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Allison, C.

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Kurdistan
CHRISTINE ALLISON

The Evolution of Yezidi Religion

From Spoken Word to Written Scripture

The Yezidis of Kurdistan have been called many things, most notoriously 'devil-worshippers,' a term used both by unsympathetic neighbours and fascinated Westerners. This sensational epithet is not only deeply offensive to the Yezidis themselves, but quite simply wrong. Yezidism is not devil-worship, but something far more elusive, and interesting.

Yezidis probably number about 250,000 (though reliable statistics are difficult to find) and their largest communities are currently found in the Dihok, Mosul and Sinjar areas of Northern Iraq. Under the Ottoman Empire, Yezidis played an influential role in Kurdish tribal confederations, but successive persecutions reduced their numbers and drove waves of emigrants into the Caucasus, where they played a notable role in the republics of Armenia and Georgia. Many of the Yezidis of Eastern Turkey were by the second half of the twentieth century living in small, poor villages surrounded by hostile neighbours, and were often reduced to practising their religious and cultural rituals in secret. They have moved *en masse* to Europe, mainly Germany, and the troubled situation in Northern Iraq has prompted many prominent members of the community there to follow them.

The Yezidis are not Muslims. They do not claim Islamic identity; the majority of them disapprove of attempts during the 1970s, enthusiastically backed by Arab nationalist groups, to depict them as Ummayyads (largely on the basis of the somewhat suspect derivation of the name 'Yezidi' from the Caliph Yezid ibn Mu'awiya). Some Orientalists, such as Roger Le Scot, posited a purely Islamic origin for the Yezidis, but such interpretations ignore important elements of Yezidi mythology and practice which undoubtedly have ancient Iranian roots. Historical sources tell us that Yezidism as we now know it grew from the establishment in Kurdistan of the 'Adawiyya order of Sheikh 'Adi ibn Musafir (c. 1073-1162 CE); Yezidi texts and customs show that the enormous influence of Sheikh 'Adi and his order was overlaid upon a background of more ancient beliefs. However, there is not enough evidence to describe this ancient Iranian religion fully, nor

to trace the interplay between it and the Islamic elements in Yezidism. We may note some tantalizing similarities between the religion of the Yezidis and that of other groups who do claim Islamic identity, such as the Ahl-e Haqq of Iranian Kurdistan, but too much speculation on origins soon founders on lack of evidence and risks missing some of the defining aspects of Yezidism today.

This religion, which has aroused so much antagonism, is difficult to summarize succinctly. It is not a religion of the Book; its holy texts are oral and literacy was formerly forbidden to Yezidis. As a religion of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, it has no single statement of faith embracing all Yezidis and no single way of praying. It is a belief-system in a very loose sense, with many variations in practice between individuals and communities. To generalize, seven Holy Beings are venerated, chiefly Melek Tawus (the Peacock Angel identified by some non-Yezidis with Satan). These may be incarnated in human form many times and are called *khas*, enabling the Yezidis to incorporate holy figures from other religions. Islamic figures thus venerated include 'Ali, the Caliph 'Abu Bakir and Hasan al-Basri; from Christianity, Jesus is equated with the Yezidi Sheikh Shems. The overriding importance of respecting purity is obvious not only in the Yezidis' attitude towards the elements, particularly earth and fire, but also in their caste system. Many outsiders have remarked their taboos, particularly the apparently bizarre, such as those on eating lettuce or wearing blue clothes.

Non-Yezidis, almost invariably people of the Book themselves, found this religion without apparent dogma highly deficient. Its holy texts as became known to Westerners were dismissed as childish and nonsensical, as if they

were attempts at Western-style 'theology', without any consideration of their purpose or use in the Yezidi cultural context. For them, because Yezidism apparently lacked the ingredients of a 'proper' religion, its spirituality must be bogus (and the Yezidis mentally deficient) or deceptive (and the Yezidis dishonestly hiding a deeper secret). Sunni Muslims tended to presume less esoteric secrets; as with the Alevi, it was often automatically assumed that different rules of purity implied lack of cleanliness, and festivals where men and women celebrated together to be orgies.

The best way for contemporary scholars studying Yezidism to avoid the above prejudices is to try to understand how the adherents perceive their religion and what it means to them. A good medium for this is the interview. Perhaps we may call this the 'oral religious studies interview'; it is certainly more akin to the oral history interview than the anthropological interview. Questions about dogma and exegesis may be meaningless to the Yezidis, but those about practice and emotional responses can be very revealing. If one has heard pious Yezidis talk about the *khas*, or met the tiny group who lead a life of prayer at the sacred shrine of Lalesh, it is hard to doubt the reality of Yezidi spirituality, despite the lack of formal 'theology'.

This traditional spirituality will no longer be enough for the Yezidi community as it becomes more urban and literate. In Europe in particular, young Yezidis need a religious identity with core beliefs and concepts which can be debated intellectually and explained to outsiders, not expressed merely through non-European practice and odd taboos. They are beginning to rebel against such fundamental rules as marrying within caste. Senior Yezidis realize that the future of their community in

Europe is at stake, and have begun initiatives to collect all relevant oral traditions and forge a written scripture, and to reform some of the taboos. Yezidism will change from an oral religion of orthopraxy to a scriptural religion of orthodoxy, yet even such a fundamental change will be in keeping with its traditions, as it has always evolved to suit its environment, borrowing elements from elsewhere when necessary.

Yezidism is very unlike textbook Islam, but perhaps its spirituality has something to show us about possible ways of studying more mainstream Islamic groups. In rural areas of Kurdistan, there are many illiterate people who are devout Muslims but whose knowledge and expression of their religion is rooted more in the orthopraxy of 'folk religion' than in Islamic scriptural texts. Oral religious studies is a developing field in Near and Middle Eastern studies, and may have much to teach us, not only about minorities, but also about the Muslim majority. ♦

Dr Christine Allison is a lecturer in Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

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