Alan He

Anthro R5B

Precis 5

Aug 10, 2019

A Fight for Legitimacy

In “Territorial Presence,” Angie Heo shares different perspectives regarding the Marian apparitions that appeared in Egypt in 2009. In addition, she discusses the Coptic fight for territorial presence against Muslims. In this paper, I will argue that the debate on the Marian apparitions as well as the competition for land between churches and mosques show a sectarian divide and a fight for legitimacy.

The Copts claim that the Marian apparitions have appeared above Coptic churches, and it has not appeared above a mosque or an Evangelical church, while Muslims and Evangelicals object their statement. Shaykh Muhammad al-Rida declares that only the Coptic Christians have seen them. He argues that everybody should be able to see her for “the apparitions to qualify as a truly divinely-authored vision,” and not just Christians (Heo 126). Muslims who saw a bright light, like the taxi driver, assert that it’s just a laser show by the Copts. Since only Christians saw her, the shaykh announces, the apparition is not real. Nonetheless, Christians are divided as well; the Evangelicals denounce the apparition even more publicly and vigorously than Muslims. When Pastor Zakariyya is being asked of the apparition, he avoids the topic and cites a formal Evangelical response on divine manifestations, which states that an apparition must verbally announce its identity to be recognized. He infers that the apparition could not be identified since it has not spoken; it might even be a diabolical deception.

On the other hand, the Copts have made responses to these arguments, and they claim that Muslims and Evangelicals reject the truth of the Marian apparition due to the fear of losing legitimacy. A well-known figure in the Coptic Church, ‘Abd al-Masih rebuts all the doubts and rejections from the Muslims. He asks rhetorically regrading why Muslims hold the belief that the Virgin was produced from lasers. He claims that it is apparently because she manifested at the Coptic churches, but not at the mosques. Furthermore, he justifies that such choice would indicate that “Christianity is right and Islam is wrong” (Heo 134). This clearly marks a fight for legitimacy between Christianity and Islam. Muslims, ‘Abd al-Masih claims, reject the Marian apparitions even though it’s real, and since the apparitions only appeared above Coptic churches, it demonstrates how Coptic Christians has the legitimate claim to the land instead of the Muslims.

Moreover, this fight has extended to the field of church construction. First of all, even in regions where the number of Coptic inhabitants have exploded recently, it’s difficult to obtain legal permits from the state to construct a new church or repair an old one. Heo further observes that the conditions for building a church are strict. These conditions not only include the religious composition of the area, but they also include the restriction that the planned church couldn't be too closed to nearby mosques. This stimulates the growth of both illegal churches and illegal mosques to fight for land. In addition, there’s also a difference between treating illegal churches and illegal mosques, which shows the sectarian divide. Heo reveals that these churches without permits have incited violence, protests, and challenges from the state authorities, while the mosques without permits have not faced such issues. It is clear from Heo’s description that the construction of churches is much harder than of mosques, and their competition for land are symbols of sectarianism.

Coptic Christians wish to establish their existence and legitimacy, while the Muslims want to uphold their claim of the land. From the debates on Marian apparitions to the rivalry for land in church and mosque constructions, Heo depicts how Copts and Muslims have fought various issues, showing the sectarian conflict between them.