of Beirut, Fatimah, told me:

I have an image of the Virgin with me. She is here, I talk to her. She reassures me. I was infertile, but thanks to her I had three boys. My brother Mahmoud saw the image one day. He tore it up. He said that we do not need an image. He launched insults. Of course, he is right, it is only an image, but, still (...) I don't know. It is the Lord who knows best. Now, I have another image.

The attitude of the Muslim believer with regard to objects manifesting the presence of the Virgin is thus situated in an *in-betweenness*: neither complete acceptance nor total rejection.<sup>38</sup>

*The Proof of the Miracle is in the Eye of the Other*

To now look at the interconfessional link created around the Virgin through the pilgrimage to Beshwāt, I will examine the discourse of Maronites about Muslims, those “Others,” who, as I noted earlier, play an important role in staging the presence of the Virgin (apparitions, miracles). My argument will stem from the description of the following two scenes:

*Scene 1.* Saturday, 7 April 2007, Beshwāt. I have just arrived. My bags dropped off, I go to the home of Therese and Umm Charbel. Therese starts to question me:

Did you pay a visit to the person [*al-shakhs*]? Do you know that there was a new miracle two weeks ago? A four-year-old boy was healed. He was born unable to walk. His mother is from here. She asked for the Virgin's aid. The Virgin had appeared in a dream, and the next day the mother went to the chapel with her son. The boy who had never taken a step suddenly got up on his legs and started running.

Umm Charbel shrugs her shoulders: “There's nothing special about this. We are used to these sorts of things here!” Therese continues:

Have you gone to see her, in France, at Pontmain? I have seen photos. Her face is more beautiful here. It's like she wants to talk like a real person. Her face changes, it is round, it's like she's

smiling. And sometimes her face scrunches up like this (*Therese grimaces, pulling in her cheeks*). Is that possible? Can her face change when it is just a statue? Doesn't that mean that she is here? On Fridays her face often gets sadder. The people who go into the chapel for a quick visit don't see anything, of course. But I see the changes. I've spoken to the priest and showed him, but he doesn't see anything. He told me that I have a "small brain" (*she shrugs her shoulders*). But others have seen the same thing. Even the Muslims have seen things.

*Scene 2.* Later that afternoon, I meet up with Fadi Bassil, a Lazarist who lived in the village for nine years and who, at the time of the apparition in 2004, was the parish priest. He played a central role in organizing the pilgrimage from the start, but then was removed by the Maronite Church. We chat about this and that. I ask him about the most recent miracle. He makes a face: "Yes, I know. I know the mother, she is from here, from the village. She is very devoted in her faith. Poor thing, her two sons are handicapped. But there are no medical certificates." I ask him what he thinks about miraculous healings. He is visibly upset by my question. He leans forward, elbows on his knees, moves his hands from left to right: "We have to be careful, we cannot believe everything. But, of course, when two Shiites come and tell you what has happened to them, it's different, you tell yourself that something must have happened." Then, Fadi Bassil tells me about two Shiites living in the area who were miraculously healed:

There was a man from Baalbek watching a report on Our Lady of Beshwât on TV. For a few weeks his legs were so swollen that he couldn't walk. He spoke to the Virgin on the TV, telling her: "Do something for me!" Then he heard a voice telling him to get up and walk. He got up and walked normally. He called out to his wife and told her to bring him a Qur'ân. He opened the Book at random and landed on the surah about Maryam. There was also this neighbor, this man whose child was sick. He went to the doctor but didn't have money for medicines. He threw away the prescription and came here, to Our Lady of Beshwât. His son got better. We recorded their testimonies on a DVD.

I asked him why, without a more thorough investigation, he accepts these two stories as "authentic miracles," and he responded: "Because normally the Muslims don't believe in this stuff. There are no miracles in their religion. They are much more rational, you see."

The DVD with these two testimonies of miraculous healing was available for purchase at the village's market of devotional objects. These stories also appeared on the Maronite religious channel Télé-Lumière. What is most striking in Father Fadi Bassil's discourse is the suspicion of the story that a Maronite child from the village was miraculously healed and reluctance to believe it, compared to his seemingly unquestioning acceptance of the miracles happening to Muslims. To better understand the role of "proof" that is given to the "Muslim," I would like to come back to the initial miracle of August 2004 that provoked a massive surge of pilgrims to Beshwât.

The main actor of the miracle of August 2004, Muhammad al-Hawadi, is a Sunni Muslim originally from Jordan. He was 10 years old at the

time. Al-Hawadi is thus doubly “Other”: Jordanian and Sunni. In August 2004 he was taking a tourist trip to Lebanon with his father, a high-ranking Jordanian civil servant. With their Maronite friend, François Saab, who acted as a guide, on 21st August the group went to the Cedar region, a very popular tourist attraction. On the way, “by chance,” they stopped at Beshwāt. The child and François Saab entered the chapel for a “sightseeing” visit. While he was looking at the statue of Our Lady of Beshwāt, the child asked the family friend “who this woman who was smiling at him was.” The adult explained that it was a statue that “did not move, did not smile.” But the child, to the surprise of his companion and an inhabitant of the village who happened to be in the chapel at the time, began to let out a long prayer that the Lebanese Christian press described as “greater than him.” The prayer was “greater than him” because it was seen as having a very strong Christian connotation: “Greetings, Virgin Mary, Queen of the world, of peace and love. The elderly, children and women fall in the world. Bring peace, love, and liberty to the earth, oh Queen of the world.” Surprised by the child’s behavior, the two adults approached the statue and observed that she was breathing. They also perceived that the rosary between the statue’s arms was moving. They noticed that the statue seemed to make the sign of the cross with her eyes. Later, the statue exuded oil. News of the miracle spread quickly through the region, and the next day a good number of Christian and Muslim pilgrims came to the chapel. The day following, the miraculous healing of an infirm man set off an even greater influx of pilgrims.

The events were immediately questioned, especially by the Maronite religious authorities, who to this day refuse to officially investigate what transpired. Some priests and even a bishop became personally interested in the case, but the Church hierarchy prevented them from going further. If the official Church wishes to cover up or bury the event, certain political entrepreneurs – from state organs, the media, and political parties – have contributed to the success of the pilgrimage by interpreting the miracle as the Virgin calling for unity among the Lebanese.<sup>39</sup> This political, nationalistic reading has a double meaning given what Lebanon went through in 2005 with the assassination of ex-prime minister Rafic Hariri and the Syrian army’s withdrawal from the country after three decades of occupation.

In the Lebanese Christian media, such as the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI), Télé-Lumière, and the French-language daily *L'Orient-Le Jour*, the Muslim child was the object of special attention. He became “Muhammad, the young Jordanian seer.” In the numerous articles or reports on him, his “Muslim” identity was always foregrounded. It was stated that he comes from a “pious family that is devoted to the Qur’ān” and that his mother covers herself.<sup>40</sup> On 21 August 2005, a ceremony was organized at Beshwāt by the Maronite bishop of the region to celebrate the first anniversary of the miracle. Muhammad al-Hawadi and his father were the special guests of honor. The bishop spoke for a long time on Muhammad’s religious faith, on how he faithfully attended a Qur’ānic school in Amman, and on his hailing from Jordan. The bishop also added that Muhammad was “a good student at school.” The religious identity of the young witness to the miracle in August 2004 thus played the role of a proof of the authenticity of the miracle.

A book on Our Lady of Beshwāt published two years after the 2004 apparition by Issam Fadi Karam, a historian of the region, made me

understand that this phenomenon is neither circumstantial nor unique.<sup>41</sup> At the start of the 20th century, the miracles of Our Lady of Beshwāt that were judged to be true, and thus worthy of being written down, systematically highlighted Muslim witnesses. Karam devotes an entire chapter to the first three miracles of Our Lady of Beshwāt, which were also detailed by Father Goudard in his *La Sainte Vierge au Liban* (1908).<sup>42</sup> These narratives, in each instance, give a leading role to a Shiite Muslim. The first miracle concerns the *mahdaleh*, the pink marble stone that the Christian and Muslim believers kiss, touch, and sometimes pass over the sick parts of their bodies. This stone has attracted an intense devotion that the Church has found embarrassing. In August 2005, Father Fadi Bassil had the basin in which it is placed surrounded by a metal barrier. As he puts it, this was done to prevent it being stolen. A woman from the village gave me a different reason for the barrier: “The women who cannot have children, you see, take the *mahdaleh* and rub it over their stomachs. He is a priest; he does not want to see women doing this in a church.” This testifies to the difficulty faced by priests in controlling practices judged to be idolatrous. When I came back in April 2007, the metal barrier had disappeared and the faithful could manipulate the stone as they wished. Even if Fadi Bassil condemns the ritual of the *mahdaleh*, he happily speaks of the miracle surrounding it. Here is the version reported by Father Joseph Goudard and taken up by Issam Fadi Karam:

We were shown in the church, before the Holy Table, a piece of pink granite that everyone devoutly kissed. It is from the debris of the ruins of the old vault, said one of the priests, and our predecessors had it encased in the wall of the first church. (...) The Metouali Emir Amin Harfush had a seraglio built in Nebk [Syria]. One day, he needed a column. A mason told him: there is a beautiful one in the church of the *Saïde* [Our Lady] in Beshwāt. The next day some men and a camel were sent to take the column. It broke our heart. What could we do against the emir? The column was taken, loaded on the camel, and the Metoualis went off, laughing. They spent the night in a village in the plain. But when they woke up, they couldn’t find the column. They came back, furious, saying that the people of Beshwāt had stolen it from them. They entered the church and saw that the column was back to where it was the day before, but without any sign that it had been moved or taken out, as if no one had touched it. They got scared and left. The emir called them cowards and sent a second group of men who tried to show how courageous they were by singing and acting tough. They put down their belts and their *keffieh* on the altar and began to dislodge the column. But then the *keffieh* and the belts caught on fire and burned up. The Metaoulis were scared and ran out of the church. How awful, they cried out. We have desecrated a *naqf* [a pious foundation]! The emir was also scared. Not only did he leave the column, but in order to appease the Christian *Saïde* whose vengeance he feared, he swore that neither he nor anyone from his family would pass the church without making an offering of reparations.<sup>43</sup>

This narrative puts forward the complexity of the interreligious ties

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Issam Fadi Karam had also published *Tarih dair al-ahmar* [The History of Dayr al-Ahmar] (Zuk Michael: n.p., 1980).

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Goudard, *La sainte Vierge au Liban*.

43

Goudard, *La sainte Vierge au Liban*, 246.

around the Virgin. The "Shiite Muslim" is designated by the pejorative term "Metouali." If he plays the seemingly positive role of "caution" and "proof" in attesting to the miracle, the Muslim is also the violent heretic who threatens the Virgin but who finds himself ultimately defeated by her. Issam Farid Karam takes up, word for word, Father Goudard's account, which was originally presented as a simple anecdote, and historicizes it by adding dates. He also makes it more dramatic by presenting the Emir as a bloodthirsty individual without any respect for the Christian religion and making the inhabitants of the village into simple frightened "goatherds."<sup>44</sup>

To conclude, I would like to widen the scope of this study by turning to Egypt, where Marian apparitions are frequent occurrences in the Christian Coptic community. One of these apparitions, from 1968, led to huge crowds and was analyzed in depth in a chapter of Brigitte Voile's *Les coptes d'Egypte sous Nasser* [The Egyptian Copts under Nasser]. The Virgin appeared in Zeitoun, a new suburb of Cairo, under the dome of a Coptic church.<sup>45</sup> The first three witnesses were Muslim employees of the public transport company abutting the church. Voile notes that Copts often use Muslim figures to attest to the veracity of a miracle of a Christian saint, "the ultimate proof of its powers."<sup>46</sup> In Egypt, as in Lebanon, then, the Muslim is a privileged figure in attesting to the veracity of apparitions and miracles. The figure of the "religiously Other" in the Middle East thus plays the same role in attesting Marian apparitions as the "innocent" (the child or uneducated woman) had done in Europe from the 16th to the 19th centuries.<sup>47</sup>

A comparison can be made between the miracle that "deflates" and remains confined to a local space without provoking a mass pilgrimage (like the miraculous healing of the child of Beshwāt in April 2007) and the miracle of August 2004 which became a prominent national matter. These two cases put forward very different witnesses:

- In the first case, the principal witness was a woman from the village – a local insider. Because she is from the village, she and her family could be suspected of having a certain interest in the affair. On top of that, she is a Maronite and someone with a "strong faith," as Father Fadi Bassil puts it. In this context, being a strong believer is paradoxically a negative judgment from the ecclesiastical leader, synonymous with subjectivity and irrationality. And by speaking of the "poor woman [whose] two children are handicapped," Fadi Bassil moves the case to the arena of the individual and psychological.

- In the second case, the principal witness, Muhammad, is in a way an impartial spectator, doubly "Other" as a Sunni Muslim and Jordanian. It would be impossible to be further away from the local, and thus he represents a figure of complete detachment.<sup>48</sup> By underlining the fact that he is a good Muslim and good student, that he *a priori* is "someone who does not believe in miracles," the witness's rationality and objectivity are highlighted. The Muslim thus occupies the structural place of the good witness in the Maronite staging of the presence of the Virgin (and also for the Copts in Egypt). This is because the Muslim brings together, *a priori* and without the need for any further inquiry, the necessary characteristics of detachment, disinterest, independence, and objectivity.