

PART THREE

INDETERMINATE SAINTHOOD

OUR LADY OF SOUFANIEH: ON KNOWLEDGE, IGNORANCE AND INDIFFERENCE AMONG THE CHRISTIANS OF DAMASCUS

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Introduction

In this chapter, I reflect on the nature of evidence as it is negotiated among the Christians of Damascus regarding the contemporary Christian stigmatic and visionary Myrna Akhras. In late November 1982, Myrna started to receive apparitions of the Virgin Mary, and both her body as well as an icon in her home began to exude oil. In the years that have followed, Myrna has on several occasions had stigmata, the six wounds of the crucified Christ, marking her body. Furthermore, on numerous occasions she has received messages from either Christ himself or Mary (Zahlawi 2008; see also Arjakovsky 2010; Khoury 2005; Ravaz 2009). Myrna soon attracted a huge gathering. Devout Christians, curious Christians, alongside Muslims and Druzes poured to her home, which was eventually made into a shrine. The phenomenon was soon named after Soufanieh—the Christian quarter in Damascus where Myrna and her husband live. The phenomenon of Our Lady of Soufanieh drew a variety of reactions from the very onset of the events. A great number of people were highly skeptical, doubting the veracity of all narrations of the miraculous surrounding Soufanieh. Yet others were indifferent, or tried to remain so by not frequenting the home turned shrine. Our Lady of Soufanieh and Myrna also attracted a more pious following, which terms itself the family of Soufanieh and which comes to daily prayers, weekly services and novenas in the home, seeing this as God's divine plan for the redemption of mankind in and through Damascus.

In this chapter, I argue that the often found lack of attention from local society towards seemingly miraculous events necessitates different

¹ I want to express my gratitude for productive readings of previous versions of this paper by Tom Boylston, Matthew Engelke, Alice Forbess, Willy Jansen, and Joel Robbins. Also I want to thank the participants in the research project *Alternative Spaces* for comments at a research seminar at the Danish Institute in Damascus.

strategies to make what the extended family of Soufanieh experience as the gift of God visible and audible. I examine this as a cross-field of indifference and knowledge, where mixed motivations exist in the relationship with Soufanieh in that most Christians know of the place and Myrna but only few frequent it regularly. For some, this scant frequenting, if at all, reflects an enmity in which Soufanieh and Myrna are suspected to be a source of evil but, for most, a lack of attention or even outright indifference is the most typical attitude. Here, I focus on the explanations and justifications both inside and outside of Soufanieh's extended family for sustaining or suspending relationships with the divine. Instead of separating Damascus into a multiplicity of fields, such as that of many denominations, families and areas, I contend that the ideas of unity that Myrna propagates animate general concerns and must subsequently be treated as a single field rather than a diversity of fields (cf. Hage 2005). The local negotiations over Myrna's person lead us to a discussion of Christian claims to sainthood and saintliness and the inherent fragility of such claims.

The French radical phenomenologist and Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion has perceptively reflected on a number of these themes and he establishes a basic paradox as follows (2009: 705): "The holiness of anyone remains for us (*quo ad nos*) undecidable; the saint consequently remains for us formally invisible. The question of the saint's holiness paradoxically begins to be raised from this invisibility." The basic conundrum, then, according to Jean-Luc Marion, is that a saint can never say that he or she is a saint for, in the very act of so doing, the transfer of attention would be severed and any claim to sainthood would then, as it were, be rendered fraudulent. Holiness, on the other hand, must be performed or attested to by the believer, in the act of imitating Christ or the life of venerable saints. Bearing witness, in this sense, is the difficult but not insurmountable task bestowed upon the followers of Soufanieh. The critical category of evidence is hereby opened, in that various Christians negotiate the status of the events. In this chapter, I therefore explore the nature of evidence as it relates to forms of knowledge, and this involves the opposite equally as much, namely indifference and ignorance. I shall start by describing a heated discussion on Soufanieh that took place among a Greek Orthodox family at some length. From this, I go on to consider other responses from perspectives that are both supportive and suspensive of Soufanieh.

*New Year's Eve with Tony and Hanan—Negotiating
Sainthood and Saintliness*

I got to know Tony in 2005.² He is a devout Christian and a highly intelligent engineer. He is now working for an American company in the Gulf and often visits his in-laws in Damascus. His wife Hanan is also a devout Christian and works as a lawyer in a prestigious company in al-Malki, one of the most prestigious areas of Damascus. One evening, Tony and Hanan saw the three-volume book *aṣ-Ṣūfāniyya khilāl khamsatin wa 'ashrīn 'āmān, 1982–2007*, a 1,500-page tome on the first 25 years of Soufanieh by the cherished Catholic pastor and proponent of Our Lady of Soufanieh and Myrna, Abuna Elias Zahlawi, standing on my bookshelf. I handed the heavy volumes to them and, after a brief examination, sifting through the pages, Tony soon pointed out how expensive the glossy pages and hardcover must be. His gestures and way of handing the book on to Hanan showed an expression of disdain. The comments on the book by Zahlawi and the price of it were only the first reactions of a much deeper resentment towards Myrna that I was to find among many Greek Orthodox Christians. Tony was quick to say that, to him, the veracity of the miracles and their fruits was the most important thing. Hanan fell silent on this point. Contrary to their otherwise standard behavior, Tony and Hanan did not embark on a long discussion but instead pointed to the great hostility Myrna had provoked. At the same time, both of them admitted to not knowing much about the details of her life and deeds. In this sense, even as devout Christians, Tony and Hanan are indicative of much broader structures of knowledge and ignorance.

Some months later, on New Year's Eve 2009/2010, I am invited by Tony and Hanan to celebrate the occasion with her family. My thoughts are barely with Soufanieh as I enter their home that evening. And nothing seems to indicate that a heated discussion is about to occur as we enjoy the splendid food and whisky placed on the table. During the evening, the talk revolves around the year that has passed and many comments are made on the witty programs on television and on the weight gained by some of the male members of the family. At some point after midnight, one of Hanan's aunts wants to know what I am doing my research on. On hearing that it focuses on ideas of unity among Christians in Damascus

² Ordinary persons appear under pseudonyms while official and known persons appear with their original names.

and Syria and that I am using Soufanieh as a case study, one of the aunts instantly exclaims: "Why Soufanieh?!" She is joined by her sister and Umm Hanan, the lady of the house: "Yes, why Soufanieh?" All express visible disdain in both their voice and facial expressions. "There are many miracles that are prettier than this... Why then Soufanieh?" Hanan's aunt continues. I say that I find Soufanieh interesting because it always leads to conversations on the topic of unity among Christians in Damascus and Syria. I remark that I am not for or against Soufanieh, that my aim is to be neutral. "I am against Soufanieh!" the aunt states vehemently, in opposition to such a stance. She continues by expounding a story of the house in which Myrna lives, in order to render it suspect. Immediately upon this, she continues: "Do you know that, at first, the icon was taken to *Kanīsat al-Salīb* [the Greek Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross], but nothing happened, nothing! After this the Orthodox Church opposed it, this was already in the first year... You know the icon was taken to *Kanīsat al-Salīb*, but it did not shed oil...?" Hanan's aunt reiterates this part as if to prove her point. Mereh breaks into the conversation: "We went there in the very beginning when all the stories were circulating, and we didn't see anything...! So I don't believe it..." The aunt takes up the cause: "All churches but the Catholic Church renounce Soufanieh..." After a short pause, she continues with renewed force: "You know, they were really poor before, but see how they are now... They have a house in Saydnaya, where they give parties! It is the same with Abuna Zahlawi, he was poor as well, but because of his ties with France he is well off now. They have gained a lot from this... Everybody in Saydnaya knows this!" The aunt hereby transposes her attack onto other domains. The other aunt, who is still eating, supports this. "Yiiihh, they have a lot of parties in Saydnaya..." The onslaught develops ever more fervently, attacking both the family and Abuna Elias Zahlawi: "Once Myrna was asked to see a sick person, and she was very rude, do you know what she said? She said: 'I can see this person another day, not now'... She ought to have seen her!"

After this first series of attacks and incriminations, the aunt steps up yet again: "And why go making it public like that? There are many places where similar miracles have been kept for the home... I have experience of other such miracles where icons have shed oil... in Saydnaya and in our family, but people do not just go and make their home a public place. Now, they are making it into a church!" She continues: "And why film it and make DVDs? Why make it public like that?" The aunt thus implies that the very form of publicity is only intended to gain something personally and is therefore, concomitantly, a highly suspect practice.

“And the relationship with the state, do you know about that?” The aunt is again backed up, but this time by Nabil, Hanan’s father, who says: “You do know that they are on good terms with the state . . .” This point is not continued but it is very interesting that it is raised, since Christians typically hold ambivalent sentiments towards the Syrian state as both a guarantor of security and, at the same time, a strict regime (Wedeen 1999; see also Bandak 2013). It is significant to note that the first apparition and miracles happened the very same year, 1982, in which the infamous atrocities occurred in Hama, where several thousand members of the Muslim Brotherhood were killed by the Syrian regime (van Dam 1996: 111; George 2003: 16; Lesch 2005: 44; Perthes 1995: 137). Even though there may not be a direct link, this is one of the critical backdrops against which the apparition of Our Lady of Soufanieh and the stress on unity must be understood (cf. Christian 1996; Jansen 2005; Turner & Turner 1978). Even members of the extended family of Soufanieh see the beginning of the whole phenomenon in 1982 as God’s and the Virgin Mary’s way of signaling His path in a time of turmoil and—as it were—fragility. The idea of fragility is not just inherent to the image of Syria at this particular time but rather the whole region, and this is what made the later messages Myrna received intelligible, and which members of the extended family believed foretold, for instance, the first Gulf War and what was to come.

For some Christians, such as the aunt, the acceptance *qua* non-intrusion of the Syrian state casts Myrna in a dubious light. Is the message of unity promulgated by Myrna on a par with national unity? The aunt leaves this as an insinuation but continues after just a moment’s respite: “Myrna has had something in her psyche, *nafs*, where and when have you heard of stigmata in the history of the Church . . .?!” The aunt goes on, assisted by several of the others present, in particular Hanan’s sister and father, who ask: “What is the benefit of stigmata?” At this point, Tony and Hanan attempt to explain that she is most definitely not the first person in the history of the Church with stigmata: “Saint Francis was the first to have stigmata, and this isn’t contested, is it?” they interject. The aunt makes to continue but this time Tony manages to make himself heard: “Wait a moment, there are others, for instance Father . . . Pio, wasn’t that his name, Andro?” I confirm that he was one of them, but that several more had been reported as having had stigmata.³ “These are all western

³ There exist a corpus of scholarly work on stigmatics, including for instance Catherine of Siena, Christina of Stommeln, Francis of Assisi, Lukardis of Oberweimar (Kleinberg 1992;

saints!” the aunt retorts, thereby emphasizing the difference between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, which in Arabic are designated as Eastern and Western. “But who would argue that Saint Francis’ stigmata weren’t genuine? It was due to his faith that these marks were revealed on his body!” Tony insists. Tony’s certainty of this revealed message is not returned by the others. What is revealed, however, is the difficult idea of unity. This difficulty rests upon the history of Catholic intrusion into the Levant, first, following Pope Clement V, who replaced military conquest with conversion (DeGeorge 2004: 159) and then, in particular, Pope Gregory XV who, in 1622, established the *De Propaganda Fides* congregation to promote mission in the East (Masters 2001: 68ff.). This mission and proselytizing was initially directed at Muslims but, finding it too difficult, it was soon redirected at the Orthodox churches, with the ensuing implication of sedition. As a lasting consequence, to this day, the idea of unity (even if lauded by many, the laity in particular) is difficult to achieve due to a trajectory of animosity between the establishments of the various churches. Furthermore, this ties into the idea of unity propagated by Myrna and the extended family of Soufanieh. Myrna herself is from a Greek Catholic family whereas her husband, Nicolas, is from a Greek Orthodox one. Her followers believe their marriage gives substance to Christian unity whereas her opponents are more concerned with her morals, public image and the interest the Greek Catholic Church has shown in Myrna’s case.

The aunt goes on by recounting how miracles of, for instance, the scent of incense arise in a home, or of icons exuding oil. “I don’t think that there are such things in Soufanieh . . .” she says. I listen, and then give the example of a miraculous healing I have been told of by the Frenchman, Gérard Challet. Challet was allegedly cured of severe cancer, while in a coma, by having a photo of the icon placed on his stomach.⁴ “That’s different! That’s the icon—it’s not Myrna as a person! We believe that God can heal and can do so through icons . . . We believe in Our Lady!” the aunt says, assisted by Hanan’s mother. The aunt refers to a somewhat similar miracle of a young child being cured. At this point, I choose to introduce what the people from the extended family of Soufanieh often refer to

2008: 224–246); Gemma Galgani (Orsi 2005: 110–145) and Francis of Assisi (Davidson 2009; Belting 2010).

⁴ Gérard Challet gave his testimony upon a visit to Soufanieh for one of the Tuesday evening novenas, which I recorded.

as the critical point of distinction, the messages Myrna claims to have received, messages of unity, love and faith. But this is not something that the aunt knows anything about. "They are all about faith, love and unity, right?" Hanan states in response, which is just as much directed at me to correct me. This lead is not followed and Tony tries to broaden the perspective by saying: "For me, I am just a Christian!" Both Hanan's mother and the aunts have their eyes wide open after this comment. "Of course, we are all Christians, but there are differences . . .," the aunt says.

Accusations and Responses—Sinner or Saint

What we learn here is that miracles as a general phenomenon may not be rendered as problematic but their actuality always conjures up wider discussions on the source of the miracle, whether it is credible or not. The heated talk this New Year's Eve, in this sense, signals the explosive material contained in the talk of unity among the Christians of Damascus, and Soufanieh and Myrna as well, particularly among the Greek Orthodox. Of course, not all are as learned or as vehement regarding the issue as the aunt we just got to know but many do hold a profound skepticism towards Myrna. Even a lady such as the skeptical aunt, however, is unaware of what many in Soufanieh regard as the most significant part of what has happened, the messages Myrna has received. On a popular level, many other accusations circulate that entail Myrna allegedly frequenting public swimming pools dressed only in a bikini. This is presented by some Greek Orthodox as the ultimate token of a lack of modesty on Myrna's part. In addition, the fact that Myrna does not cover her hair and is a married mother of two is seen as problematic and less than conducive to the corroboration of Myrna as a living saint. The image of a Christian saint for many is and has been tied to the image of the young girl, virginity or a monastic life and there are very, very few women that have entered the number of those officially blessed and sanctified as mothers (see also Christian 1981: 198; 2012: 71; Macklin 2005: 6; 20; Woodward 1990: 337). Some would not simply insinuate that the miracles in Soufanieh are false or made up, as the aunt does, but would even suggest that this trickery was brought about by placing tubes in the frame of the icon from whence the oil was then able to flow. No such fraud has ever been proven. This does not lessen the accusations, however, as they flourish on moral issues such as extravagance, illicit economic gain and immoral behavior, all of which summon up a somewhat different image of Myrna and Soufanieh

than what is strived for from within. Furthermore, the paradox we already encountered in the introduction to this chapter on sainthood and visibility is played out regarding the publicity Myrna has attained; too much visibility would amount to a discrediting of Myrna, too little and she risks being forgotten altogether. As Marion has aptly demonstrated, it is from the very invisibility and undecidability that issues of sainthood are raised (2009). So when the aunt so vehemently opposes the public presentation of the miracles by Myrna and her followers, it shows the precarious nature of any actual claim to sainthood. Polemics and incriminations, however, appear to accompany all claims to sainthood, not just as mere happenstance but as a productive force (Elsner 2009). It is precisely the lack of recognition that is a driving force in claiming the saintliness of Our Lady of Soufanieh and Myrna on the part of her followers.

The negative backdrop of persistent claims of extravagance, immodest behavior and illicit economic gains exists and is quite frequently addressed by either Myrna or the people around her. If I brought these accusations up in interviews or conversations with the extended family of Soufanieh, they would quite quickly be put down or silenced. One of Myrna's confidante's, Salwa, would derail such accusations quite easily, but not without being troubled, if not saddened. A couple of days after New Year's Eve, Salwa is taking me to the office of Fawaz, the official photographer hired to document all the events of Soufanieh. On the way, she asks me if I had a nice New Year's Eve. In fact, she had already asked me if I wanted to celebrate the evening with her family, but I had declined due to the prior invitation from Tony and Hanan. I tell her how we ended up in a heated discussion over Myrna and Soufanieh. Instantly, Salwa asks for details of how the topic was framed and my responses. I recount the position of the aunt, in particular, and her skeptical stance. Salwa retorts with a saddened look: "And they have never been there to see for themselves? Have they?" In saying this, she gets more worked up at the criticisms and, before I get a chance to answer, she continues: "What is it? Some like you travel from the other side of the planet just to see this, but people here in Damascus just don't care!" I venture upon the line I have heard used in sermons in Soufanieh that paraphrases Jesus, in that a prophet is never accepted in his . . . Salwa concludes the sentence:⁵ "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country."

⁵ Cf. Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24.

As we continue our walk, I bring up the topic of expenses with regard to Abuna Elias Zahlawi and the money for his most recent book, namely where they come from. "They come from certain highly trusted persons..." Salwa pauses and is not speaking out loud and clear it seems, as if withholding information. "Whenever something is needed, it can be asked... They are of enormous importance to Soufanieh..." Money, in this sense is an important factor, but problematic and even a dangerous topic as the accusations uttered in the Greek Orthodox family attest to. In the home of Myrna, signs announce that donations are forbidden. Pilgrims and guests are typically asked to give donations or votive gifts to churches, not to Our Lady of Soufanieh. The secrecy surrounding the followers' economic support, however, only leads to further suspicion on the part of the skeptics. In interviews, Salwa would emphasize the costs of giving up an ordinary life for Myrna and her family. "Imagine..." she ventured, "... that you are put under scrutiny all the time, that people notice the slightest thing you do! [...] That people come at all times of the day and even at night expecting you to be only happy and welcoming!" In stressing Myrna's demanding life, Salwa at this point designates this as the real miracle: that the home has been open for 27 years in a row. Emphatically, Salwa renders Myrna's acts in a light whereby the saint, and not the sinner, in her can be seen and heard. In this sense, Salwa and many others from Soufanieh's close circle do not simply testify to the veracity of the happenings in Soufanieh; an important part of their task is to challenge the spread of slander and gossip from people aimed at vilifying Myrna in her act of witness. And this, at times, may seem as bordering on an insurmountable task.

Bearing Witness—Testimony as Proof

A critical task for the extended family of Soufanieh is to become a witness. This is what Salwa strives to be in word and deed. It is worth expounding on the particular act of witnessing at some length. In testifying to what the individual believer has seen and heard, the status of the individual becomes that of a witness and living proof to others of what has happened and can happen in Soufanieh. What you are supposed to see in miracles is directed by what you hear and listen to, and therefore you have to tell and be told what has happened here in Soufanieh. The act of witnessing can also be seen as a defense against the forgetfulness and neglect that easily refashions what was initially taken as a miracle and sign only later

to become mere coincidence or a stroke of luck—as Walter Benjamin neatly captured in the image of Penelope’s thread, which has to be started over again every morning (1968: 204).

The miracle, which is taken to be such a transformative source of evidence, is in this sense prone to reinterpretation. There is a particular vulnerability related to the conceptualization of the proof in that it is never fully sufficient to waylay doubts completely. This is not necessarily problematic in practice, however, where doubts and misgivings can be productive and creative, as the conditions upon which beliefs are formed (Taussig 2006; see also Bandak & Jørgensen 2012; Shenoda 2012). Acts in spite of a lack of belief or impossibility of belief are, in a certain sense, ways of extending the effects of a continuing re-inscription of the importance of Soufanieh. The miracle, then, is not just a miracle by mere chance but as much by its reinvigoration in the form of both individual and communal practices of retelling.

The act of witnessing therefore works precisely as a collective form of what I would term *evidentification*; an identification of evidence properly suited to attest to the divine workings in and through Soufanieh. By this, I wish to underline that not every happening counts as a divine working but must be tested and discerned to find out the proper source—if it is from God, man or the Devil (see also Apolito 1998; Gilsenan 2000). Human expectations may, in this sense, override divine plans and only careful examination and the search for a particular message genuinely reflect the Christian spirit as promulgated in Soufanieh. In an interview on miracles, Fadi, a devout follower of Our Lady of Soufanieh, explains how he heard of an alleged miracle in the suburb of Dweila. Fadi, not satisfied with only hearing of the miracle, goes there to see it for himself. His assessment was that this was not a genuine miracle but that a natural explanation could be given. Furthermore, no message was pronounced, which to Fadi epitomizes the utmost mark of divine intention. By downgrading this incident in Dweila, Fadi yet again makes a comparison or rather, as Jas’ Elsner has aptly phrased it (2009), places Soufanieh *beyond compare* (see also Harris 1999: 91–109; Taves 2012: 64; Zimdars-Swartz 1991: 57–67). The message of Soufanieh is taken by Fadi as proof of the veracity of the miracles which, through their absence in Dweila, cast the alleged miracle into doubt. Soufanieh, in this sense, is regarded by most of the followers not just as any ordinary Christian revelatory phenomenon; it is rather a contraction of the Christian message in and through Damascus, which they all see prefigured in the conversion of Saint Paul on his



Fig. 6.1. Photo of the icon in Myrna's home (photo by the author).

way to Damascus some two millennia ago. Fadi is therefore an active proponent of Soufanieh and goes out of his way to tell of the miraculous happenings, both in his own neighborhood and in other areas, and which he has great plans to bear witness to.

Everyone in the Soufanieh family are, like Fadi, instigated to participate in spreading the message. Raif, a man in his forties, used to emphasize that every single person would be used by Our Lady in terms of the gifts he or she had, whether this be producing web-pages, driving an icon of Our Lady on trips for veneration purposes, recording and distributing DVDs and booklets on Soufanieh or decorating Myrna's home for celebrations. The status of witness is hereby transformed from being a mere passive recipient to an active proponent and hence a part of divine history as it manifests itself over time. The witness is participating in making divine history.

As with saintliness in a general Christian formulation, it is the imitation of Christ in his life and death that has been the diacritical mark through history, both when heroic virtue has been emphasized and when the thaumaturgic wonderworking has been so (Kieckhefer 1988; McBrien 2001). Christ, in this sense, is a model for imitation and all witnesses are seen to partake in the model by themselves modeling their life upon his by emulation. As already pointed out in the introduction, it makes sense to paraphrase and reformulate Clifford Geertz (1993[1973]) when he says that, for the Christians of Damascus, there exist both models *of* sainthood and models *for* sainthood. The first involves recognizing particular forms of saintliness and holiness which, as we have already seen, is not a problem as such for many Syrian Christians. The problem arises with the model *for* sainthood since it is deliberately used to form particular lives and characters, and here people are drawn into the apologetics and defense, or polemics and a lack of desire in that this is something only some adhere to, not all. Bearing witness, to the believer, in a particular way encapsulates the ultimate reality which has marked individual life with a divine touch and which, by being conveyed to others, renders credible what goes beyond human understanding. The act of bearing witness in this sense is to testify to what has happened and is hence a way of proving the veracity of the miraculous deeds that happened in and through Soufanieh; it presents the possible transition from the model *of* to the model *for* sainthood.

Objects of Evidence in Anthropology and Beyond—Signs and Evidentification

If we turn back to the miracles, then one critical observation is that they have a fundamental ambiguity about them from a Christian tradition. On the one hand, miracles are important and taken as evidence of a certain reality to which they point. On the other, miracles lack ultimate force since they will never be able, once and for all, to settle the matter; some will always contest the veracity of the miracle. It is not a novel phenomenon to render people more superstitious of previous times; rather as the anthropological record amply demonstrates, certain thresholds exist across time and cultures, after which no solid explanations can be given (Douglas 2002[1966]: 74; 1970; Evans-Pritchard 1937). Even Christ, in his sayings in the gospels, appears to have a dual stance towards miracles. In the gospels, miracles are designated as *signs*, as both something given to the populace to convince but, at the same time, something you cannot demand. Some will not be convinced, but only stop short at the wonder and not the divine and invisible to which the miracle as a sign is believed to point. It is precisely this dilemma that is negotiated by the followers in Soufanieh. Whereas the miracles are constantly referred to as a source of joy and happiness by my informants, several of the core members criticize the tendency of the world, a designation of Damascus and Syrian society, to show up only if they hear about miracles they want to see for themselves. Miracles, in this sense, are not seen to produce conviction but joy. If only a marvel is seen in the miracle and not a sign, then the miracle is happening in vain for the believer. This is also the reason why Robert Shanafelt, in his review of the literature of miracles in anthropology, stops short of arriving at a satisfactory explanation (2003). Shanafelt rightly asserts the anthropological problem with miracles. When he makes the easy transposition of miracles into marvels, however, he cannot aid an understanding of the miraculous as never arriving at certainty in itself. Miracles rather produce chains and logics which, with perseverance, must be reasserted. And, on the other hand, it is precisely because the miraculous could have happened that it is not easy to discard altogether.

Again, the central miracle is transferred from the icon or the hands of Myrna exuding oil or blood, and the healings of sick people, to the particular message of Soufanieh and a change of heart and lives for those brought into contact with Our Lady of Soufanieh. Jean-Luc Marion frames this as the experience of *signa* (1991: 8–9; see also Ward 2011: 150; Weddle 2010: 141f.). The devoted Christians around Myrna use the terms *mu'ajizāt* and

‘*ajāib* to render miracles,⁶ but what is critical here is again their specific status as signs, *rumūz*. Since many just come to see the wondrous workings, without taking the particular message of Soufanieh into account, however, a major concern for the followers is to substantiate the message. As Robert Orsi has noted, clerical authorities hastily attempt to tame and direct the uncanny presence and excess of the miraculous (2008). The identification of evidence, what I term *evidentification*, is important in that it is this very attempt at taming or directing the excess of the miraculous that points to its particular quality as a sign. Precisely because of the lack of certainty, the problems in fixing any single meaning on such excessive events, proof and evidence is needed to corroborate indexicalities that mark out what should be seen in the miracles. The indexicalities are created through words which, in the community of believers, are aimed at molding characters that do not see everything but focus on the sign in the miracles. This process takes place in sermons and testimonies, in which an attempt is made to fix the miraculous as a sign of grace.

The Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg addresses the question of evidence, regarded as clues, in several of his works (1980; 1999). Clues mark the work of art or history in traces of its originator which the attentive eye can detect. A similar feat has been captured by Edwin Ardener as *vestiges of creation* (1989). These traces, as clues, point to those who have been taught to see in them the sign more than the wonder. In this respect, it is significant that, during the Enlightenment, the Catholic Church chose to decree that no one should designate a phenomenon as a miracle until the Church itself had approved of it as more than just hearsay (de Certeau 1992). During the Enlightenment, a positive regime was established, and not just in terms of skepticism towards religious or transcendental powers, whereby stories or the testimonies of others alone were not enough to establish the credibility of a supernatural occurrence. Not only science in its modern inception in this period but also the Church demanded evidence before declaring a phenomenon to be a miracle. David Hume famously captured this modern form of skepticism by placing the senses over and above tradition and oral testimony (1975[1777]: 109): “Our evidence, then, for the truth of the *Christian* religion is less than the evidence for the truth of our senses.” To Hume, then, the testimony is rendered

⁶ Significantly, Muslims do not generally use the same terms for miracles; the term *karamāt* is instead used (cf. Pinto 2004: 197; Mittermaier 2011: 156). However, in some places it seems that Muslims may also use the terms interchangeably (see Gilseman 1982: 79ff.).

suspect since it can only vicariously approximate what has occurred whereas the senses in his optic have an unprecedented primacy. Testimony as proof is, from such a skeptical perspective, then, never enough to establish the facts even if, as a secondary source, it demands attention. If testimonies alone are counted as proof, as the entire proof, then Hume is not willing to accept this as a source at all. Here, Hume asserts that we have proof against proof since (ibid.: 114): “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience possibly can be imagined.” Where Hume, then, like the Enlightenment tendency in general, formed a novel and skeptical assessment of miracles altogether, it was however not able to eliminate the uncanny experiences such as those found in mystics and mysticism altogether. Hume and the likes would relegate these forms of conviction to remnants of superstition and ignorance. But in fact what has happened is that modern science, as well as testimony, has been used by the Church to establish what counts as a miracle, albeit with one major difference: for the Church to establish a phenomenon as a proper miracle *ipso facto* is to make it stand for something else, to make it establish the evidentiary force of the divine, whereas modern science typically prefers to gloss over miracles as merely what has not been explained by natural causes *yet* (Woodward 1990: 191f.). In Damascus, the miraculous—as we have seen—has not lost its force altogether although, for various Christians, the concrete instantiation is always up for negotiation. Even more so when the modern state—as pointed out by Carl Schmitt (2005[1922]: 42)—is working against the miraculous both as an exception to natural order and also as a divinely ordained realm in order for the state itself to become the miracle, albeit of a modern, secular nature. The Syrian state, with a similar logic to date, only reluctantly or when under pressure uses the religious domain to emphasize its own agenda (Pierret & Selvik 2009).

The quality of the evidence itself has been taken up in recent anthropological writing (Hastrup 2004; Engelke et al. 2008). One of the critical aspects that has emerged is how evidence is made to stand for something else and thereby obtains the status of a sign value, a process in which the senses are incremental in making evidence seen, felt or heard (Keane 2008). Maurice Bloch asserts that a fundamental part of evidence rests on the eyes (2008). Whereas Bloch may be right in attributing this primacy to the eyes generally—it is also the case in Syria and Damascus that people want to see for themselves and not just be told stories of the

miraculous—a central feature he overlooks is the cognizant part the ears play in forming *what* to see. The problem with the obsession with cognition and vision, as I take it Bloch is embellishing, is that he is not attentive to the way in which the human senses work in tandem to give one unified perception, one perception where we, at times, hear with the eyes and see with the ears (Deleuze & Guattari 2004[1980]: 342f.; Ingold 2000: 245; Schmidt 2000).

A particularly fertile way to conceive of the process of making and giving evidence is found with the neologism *infinition*, which Martin Holbraad dubs the unfinished character of proof (Holbraad 2008). What has counted as proof at one point in time only necessitates further proof at later stages by craving recounting and narration. A series of instantiations is, however, created whereby what was regarded as evidence is used as such in narration and hence proves something else. Because the human memory is frail and people may reinterpret past incidents, the individual needs to be retold in order to relive and redirect the focus on the force of the proofness of the proof. Holbraad therefore aptly captures the unfinished nature of much evidence, as well as its infinite status, where divine touch remains so only in a constant re-inscription. Rationality is, in this sense, not a property that belongs solely to either anthropologist or interlocutor; rather it resides in between, as a contested and negotiated space, where different experiences, traditions and articulations are made. Negotiations over the possibilities of icons exuding oil, apparitions of the Virgin Mary and Jesus are present in Damascus and, as responses vary from person to person, even the same people would have different opinions over time. Evidence therefore pertains to domains of knowledge and thus to a variety of situated epistemologies. Here, the desire to see, to listen and to touch has different economies within the same society. Where some are convinced, others are not; where some are thrilled by the narration of the miraculous, others are only reluctantly so; and where some aim to come to Soufanieh, others hesitate and even fear to do so. In this regard, the decision of what to regard as fantastic, supernatural or miraculous is critical (cf. Todorov 1973) even if, or better yet, precisely because, it is not necessarily possible to settle the matter once and for all.

Suspensions of Belief—A Miraculous Cure

Another standard reaction towards Myrna and Soufanieh among many Christians was not one of outright enmity but rather of indifference.

Typically, I would embark on conversations with a variety of Christians who would all know of Myrna and Soufanieh but would be more hesitant towards deciding on what to infer from the stories. "I don't know..." George would say, as we and three other young men sat in Steeds, one of the fancier restaurants in the Christian quarter of Qusour. "I mean, I live only a couple of hundred meters from her home and I never went there, ha ha ha..." George laughs. I know George and the other young men from the Melchite Catholic Church of Our Lady of Damascus, *Kanīsat al-Sayyida Dimashq*, where I met them in the *Legio Mariam* which I attended on a weekly basis for six months in 2005. George works in computer engineering, and the other two, Ziad and Ilyas, work as a goldsmith and lawyer, respectively. The three men have all been or still are involved in the activities of the church. George and Ziad participated in the Catholic World Youth Congress in Australia in 2008 and hence must be said to emphasize putting their faith into action. Obviously, however, there is a hesitant stance among all three of them when we touch upon Myrna and Soufanieh. They applaud the fact that I am undertaking this research but they do not want to go and have a look for themselves. This would appear all the more interesting as Abuna Elias Zahlawi is one of the three pastors in the very same church they attend. In other words, even though they all greatly admire Abuna Elias Zahlawi, he has not yet succeeded in bringing a focus to Our Lady of Soufanieh, or not so much as to have these three men frequent the place.

This points us in the direction of the mixed motivations and forms of indulgence with which saintly figures are met (James 1982[1902]; see also Bandak & Bille this volume). Frequently, I would hear people advise me not to believe anything I had not seen with my own eyes. In this sense, I would be warned not to be fooled. My local hairdresser and a good friend of Myrna's husband, Nicolas, would laugh and stretch his arms out and look upwards when asked his opinion of the happenings in Soufanieh: "I don't know... only God knows!" He would add and then laugh. This cautious stance was countered by a great many that had actually seen miraculous happenings but still remained reluctant to get drawn into the community of the pious. In this regard, the recent spate of studies on pious Muslims in the Middle East (Deeb 2006; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005) runs the risk of placing a greater uniformity on the pious subjects than is actually the case (Schielke 2009a; 2009b; 2010; Soares & Osella 2009; Starrett 2010). Even though this study does not delve into Muslim identities but Christian ones, it is quite clear that a great variation exists in how identities are articulated in relation to ideas for or against piety. These

are not fixed positions, however; rather they are fluid in the sense that they are used in time of need (Bandak 2012). Nabil, a young estate agent I have known for several years, had some interesting stories to tell when one day we started to discuss the miracles of Soufanieh at great length. Some years back, before serving his time in the army, Nabil fell very sick with a particularly malignant form of skin disease. He went to several doctors with his mother but none of them could give him a remedy; quite the opposite, the diagnosis was that it was a severe disease with dire implications. He would not be able to join the army. Although one's stint in the army is considered a harsh time by most Syrian men, Nabil considered it preferable to a severe disease. At night in his home, while the family was asleep, his mother Umm Fawaz had a dream in which Saint Anthony met her in a church with Nabil lying on the floor of the church in front of them and told her that her son would be cured. When she woke up, an icon of Saint Anthony in the home shed drops of blood and, as Nabil awoke, they learned that he was healed. Nabil added another miraculous event to this. Now no longer exempt from military service, he joined a unit in the vicinity of Damascus. A presidential decree changed the rules, however, so that everyone had to be posted a greater distance from their homes. Nabil was initially annoyed at this but nothing could change the new decree. A week after his transfer, the remaining seven members of his unit rolled the vehicle which they always drove, killing them all. "God must really like me! It was a second miracle . . . Think of this, God used the president to save me!" Nabil here left out all sorts of bad conscience over being the only one spared.

Nabil saw his life changed by these two miracles. He emphasized the certainty of his faith. At the same time, he would suspend many of his moral choices, as in his sexual relationships with Muslim girls. When asked about Soufanieh, Nabil would contend that there was no surprise in the miracles, and that he had twice experienced miracles on his own body. He would also praise the message of unity, saying that it was greatly needed among the Christians of Syria. A unification of Easter would signal that the Christians were one people and not many. Regarding the consequences for his own life, however, Nabil would rather not go to Soufanieh. He emphasized that he somehow felt prevented from actually going there, afraid of what would happen to him if he should actually step over the threshold. He thus preferred to leave it to the grace he himself had experienced and not embark on any investigation of the details of Soufanieh, suspending any form of judgment until later.

Knowledge, Ignorance and Indifference—Strategies of Intensification

A central feature for the various people I have presented so far in this chapter is the differing attitudes held regarding the status of the miraculous. In a certain sense, the choice not to go into the details of the happenings of Soufanieh is a specific strategy of not getting involved but remaining unaffected through a dual suspension of both belief and disbelief. Ghassan Hage has termed such a process by which certain realities are invested in as *strategies of intensification* (2002). By placing or not placing a stake in a given reality, it can become more or less intense. If a person follows Soufanieh as Salwa, Fadi or Raif do, all the minor details hold the divine seeds of knowledge and must be attended to. It is the opposite for people such as George, Ilyas, Ziad or Nabil, who deliberately postpone any judgment on Soufanieh. And, yet again, for people such as Tony and Hanan's family, the aunt in particular, the reality may be a present one but representing the opposite of what the followers of Soufanieh would want it to. By focusing on the differing strategies people have for letting or not letting the miraculous seize them, we embark on a classic discussion with social, theological and existential ramifications of how knowledge affects choices and attitudes held. The choice not to visit Soufanieh, even if the place is known, indicates a fear or uneasiness with the uncanny in the form of the miraculous as if it is common knowledge that it could actually affect the life of a George, Hani, Ziad or Nabil. For these figures, however, personal change is not strived for. Rather, a certain distance, knowing of it but not divesting too much time and energy in it, is found to be a suiting response in an otherwise busy daily life. Here, the choice is not to let this reality affect the person. This is a highly significant form of indifference, which is formative as the background upon which Our Lady of Soufanieh has to be heard and seen. Where the motives and situations of the people described may vary, what—from the perspective of the Soufanieh family—is encountered is the dangerous couple of indifference and ignorance. By not taking a stand but remaining in the gap between belief and disbelief, general society proves how difficult it is to listen for the voice of God. This theme would often be underlined by the pastors in Soufanieh in novenas and sermons: that, at a particular time, God's specific timing that is, everything will be revealed and the whole world shall come to acknowledge who He is. Abuna Elias Zahlawi would emphasize this reality in a sermon by telling of an old friend of his who does not *yet* believe. Here perhaps, however, lies a deeper problem as to why the

world cannot, or will not, see. And it was this more troubling theme that Abuna Elias Zahlawi labored upon on the anniversary of the first apparition of Our Lady of Soufanieh. The problem, Abuna Zahlawi ventured, is that people will not see.

In this sense, what we encounter is a problem of knowledge. Why is it that not everybody accepts the signs of Soufanieh and, more widely, God? Why is it that the miracles do not once and for all settle the matter? By making the claim that this is due to ignorance and indifference, the pastors and followers can render the choice not to see the workings of God in the mundane and extraordinary life of Myrna and Soufanieh completely irrational. The evidence and *evidentification* is found in Myrna, the stories, and the life and becoming each individual strives for and the followers therefore themselves participate in producing. Only ignorant or indifferent people would not accept this. In this respect, even the ignorance of the wider society can be taken as further evidence of the veracity of Christ's sayings on misjudged prophets. This points to an interesting coincidence in the evaluation of indifference, as the explanation can be found in a sermon such as the one given by Abuna Elias Zahlawi, but also among people such as Nabil. For some, there is too much to take into account to settle on just one dimension, and hence the dual suspension of both belief and disbelief locates the individual in the gap, where a choice can be taken at a later stage. For the followers of Soufanieh, this is a dangerous strategy as you never know if you will be able to listen if you postpone the moment. Deaf ears and blind eyes are a dangerous coupling.

What we encounter, then, are problems of knowing and knowledge. The problem of knowledge has been addressed both in recent anthropological discussions (cf. Barth 2002) as well as older philosophical discussions (Foucault 1970; Kuhn 1962). A focus on which forms of knowledge people put to use in different times, situations and contexts hence offers a more sensitive framing of social stakes across scales and cultural settings. More recently, discussions of epistemology have been broadened by a focus on what people do not know, be this purposely held zones of not-knowing, which Clifford Geertz has phrased as *passions of ignorance* (2000: 259) and Michel Foucault as *a will not to know* (1980[1976]: 55), or structural blind spots, which paradigmatically fall outside the zones of attention. In his recent work, anthropologist Roy Dilley addressed these forms of ignorance which, as he eloquently puts it, always mark knowledge as its shadow (2007; 2010, see also High, Kelly & Mair 2012). Dilley takes his point of departure as the conceptual innovation of James Ferrier (1854) who, besides the typical use of ontology and epistemology, coined

and introduced the term *agnoiology*. The term, admittedly not too elegant, covers what people are not interested in knowing or cannot know and is a significant contribution to our understanding of the social life of a phenomenon such as Soufanieh. In this sense, there exist two ways of not knowing. One which admits to being unaware of certain features and one which deliberately aims at not knowing. Dilley also crafts parts of his most recent version of the argument around different assessments of ignorance in Christian traditions. On the one hand, ignorance can be considered innocent, as the state before the Fall of Man. On the other, ignorance can be considered a willful and evil condition in which people do not want to know. The different stances held by Christians in Damascus attest to the different perspectives of what counts as knowledge and which forms of evidence corroborate this knowledge as fact. Implicit knowledge is also constitutive in this regard, alongside what people do not want to know or just simply cannot know.

We thus turn to a final issue that I wish to address, and one that is also significant as a specifically Christian topic. As Abuna Elias Zahlawi emphasized in the sermon previously alluded to, a split in humanity is present when regarding miracles as signs or simply marvels. Here, even Jesus voices criticism of the popular demands for signs, since people should believe the scripture and signs can be understood only insofar as the scripture is believed. If miracles only instigate curiosity and marvel, they lose their pertinence as signs and cannot aid personal transformation. The sign-value of the miracle is not able to force people to another conviction but, on the other hand, it always has the capability of destabilizing the normal situation and knowledge, and rupturing how things are understood to be. This is not something that the followers, Myrna or the pastors can control. What they can, and what they do, however, is to direct and re-inscribe the importance of the particular message of Soufanieh as it is manifested in the miracles as signs of grace. But these signs of grace—as this chapter has tried to demonstrate—are always resting upon and even nested by fragility and undecidedness, which leads to further negotiations of what counts as evidence, what a witness is and what counts as knowledge, ignorance and indifference.

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