

7. Divinity, Profanity, and Pilgrimage

Farida's Story

Farida was born in a village in Upper Egypt and, as a young woman, was considered very comely. When an educated man from the community asked for her hand in marriage, Farida's poor parents were delighted, since they considered the groom's education and government position to be sources of great prestige and security for their daughter. Farida and her husband had their own daughter within the first year of marriage, but, within the second year, Farida's husband divorced her to marry an educated colleague with whom he had fallen in love. Farida, an illiterate teenager, was asked to sign her name to some papers, without ever realizing that she had endorsed the consent agreement to her divorce.

As a divorcee with a young daughter, Farida's chances of remarriage were poor, even though she was considered the young beauty of her small village, where she had returned after her husband left her. However, several years after her divorce, Farida's brother returned home on military leave with a friend from the army named Hesham. When Hesham saw Farida, he could not take his eyes off her, and he asked Farida's brother if she was married. Told that she was a divorcee with a three-year-old daughter, Hesham was thrilled to learn of Farida's availability and, much to Farida's family's surprise, asked whether he might marry her. The family, and Farida, agreed to the marriage, which took place twelve years ago.

Since then, Farida's daughter, Mirvat, has grown to become a young woman, and Farida and Hesham, an Alexandrian police inspector, have grown to love each other very much — despite Farida's secondary infertility and her continuing inability to provide Hesham with his own children. Although Farida has been pregnant three times in twelve years, each pregnancy ended in late miscarriage, due to "tumors" in her uterus. These tumors have caused Farida to bleed between periods, preventing her and Hesham from having an active sex life. Farida feels that she has deprived

Hesham of both sex and children, which are his right as her husband. She has told him to remarry, although she is actually fearful of this. But she contends that she could remain in a polygynous marriage as long as her co-wife lived in a separate room. However, Hesham says he will never remarry. He feels sorry for Farida and takes heart in knowing that at least Farida is able to become pregnant. He has continued to tell her throughout their marriage that she and Mirvat are enough for him, and he has treated Mirvat as his own daughter. Furthermore, on his policeman's salary, Hesham will never be able to afford remarriage. In fact, Farida was forced to work at a nearby shoe factory in order for the family to eat three meals a day and to support her therapeutic quest. This "search for children" has taken Farida to four doctors, two hospitals, and several ethnogynecologists, who have advised *kabsa* and *khaḍḍa* healing rituals, performed *kasr* on her open back, and supplied her with grilled onion and *shih* suppositories.

However, Farida has put most of her energies into praying to God and "his people" for a child. She has made many *ziyārāt*, or "visits" — more than she can count — to Alexandrian mosque-tombs and shrines dedicated to *shuyūkh bil-baraka*, or blessed saints whose "power is very strong." According to Farida, "You ask them for anything, and they just grant it." When Farida visits the shrines of these *shuyūkh*, she prays to God "normally," and then she makes a vow to the *shaikh*, saying, "If you help us and let us keep a child, we'll get you a small carpet or put some money in your box." According to Farida, the *shuyūkh* have God's divine grace, or *baraka*, and they can therefore help human beings get their prayers answered. Most recently, on a *ziyāra* to the tomb of Shaikh Abu Nur in the Alexandrian neighborhood of Bahair, Farida, desiring a free operation for her "tumors" at Shatby Hospital, asked, "If they keep me inside the hospital to operate on me, I'll put five pounds in your box." When she went to the hospital for an examination later that week, she was astonished to hear the doctor utter the words, "You're staying" (for the operation), and she knew that her prayer-request had been answered.

Yet, although Farida believes that these *shuyūkh bil-baraka* have interceded on her behalf in the eyes of God, she is also quick to note that her ability to become pregnant and deliver a living child is ultimately "God's will." As she explains, "It's God's will that I have such problems inside [her body]. He could easily not have caused me all this. But God is showing me his omnipotence, because I get my babies, created beings, shaped as human beings, and I can't get them to live. God is showing me it's up to him. But, of course, he's leading me to treatments."

God, His People, and Infertility

As a good Muslim, Farida accepts the fact that the events of her life — including her early divorce and her ongoing reproductive trials and tribulations — are “God’s will” and are caused by God for reasons that only he can know. Like most poor urban Egyptians, Farida is religiously illiterate but religiously pious, turning to her religion to sustain her through times of trouble and to seek understanding for her misfortunes. Infertility, like other major health problems, is widely acknowledged by Egyptians as the type of misfortune for which religiously based interpretations are to be sought. Thus, it is not surprising that infertile Egyptian women — very few of whom are formally religiously educated — not only take great solace in their religion and their faith in God, but also attempt to explain their particular reproductive problems according to the nature of their beliefs in God and God’s role in their lives. The same can be said of the ethnogynecological and biogynecological specialists who treat these women. According to them, other possible explanations of infertility, including both ethnogynecological and biogynecological ones, are proximate to the ultimate reality — that is, that infertility is a condition “from God,” which he bestows upon certain human beings for a reason. This reason is something that infertile Egyptian women admittedly ponder; but, as they are quick to note, they ask the question “Why me?” without intending to question the wisdom or righteousness of God’s creation of them as infertile. This is a reality that they accept and that they attempt to overcome with God’s help, since he, too, created medicine for this purpose.

As Farida points out, it is God who guides women on their therapeutic quests and who, if he should decide, leads them to the correct “treatment.” “Treatment” is broadly defined by most (although not all) poor urban women as comprising both biogynecological and ethnogynecological remedies, even though they are aware that both doctors and the “Sunni people” (religiously literate, orthodox Islamists) frown on ethnogynecological remedies, although for somewhat different reasons. Yet, the poor infertile women who “search for children” in Egypt tend to abide by and protect their beliefs in *kabsa*, *ruṭūba*, *dahr maṣṭūh*, *amal*, and the other causes of infertility that Egyptian biogynecologists and many Islamists reject. Furthermore, these women see their ethnogynecological attempts at overcoming these problems as quite legitimate in the eyes of God, who urges his followers to “seek” so that he may guide them. Thus, women’s interpretation of the nature of “God’s medicine” is much wider than that of the members of the medical and religious establishments in Egypt, who advo-

cate only “modern” medicine. And as “good” Muslims, these women do *not* see their instrumental visits to *shuyūkh*, and especially *shuyūkh bil-banaka* who can help heal them, as being sacrilegious in any way.

According to most poor urban Egyptian women, *shuyūkh bil-banaka* are the “true” *shuyūkh*, individuals living or dead who are “chosen” by God and blessed with his divine grace. These *shuyūkh*, most of whom are *ṣūfī* saints, are not seen by women as God’s “partners,” but rather as intermediaries, who intercede on the behalf of human beings so that their prayers to God may be answered. This is why Farida makes *ziyārāt*, or pilgrimages, to the *shuyūkh*’s tombs, where her prayers for the healing of her reproductive problems have a better chance of being heard.

Thus, to fully understand the nature of Farida’s and other Egyptian women’s “searches for children,” it is necessary to understand how women’s religious convictions and beliefs about God and “his people” play a major role in their therapeutic quests. In many cases, women’s religious faith takes them on healing pilgrimages that are “not so holy” in orthodox religious terms, combining as they do the sacred and the profane. Yet, such religiously inspired therapeutic pilgrimages must be seen as part of the larger fabric of Egyptian religious life and especially the religious life of women, who are often ignored in such discussions.

Religion and the Egyptian Body Politic

To begin, it is important to understand that, in Egypt, the body politic is a predominantly Muslim body, with approximately 90 percent of all Egyptian Muslims. Muslims in Egypt are almost exclusively of the majority Sunni branch of Islam, with Shi’a sects virtually absent in the country. In addition, approximately 10 percent of Egyptians are Christians, mostly Egyptian Orthodox Copts, who complain that their numbers are underrepresented in national censuses.

Both Muslims and Coptic Christians are monotheists, believing in one God, Allah. However, Muslims view Jesus as a prophet, rather than as the son of God, and acknowledge Muhammad, who received God’s word in the form of the Qur’an, as the final prophet. Unlike Coptic Christians, who worship Jesus as the Lord, Muslims ascribe no human incarnations to God. To Muslims, who are the focus of this discussion, Allah is the one God, the Supreme, the Omnipotent, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Belief and faith in God, his power, his wisdom, and his mercy are ideologies shared by all Muslims, regardless of sectarian differences and

degrees of religiosity. Muslims call themselves "believers" in God, and they attempt to follow the Sunna, or the "straight path" forged by the Prophet Muhammad, whose exemplary life is described in the Hadith, a collection of his sayings and deeds. Islamists, or those Egyptians who are extremely devout, or "Sunni" as they are called in Egypt, are characterized by their efforts to follow as closely as possible Islamic scriptural ideals as stated in the Qur'an and Hadith.

Although the vast majority of Egyptians are not "devout" in this sense, most are "religious" in that they profess belief and faith in God, attempt to undertake the "five pillars" of Islam (namely, profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, the fast of Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca), and strive to avoid wrongdoing and practices that are *haram*, or sinful, according to the tenets of Islam in general and Islamic jurisprudence in particular. Yet, it is also important to note that most Egyptians, both men and women, are not religiously educated in a formal manner, especially those who are illiterate and who are therefore unable to read the Islamic scriptures. In Egypt, it is estimated that approximately 37 percent of adult males and 66 percent of adult females are illiterate (Omran and Roudi 1993), effectively barring the majority of Egyptian Muslims from the acquisition of religious knowledge, except through nonprint media (for example, television and radio broadcasts, audiocassettes, and so forth). Furthermore, because Egyptian women are essentially barred from many of the "formal" practices of Islam — including Friday communal prayer services at mosques, where religious clerics offer interpretive sermons — they are less likely than men to be well versed in religious matters.

Yet, despite their lack of formal participation in orthodox religious rites and their lack of religious education, most poor urban women in Egypt consider themselves to be religiously pious and guided by God, whom they see as playing a profoundly important role in their lives. To understand the nature of women's religiosity and its influence on their religious praxis, including their healing pilgrimages, it is necessary first to typify poor urban Egyptian women's religious beliefs — beliefs that have rarely been privileged in academic discourse.

Women's Religious Beliefs

Despite abundant and far-reaching scholarship on Islam, scant attention has been paid to Muslim women's religious observance, including the

nature of their religious beliefs and the transformation of their beliefs into practice. As Fernea and Fernea (1972) note, Western scholars in particular have been guilty of assigning Muslim women to a "residual category," failing to study either their public or private religious lives and portraying them, erroneously, as less devout than men. Not only has the impact of Islam on women's lives been ignored, but few if any scholars have seriously examined the impact of *women on Islam* in their roles as female saints, functionaries, curers, and early contributors to the Islamic scriptures (Ahmed 1989; Dwyer 1978). This lack of academic privileging of Muslim women's religious experience, practice, and influence — and the presumption that women are somehow subordinate and peripheral in religious as in other matters — has seriously hampered the anthropology of Islam, according to Tapper and Tapper (1987). They state:

We maintain on the one hand that men's day-to-day observance of apparent "orthodoxy" is far from unproblematic, and on the other that it is wrong to assume *a priori* that women's religious "work" is less important than or peripheral to that of men. Not only do women too practice the central, day-to-day rites of Islam, but in their performances they may carry a religious load often of greater transcendental importance to the community than that borne by men. We maintain that any anthropology of Islam will be inadequate unless it gives full consideration to both women's and men's religious ideas and practices and the relation between them. (1987:72)

Although various scholars have advocated additional research on Islam as *lived* by both men and women, the links between Islamic orthodoxies and gender, and the specific kinds of everyday Islamic religious praxis, including gendered praxis, typical of particular local contexts (Delaney 1991; Early 1993a; Eickelman 1982; Eickelman and Piscatori 1990a; Fernea and Fernea 1972; Tapper and Tapper 1987), relatively little ethnographic work of this nature has been carried out.¹ This is as true for Egypt as it is for other parts of the Middle East, with the result that little is known about how Egyptian Muslim women practice their religion or how this practice relates to their beliefs in divinity.

Certainly, a gendered corrective is called for, but one that does not essentialize women as a monolithic, "unorthodox" religious force, opposed in belief and practice to the "orthodox" world of Muslim men. Among poor urban Egyptian women at least, their religious convictions are often shared with men, who may, in fact, play a pivotal role in educating their wives, mothers, and daughters about religious matters. Furthermore, in urban Egypt at least, the popularization and commercialization of Islam —

through well-received television and radio shows and a thriving market in religious audiocassettes — has brought Islam to the masses, leading to the increasing religious education of illiterate women and perhaps to the increasing homogenization of their religious knowledge.

But what are poor urban women's religious beliefs? And how do they pertain to their understanding of infertility? As we shall see, women's beliefs in and about divinity could not play a more central role in their understanding of misfortune, of which infertility is but one example. Ultimately, it is women's beliefs in God and his role in their lives which informs *all* aspects of their pilgrimages for pregnancy, pilgrimages which they view as divinely inspired.

GOD AS CREATOR

First, most poor urban Egyptian women see God, who is referred to as male, as the creator of the universe and of all life in it. Egyptian women are fond of saying that "God is everything" and "everything is from God." All creation, including the creation of human beings, is ultimately in God's hands; or, as Egyptian women say, "human beings are incapable of creating even a fingernail." Most important to this discussion, God is seen as orchestrating human procreation. Not only does God decide who will be fertile and who will be infertile, but he also imbues each fetus with a soul and decides which ones will be male and which will be female. The proof of his creative force, according to women who know the approximate translation,² can be found in the following Qur'anic verse (42:49–50):

Unto Allah belongeth the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth. He createth what He will. He bestoweth female [offspring] upon whom He will, and bestoweth male [offspring] upon whom He will;
Or He minglenth them, males and females, and He maketh barren whom He will. Lo! He is Knower, Powerful."

Thus, human procreation is divinely guided, and, as such, it is ultimately beyond human control. Speaking of procreation, one woman explained, "He creates pregnancy. He creates children. And he makes liquid water into a fetus." Or, as another put it, "He's the one who created children from the beginning to the end. It's with his power. He's the one who gives the fluid to the husband, and God is the one who is creating the baby inside us, and he makes the baby move, for example, its fingers and everything."

Because God ultimately controls procreation, it is his decision to give children or not to give. Thus, women who use birth control may still

become pregnant because God wants this. Likewise, a husband and wife may never have a child, because God wants this, too. These decisions are his and his alone, because God is the ultimate creator. Women express this variously, with formulaic phrases such as, "It's in God's hands," "God decides," "God has his reasons," "It's God's judgment," "It's when God wants," "God permits," "It's God's wish," "It's God's will," and "God gives his permission." Or, as they are particularly fond of saying when referring to their own inconsequential role in such matters, "There is nothing in our hands."

PREDESTINATION

Thus, God, who is omnipresent, is the one who decides everything, and these decisions are made by him before an individual's life begins. Once born, an individual's destiny has already been determined. As many poor urban Egyptian women explain it, on the tree of life, each person has a leaf, upon which his or her life is written; included on the leaf is the time of birth, if and when marriage will occur, if and when children will be born, and how and when a person will die, at which time the leaf falls from the tree.

Because each individual's life is "written" by God (with the help of his angels) in this manner, life occurrences can be seen as being under God's control, according to his wishes and his will. Events are not random; rather, they occur at predestined times according to a plan, the purpose and meaning of which can only be known by God. For example, if God does not allow a woman to become pregnant, God knows that her time for motherhood has yet to come. Furthermore, he has his reasons for waiting — for example, to prevent the birth of an abnormal child or one who will grow up to lead a bad life. God has his reasons for everything he does, including "approving the timing" of life's events. This is the nature of God's wisdom and judgment. Thus, women who fail to become pregnant can often be heard to remark, "My time hasn't come yet."

HUMAN VOLITION

Yet, just because life is "written," human beings are not passive creatures, devoid of volition and will. God expects human beings to exercise their minds and to make choices, including decisions about how to lead their lives. As one woman explained, "God is the one who decides your life, but he gave you a brain, and when he gave you a brain, he showed you good and bad. It's the person himself who decides to go the right or wrong way."

Although humans have been divinely endowed with intelligence and morality, God is seen as making the "important" decisions about humans' lives, overruling and reversing human decisions at any time, for reasons known only to him (since he does not "reveal his secrets"). As one woman explained, "You can think and imagine and wish for lots of things, and God may have in mind something totally different for you. We have a saying, 'The worshipper is in a state of thinking, and God does the action.'" Another commented, "Each person has twenty-four wishes, but God doesn't grant them all. There is always something missing, including possibly children." Others argue that the more a human being wishes for something, the less likely God is to grant that wish. Therefore, those who are "dying for" children do not get them, and those who do not want children get too many. One woman put it this way: "Those who have children suffer from responsibility, and those who don't search. Neither is happy. It's his [God's] ability and greatness that no one should question."

Although God decides the "important" matters of humans' lives, he is seen as disapproving of human passivity and indecision. Therefore, it is argued that God expects those who are sick to seek treatment. Infertile women take this notion very seriously. As one woman stated, "God prevents us from having something, but he shows us the way to get it. It says in the Qur'an, 'Try my worshippers, and I will try with you.'" Another explained, "He's the one who decides and gives. The human beings have nothing in their hands. It's God who makes the doctors. He creates the medicine, and he's the one who showed us to go to doctors." Or, as another woman put it, "If you try to help yourself, God will help you. That's why God gave medicine."

But, if and when "medicine" takes its effect is God's decision. God may choose to heal or not to heal, to give life and take life away. As one woman explained,

It's written that God created medicine and said, "Search for medicine, and I will help you." But you have to think about it, too. For example, someone has a bad sickness and with treatment, he doesn't get well. And he goes back to God with his prayers, and there is something written in the Qur'an, "Wish from God and have faith in Him, and He can make you well from anything you can't get over." Some people get well; these are the ones who have *real* faith in God. It doesn't matter that you don't have faith if you don't get well. A woman can be very close to God, but that's a fact she has to live with.

Thus, in matters of life and death, sickness and health, God is seen as having the "final word." Final outcomes, such as irreversible infertility or

even death, are always under his control and "out of the hands" of humans. God may grant or deny human wishes for wellness, cause or alleviate human suffering. These are his choices, and his alone. Although humans may attempt to overcome their problems—and, in fact, are expected to do so—they cannot, ultimately, overcome God's will regarding their health and well-being.

Whether God creates all medical problems, however, is a point of some debate. Although it is widely believed that God creates all medical conditions, just as he provides all remedies, some women contend that their medical conditions, such as blocked tubes, are the result of irresponsible actions, or "human failing." Speaking of her own medical condition, one woman remarked, "He's not the one who causes, for example, blocked ovaries. That's the negligence of humans. If one of my ovaries is blocked, that's because when I delivered a baby, I didn't do a D & C." However, a woman expressing the majority opinion stated, "Just like anyone born without vision or fingers, she's born with blocked tubes. He has power in everything. He can make all women pregnant if he wants to, and he can prevent all women from being pregnant if he wants to."

GOD'S REASONS FOR HUMAN SUFFERING

When deciding who will have blocked tubes and who will not, who will bear children and who will remain barren, who will live and who will die, God is not whimsical. All of the decisions made by God, even when they cause human suffering, are made for a reason and are meaningful. For example, in his actions, God may be reminding human beings of his power, strength, and omnipotence. Or he may be setting an example, so that human beings may learn from one another. Or he may make human beings suffer for something so that, when they finally receive it, they will be grateful and caring. Or he may deprive individuals of happiness in their earthly lives so that they will be rewarded in Paradise or suffer less on the Day of Judgment. As one woman stated, "A needle prick in life lightens some suffering in the afterlife."

Or God may be testing human beings. According to most poor urban Egyptian women, infertility is best viewed as a test of both patience and religious faith. When God fails to grant a husband and wife a child, he is testing their faith in him and their ability to endure hardship—just as he tested Ibrahim (Abraham) and Zakariya (Zacharias) in the days of old, giving them children when they were elderly and their wives were barren or postmenopausal.³ Indeed, God is thought to have tested the Prophet

Muhammad himself, whose first wife, Khadija, was the only one to bear living children. Although 'Aisha, one of the Prophet's wives, was infertile, she was deemed "the Mother of the Worshipers of God" by the Prophet and was held in great favor by him (Ferneu and Bezirgan 1985).

According to poor urban Egyptian women, when God tests husbands and wives in this way, he seeks to determine: Will they continue to believe in me, even if I allow years to pass without granting them a child? Will the wife give up her quest for therapy? Will the husband divorce his infertile wife in haste? Do they have faith in my ability to help them overcome their problem?

According to one woman, "He tests the strength of their faith and the slavery of humans to him, to see if they will be patient or not. He can give a person a child after twenty years. He means something by infertility, but we don't know what it is." Commenting on infertile women's often frenetic "searches for children," another woman argued, "Women are *not* patient. They make themselves into *'attārīn*. They fill themselves with herbs and spices they think will help them get pregnant. But this is all nonsense. A few months go by and they tell the woman, 'Get up and do something. Have a D & C, a tubal insufflation.' But if she does ninety-nine operations and God doesn't want her to have children, she never will."

Those who are impatient or without faith will never be granted a child by God. But whether God punishes humans for their misdeeds by depriving them of his gift of children is a point of great contention. According to most women, infertility is a test but *not* a punishment. They argue that God only punishes in the afterlife and that during one's earthly life, God is forgiving and merciful. As one woman stated, "God never does anything bad like that. He's all goodness. He's big. He never harms. He's generous. He forgives. God has his own wisdom."

Those women who disagree with this view tend to be ones who feel that they (or their husbands) are, in fact, being punished for their mistakes and improprieties. These include, *inter alia*, failing to pray; refusing an arranged marriage; committing adultery, premarital sex, or prostitution; engaging in malicious gossiping or wishing harm to one's enemies; using birth control before having children; being tyrannical or abusive to one's spouse; divorcing a spouse and abandoning one's children; interfering with a sibling's wedding plans; and committing a heinous crime, such as beating, raping, or killing someone.

Obviously, there are levels of difference between these misdeeds, with greater misdeeds being punished more severely, according to those who

view God's punishment in this way. For example, a woman who underwent three abortions shortly after her marriage to a coercive husband who eventually divorced her is certain that her continuing infertility in her second marriage is God's way of punishing her. "I cry all the time now that I did them," she lamented. "I'm afraid from God that I'm going to hell. But I think I was too young then, and I did as I was told by my husband."

Furthermore, God is seen as punishing those who doubt his wisdom. Thus, infertile women who lament their fate and ask repeatedly "Why me?" are considered unlikely to receive God's favor of children. As one woman explained, "God gets angry and will never give you."

Indeed, as apparent in the Qur'an, God regards children as a great favor to believers, extolling the virtues of children in his proclamation, "Wealth and children are the adornment of earthly life." Yet, he reminds believers that wealth and children are also human beings' greatest temptations, and he cautions that good deeds are more deserving of reward in his eyes.

Thus, according to poor urban Egyptian women, religious faith and devotion to a merciful and compassionate God are the only *true* hope for overcoming a problem that he created, for reasons that only he can know. For Egyptians, who attempt to surmise these reasons without questioning their divine inspiration and authority, ultimate causes of and solutions to infertility problems lie with God himself, who helps his worshippers in their quests to overcome the more proximate and medial causes of infertility that he creates. Thus, it is God who decides the outcome of each woman's therapeutic quest, including if and when conception will occur.

However, because the gift of fertility is ultimately incumbent upon God's divine wisdom and will, convincing God of one's worthiness as a (re)productive member of society and as a parent is viewed by many Egyptian women as an essential part of the "search for children." How one seeks to demonstrate one's worthiness depends to some degree on one's religious orientation, level of religiosity, and religious education. For poor urban Egyptian women — who tend to be minimally schooled, religiously illiterate, "religious" but not devout, and who often do not pray regularly, because of their lack of knowledge of the formulaic prayer verses and the culturally grounded belief that prayer is an activity restricted to men and older women — leading an upright life is seen as the best demonstration of one's worthiness in the eyes of God and one's ongoing devotion to him. Many women attempt to pray informally, if not frequently and correctly, and generally attempt to be good Muslims by following widely accepted

religious codes of behavior. For some, the experience of infertility also makes them more religious, given their conviction that they and their husbands are being "tested" by God in order for him to determine the sincerity and strength of their faith and patience.

However, for many of these women, an exceptional demonstration of one's devotion, belief, and faith in God involves *ziyārāt*, or "visits" (pilgrimages), to holy places associated with the dead *shuyūkh bil-baraka* favored by God for their goodness and piety.

Healing Pilgrimage

In the western Nile Delta region of Egypt, thousands of Muslim pilgrims make *ziyārāt* to the many shrines, some large, some quite small, dotting the urban and rural landscape. Most of these shrines contain the tombs of dead saints, and some, especially the relatively famous ones, host magnificent mosque-tomb complexes. Most of these shrines are associated in some way with a dead "pious one" (Eickelman 1989) — a *ṣayyid* (a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad); a renowned cleric who is regarded as pious for the quality of his learning; a founder or descendant of a founder of a *Ṣūfī* religious brotherhood; or a "holy" person, male or female, known for exceptional religiosity and the demonstrated ability during his or her lifetime to perform "miracles." For the masses of rural and urban poor Egyptians who visit these sites as pilgrims — given that pilgrimage of this sort tends to be a class-based phenomenon (Biegman 1990) — these dead *shuyūkh*, as all Muslim religious notables are called, are believed to radiate *baraka*, a living form of beneficial power associated with divine blessing, grace, or holiness, which is transferrable to their descendants, followers, and visitors (Biegman 1990).

Belief in the miraculous *baraka* of saints, the formation of "cults" involved in the veneration of such saints, and the subsequent movement of thousands of miracle-seeking pilgrims to and from saints' shrines are considered to be among the major hallmarks of North African Islam (Crapanzano 1973; Eickelman 1976; Eickelman and Piscatori 1990a; Gellner 1969). Although Egypt is usually not regarded as part of this North African complex, scholars of Egypt have documented the existence of similar cults of saints, primarily *Ṣūfīs*, dating back to at least the sixteenth century (Gilsenan 1973; Gran 1979). From the beginning, these cults were involved in healing, especially among the poor and among women, whose

conditions had worsened with the development of protocapitalist market conditions in the country (Gran 1979).

Today in Egypt, the poor, and poor women in particular, continue to worship dead, miracle-working saints, whose tombs, if relatively accessible, they may visit on a regular basis. Indeed, in Egypt, it is women — not men — who are most actively involved in saint veneration and who are therefore the primary participants in the salvation-oriented *ziyārāt* to local and regional saints' tombs. The essentially "female character" of local pilgrimage in the Middle East (Betteridge 1983) — and men's accompanying embarrassment and even disdain regarding this activity — has been noted by a number of scholars working in various regions of the Middle East (Crapanzano 1973; Dwyer 1978; Mernissi 1977; Tapper 1990). Yet, with a few notable exceptions, the character of female participation in saint worship and pilgrimage has been poorly studied, in part because of lack of interest and in part because of the inaccessibility of these activities to Western male researchers (Betteridge 1989). In her examination of why Muslim women more often than Muslim men are concerned with shrine visitation and why such women's visits are often disparaged by men, Tapper notes:

In academic studies of Muslim societies, men's ideals, beliefs, and actions have usually been privileged above those of women; typically, this bias confirms and reinforces the bias against women that is intrinsic to Muslim cultural traditions themselves. If questions of gender are to be investigated, it is essential to analyse a notion such as *ziyārāt* that has a prominent place in practised Islam, and to consider implicit behaviours that are associated with it. (1990:237)

That Tapper's essay on gender and pilgrimage in Turkey is the only one of its kind in a recent volume devoted to *Muslim Travellers* (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990b) is typical of the androcentrism in Middle Eastern pilgrimage studies. Likewise, the nexus between healing and pilgrimage, which often go hand in hand, is overlooked in that volume, and has been underprivileged in general as a topic of serious Middle Eastern scholarship. Although it is easy to find passing references to women's involvement in healing pilgrimages to saints' shrines,⁴ extended discussions are virtually absent in the ethnographic or other social scientific literature. To wit, in the only major work on Middle Eastern *Ṣūfī* healing, Crapanzano (1973), who studied the psychotherapeutically oriented Hamadsha order of Morocco, essentially discounts the experiences of women, including what appears to be their active participation as "patients" in both the Hamadsha healing rituals themselves and in pilgrimages to the Hamadsha saints' tombs. For

example, Crapanzano mentions the problem of "barrenness" in passing five times, citing it as one of the primary reasons why *women* seek Hamadsha healing and journey to the Hamadsha *zawiyas*, or lodges, and to the saints' mosque-tombs located in a distant, rural area. However, his psychoanalytically oriented discussion of the Hamadsha "system of therapy" focuses exclusively on *male* role conflict and mentions nothing of the conflict faced by infertile women unable to continue the male line in this monogenetically oriented society.

Among women in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, healing, as well as the solution of other difficult life problems, is a primary impetus for *ziyārāt* to saints' shrines (Betteridge 1983, 1992; Dwyer 1978; Early 1993b; Mernissi 1977; Morsy 1993). Such healing, furthermore, may be multifaceted. On the one hand, belief in *baraka* and the abilities of *barmak*-bestowing dead *shayūkh* to perform miraculous cures, including the restoration of fecundity to the infertile, brings hope to those whose health problems seem intractable or who have failed to find relief in other therapeutic venues. In addition, the activities of the pilgrimage itself—including the respite from everyday routine, the exhilaration of travel to a spiritually "magnetic" center (Preston 1992), the cathartic effects of unburdening one's "private heartaches" (Tapper 1990) on a nonjudgmental but responsive holy one who can be requested to act on one's behalf, the ability to be part of a sympathetic, experienced community of female sufferers who often congregate at these shrines (Mernissi 1977), and the ministrations of the living *shayūkh bil-baraka* who often attend to these shrines and who pray and write healing *hugub* for suffering pilgrims—are part and parcel of the healing process. Thus, even if miraculous cures do not eventuate, the pilgrimage itself may bring relief and "psychological relaxation," as well as spiritual renewal through contact with divinity (Betteridge 1983).

Furthermore, as Mernissi (1977) has noted, Middle Eastern women's pilgrimages to holy sanctuaries are "power operations," means by which subaltern women can seek control over their sexuality and fertility in societies that tend to be emphatically patriarchal. The *empowering* effects of pilgrimage stand in stark contrast to women's *disempowering* encounters with physicians and hospitals, which, as we shall see in the following chapters, are often subordinating, frustrating, even humiliating experiences for poor Egyptian women. Speaking of Moroccan women's similar experiences, Mernissi states:

In the . . . hospitals, women hold a classically powerless position, condemned to be subjects, receptacles of impersonal decisions, executors of orders

given by males. In a public hospital, the doctor is the expert, the representative of the bureaucratic order, empowered by the written law to tell her what to do; the illiterate woman can only execute his orders. . . . Moreover, the hospital is a strange, alien setting, a modern building full of enigmatic written signs on doors and corridors. . . . In comparison to the guardians who stand at the hospital's gates and its offices, the saint's tomb is directly accessible to troubled persons. . . . The task of the saint is to help her reach her goal. She will give him a gift or a sacrifice only if he realizes her wishes, not before. With a doctor, she has to buy the prescription first and has no way of retaliating if the medicine does not have the proper effect. It is no wonder, then, that in spite of modern health services, women still go to the sanctuaries in swarms, before they go to the hospital, or simultaneously, or after. Saints give women vital help that modern public health services cannot give. They embody the refusal to accept arrogant expertise, to submit blindly to authority, to be treated as subordinate. . . . Visits to and involvement with saints and sanctuaries are two of the rare options left to women to *be*, to shape their world and their lives. And this attempt at self-determination takes the form of an exclusively female collective endeavor. (1977:103–4)

In Egypt as in Morocco, pilgrimages to saints' tombs allow women to reaffirm, if only temporarily, control over their lives and their personal well-being through actions that are autonomous from men. Typically, *ziyārāt* to the mosque-tombs of blessed *shayūkh* are journeys that women make alone, allowing women the opportunity to demonstrate their activism and independence. Furthermore, travel may be arduous; among Alexandrian women, for example, four of the five major pilgrimage centers they visit are located in distant cities and require that women face and overcome the importunities of public transportation. Thus, even though women's *ziyārāt* often require money from husbands and, in most cases, permission to travel by husbands or other family members, the pilgrimage typically remains an exclusive female activity, with shrines often serving as protected "female turf" (Betteridge 1983).

For the poor Egyptian women who make pilgrimages to these shrines, their journeys are typically instrumental quests, motivated in large part by their desire to obtain solutions to and relief from major problems plaguing their lives or those of their loved ones. For many infertile women, the quest for divine intervention through pilgrimages to holy sites is considered an integral part of the search for children, and, for some, is a component of their overall quest for therapy that may be repeated many times during their "crisis years" (Dwyer 1978) as potentially reproductive, but infertile women.

In the view of infertile women, there are two compelling reasons for making such pilgrimages. First, many poor Egyptian women believe that

mosques and other holy places are "houses of God" and that God is more likely to hear and answer their prayers in a "pure" place where he is certain to be present. Thus, Egyptian women tend to distinguish between "domestic" prayer at home and prayer in a pilgrimage center. Essentially, women believe the shrines of saints to be better settings for making their direct "prayer-requests" to God. For infertile women, these prayer-requests are usually quite straightforward — namely, women ask their merciful God to grant them a child.

However, after registering their direct prayer-requests to God, women make a second, "indirect" prayer-request to the *shaykh bil-baraka* to whom the shrine is dedicated. As women understand it, *shayyikh bil-baraka*, who are "dead but alive," are "close to God" and can therefore serve as direct intermediaries by helping to ensure that God hears and considers the original prayer-request. Furthermore, praying to *shayyikh* who are known to be close to God is a way of obtaining some of the *shayyikh's baraka* itself, which, in essence, is like receiving God's grace. The desire to obtain *baraka* from holy *shayyikh* is a major reason why many Egyptian women prefer to make their prayer-requests at pilgrimage centers. With this transfer of *baraka* — usually obtained through the circumambulation of the saint's tomb and touching of the cloth covering his grave — women feel empowered and believe that their chances of being rewarded by God are ultimately much greater.

Furthermore, women typically vow to compensate the *shaykh bil-baraka* for his intercessional role. These vows tend to involve tangible promises of material repayment for the *shaykh's* spiritual and material assistance — but if and only if a woman's prayer-request is granted. For example, a woman whose infertility problem was linked to her husband's impotence visited a famous Alexandrian mosque-tomb after having gone for an entire year without having sexual relations with her husband. In the mosque, she first asked God to help her with her problem, and then she asked the same of the *baraka*-bestowing *shaykh*, promising to return with "whatever amount of money" she could afford if he interceded on her behalf. As she explained, "as soon as I arrived home, we had sex."

Such "reciprocity" to *shayyikh* on the part of poor infertile women takes many forms. Some women promise that they will return to the pilgrimage site annually, often at the time of the saint's *mīlād*, and they may promise to make an annual contribution as well. Other women promise to bring small gifts to the shrine, such as toys to be distributed to poor children, or pairs to refurbish the shrine, or candles, cloths, and handkerchiefs to illuminate

and decorate the grave, or new prayer-rugs for the mosque floor. Still others promise to hire a *shaykh* to read the Qur'an or a religious singer to praise the Prophet.

Partly because of the contractual nature of the vowing process and partly because of the worship and veneration of intermediary figures (which is anathema to Islam, constituting, as it does, the supreme sin of *shirk*, the association of other beings with God), women's pilgrimage activities in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East are considered quite controversial by orthodox religious forces, as well as by many men, who eschew what they view as the self-serving quality of such activities (Betteridge 1989; Tapper 1990). As Tapper (1990) sees it, it is the content of women's exchanges in particular — which are neither "pure gifts" nor forms of market exchange — that may explain why *ziyārat* are derided by men with such "dismissive hostility." She notes:

Ironically, precisely because the women's activities blur the kinds of exchanges which are well-defined and prestigious in terms of orthodox religion . . . women confirm, to men and themselves, their distance from the sources of both supernatural and secular power. In each case the exchanges associated with women's movements outside the home become a further expression of women's marginality and dubious orthodoxy, while their inferior gender status becomes a self-fulfilling ideology in itself. (Tapper 1990:253)

Yet, for poor infertile women, their strictly *quid pro quo* transactions with dead *shayyikh*, who receive "payment" only if they solve a woman's problems, are preferable to the often "useless" and exorbitantly expensive encounters with other healers, who tend to exact compensation before their "cures" are ever realized. Furthermore, as seen in the previous chapter, the fees demanded by healers for their services may be well beyond the means of poor women and their husbands, who are often forced to delay therapeutic intervention until sufficient funds for treatment can be secured. The same is true of biogynecologists in Egypt, who rarely offer "sliding scales" of payment for poor patients and who charge in one office visit what a poor family may expect to earn in an entire month. Thus, vowing to saints — and the inherently individualized process of determining appropriate, affordable, cash and noncash repayments, "according to one's means" — makes immanent sense to poor women, whose access to monetary funds are usually quite restricted.

Furthermore, part of the appeal of pilgrimage in Egypt lies in the presence of living *shayyikh bil-baraka*, who frequent pilgrimage centers and are

thought of as healers in their own right. Some of these *shayūkh* are descendants of the dead *shayūkh* enshrined in their tombs. At shrines dedicated to *Ṣūfīs*, many are members of the saint's brotherhood, and some are considered to have acquired the dead *shaykh's* *baraka* through years of devoted service to the perpetuation of his memory. For troubled pilgrims, these living *shayūkh* may offer a number of special services, such as the reading of the Qur'an "over" them, the writing of religious *hugub*, and the pronouncement of special *ṣalāwāt*, or healing prayers. Some *shayūkh* may not speak, but may initiate bodily contact, such as the touching of pilgrims' hands, bestowing their own *baraka* on the afflicted in this manner. Many of these *shayūkh*, furthermore, preside over collection boxes, where pilgrims make their devotional alms and repay the saint for miraculous services rendered.

Muslim Pilgrimage Centers in Northwestern Egypt

For women in Alexandria and the northwestern Nile Delta region of Egypt, there are five major pilgrimage centers, comprising large mosque-tomb complexes located in Cairo, Alexandria, and two provincial cities in between. Although *ziyārāt* to these major centers are desirable, they are often impractical for women, who journey instead to lesser shrines, which, nonetheless, may offer more specialized healing. For many poor women, *ziyārāt* to the "big" shrines offer once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to visit other cities, particularly Cairo, which is an infrequent destination for the Alexandrian poor. In Cairo, the number of shrines is tremendous (Biegmian 1990), but Alexandrian women generally recognize two as being of supreme importance, with the three other "big" shrines being located closer to home. These pilgrimage centers can be described as follows.⁵

MOSQUE OF SAYYIDNĀ AL-ḤUSAYN (CAIRO)

The mosque of Sayyidnā al-Ḥusayn is one of Cairo's principal pilgrimage centers and is one of two in which entry is forbidden to non-Muslims.⁶ The head of Ḥusayn, one of the twin sons of Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, is said to be buried here. Because of this, the mosque is a major pilgrimage site for Egyptians, as well as for Shi'a Muslims from around the world, who revere Ḥusayn and his father Ali (the fourth caliph and son-in-law of the Prophet) as Shi'a martyrs. For the Shi'a community, the celebration commemorating the *mīlād*, or birthday, of Ḥusayn is one of the most important events in the calendar year of religious celebrations and is held for two weeks around the mosque in Cairo. For the urban and rural poor of

Egypt, who are predominantly Sunni Muslims, the mosque is also a major pilgrimage center throughout the year, given its dedication to the Prophet's grandson.

MOSQUE OF SAYYIDAH ZAYNAB (CAIRO)

Many pilgrims who visit the mosque of Sayyidnā al-Ḥusayn also visit the mosque dedicated to his sister, Zaynab, who fled to Cairo and who died and was buried at the site of this mosque. As with the mosque of her brother, the mosque of Sayyidah Zaynab is restricted to Muslims, and, similarly, it is the site of a major *mīlād* celebration, which lasts two weeks and which is attended by both non-Egyptian Shi'a and Egyptian Sunni Muslims.

MOSQUE AND TOMB OF SAYYID AḤMAD AL-BADAWĪ (TANTA)

In the provincial city of Tanta, located on the major agricultural highway between Cairo and Alexandria, the mosque-tomb of Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, a thirteenth-century founder of a still operative *Ṣūfī* brotherhood, is a major pilgrimage center, attracting as many as two million visitors during the *shaykh's* *mīlād* alone. Because of the *shaykh's* founding of the Badawīyyah (also called Ahmadiyyah) *Ṣūfī* brotherhood, the magnificence of his large mosque-tomb, and his spectacular *mīlād* celebration, which follows directly after the major cotton harvest and is the largest in the Delta region, this pilgrimage center is one of the most active in northern Egypt and is the subject of two recent scholarly works, including an ethnographic film called *El Moulid* by the Egyptian-born anthropologist Fadwa El Guindi and a text entitled *The Hidden Government* by Reeves (1990).

MOSQUE AND TOMB OF SAYYID IBRĀHĪM DASŪQĪ (DASUQ)

In the agricultural town of Dasuq, located northwest of Cairo and south-east of Alexandria, the mosque-tomb of Sayyid Ibrāhīm Dasūqī, an eminent *Ṣūfī shaykh* and student of Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, is another major pilgrimage site, second only to that of al-Badawī's in Tanta. The *shaykh* to whom this large mosque is dedicated was born into an Egyptian *Ṣūfī* family and studied under Shaikh al-Badawī, reaching such a high state of knowledge that he was encouraged to start his own brotherhood, known as the Dasūqīyah (also Burhamiyyah). His *mīlād* is second in size only to that of Aḥmad al-Badawī in Tanta and follows directly after al-Badawī's.

MOSQUE AND TOMB OF ABŪ 'L-'ABBĀS AL-MURSĪ (ALEXANDRIA)

For Alexandrians, the mosque and tomb of Abū 'l-'Abbās al-Mursī, located on the shores of the Mediterranean in central Alexandria, is their primary