

Mary among the Egyptians

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [December 23, 2015](#) issue



An icon of Mary given by Egypt to Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, Israel, hangs in a gallery alongside other Marian devotions from different nations. Thinkstock.

In many Catholic and Orthodox countries, the most visible face of faith is commonly the Virgin Mary (think of Mexico's ubiquitous Virgin of Guadalupe). Surprisingly—and counterintuitively—Mary is scarcely less venerated in Egypt, an overwhelmingly Muslim country. Unless we pay attention to Mary, we miss large portions of the religious faith and practice of the most populous Arab nation. That fact complicates many assumptions about the inevitable hostility between Christianity and Islam.

Egypt's Christian population is variously estimated at between 5 and 10 percent, anywhere from 5 to 9 million individuals, and most are members of the ancient Coptic Church. These believers have often suffered from violence and persecution, most

notoriously during the upsurge of violence that followed the military overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in 2013. Many churches were attacked, and the continuing insurgency in the country raises grave fears about future pogroms.

Despite that uncertainty, Egypt's Christians still thrive and maintain their ancient churches and shrines. Almost certainly, historic Christian devotion to the Virgin Mary began in Egypt, which is home to countless churches dedicated to her and icons celebrating her. Egyptians point proudly to many sites that the Holy Family reputedly visited during Jesus' childhood, some of which are major centers for pilgrimage and religious tourism. The Orthodox Christmas Day (January 7) is a national public holiday, on a par with the familiar roster of Islamic celebrations.

Much as in ancient Christian times, Coptic believers still report Marian apparitions, with spectacular manifestations recorded every decade or so. The most famous incident occurred at a Marian church in the Cairo district of Zeitoun between 1968 and 1971. This affair drew millions of pilgrims and onlookers, and the story still resonates today.

In 2000, Mary reportedly appeared again in Assiut, at Deir al-Muharraq, one of the world's oldest surviving monasteries. (Tragically, this church was one of the many attacked in 2013.) At Giza in 2009, hundreds of thousands gathered to view the appearance of Our Lady of Warraq.

Such visions demonstrate the continuing power of traditional beliefs among the Christian minority, but they also display the interest of faithful Muslims. The Zeitoun apparitions were a national sensation and were witnessed by the nation's leader at the time, Gamal Abdel Nasser. The fervor can be understood in the context of the catastrophic national mood that followed the nation's defeat by Israel in 1967, at a time when Egyptians were desperately seeking signs of hope. But Muslims have participated fully in celebrating Marian manifestations, many of which actually began with reports from Muslim believers and then were taken up by their Christian neighbors.

Mary is a major figure in Muslim tradition and piety. She actually receives much more attention in the Qur'an than she does in the Christian Bible. Throughout Islamic history, she has been a focus of popular devotion, and women invoke her as a mother figure in a way that is highly reminiscent of Mary's role in Catholic Christianity. Muslim women are likely to plead with Mary to help them bear a child or

to offer healing.

Whatever the stance of official Islamic authorities, the belief in intercession is widespread among Egypt's Muslims. Not surprisingly, then, stories of Marian visitations exercise a very wide appeal and can lead Muslims to visit Christian shrines. Whether seen by Christians or Muslims, Lady Mary (*Sitana Mariam*) is one and the same, making her a common adornment for both faiths. The fact that she has so often left her mark on the Egyptian landscape makes her a patriotic treasure. In the words of the national newspaper *al-Ahram*, "all Egyptians, both Muslims and Christians, have exceptional love and respect for the Virgin Mary."

The great Marian event of the year is the Feast of the Assumption in August, which is preceded by three weeks of strict fasting. Traditionally, Egyptian Muslims extend good wishes to their Christian neighbors during that holy time, and even share in the fasts and feasts. Over the last couple of years, such general expressions of good will have become noticeably more common, largely as a reaction against the intolerance associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and the crisis of 2013. The post-coup government is determined to work closely with Christians, making Mary a priceless symbol of national unity.

As journalist Dina Ezzat reports in *al-Ahram*, the mass media noted the Feast of the Assumption in 2015 significantly more than in previous years. Their only hesitation was in publicly showing examples of the Marian tradition in Coptic art. These glorious works are well known, but discretion made it unwise to show visual images of any holy figures, Islamic or Christian. With that limitation, though, praise for Mary was unrestrained, and seemingly uncontroversial. Today more than ever, Mary is almost as much a symbol of Egypt's religion as she is of any Catholic country.