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**Citation**
Jong, A. F. de. (2018). Spiritual elite communities in the contemporary Middle East. *Sociology Of Islam*, *6*(2), 116-140. doi:10.1163/22131418-00602002

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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SOCIOLOGY OF ISLAM 6 (2018) 116-140

Sociology of Islam
brill.com/soi

# Spiritual Elite Communities in the Contemporary Middle East

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## Abstract

This article claims that we are in need of alternative ways of modelling religious diversity in the Middle East. This region is characterized by a high level of religious diversity, which can only be partly explained by the persistence of religions that were already in existence when Islam arose. Many communities came into being since the Islamization of the area. The communities addressed in this article therefore include one pre-Islamic tradition, the Mandaeans, and five communities that crystallized (much) later: the Yezidis, the Ahl-e Haqq, the Druze, the Alawis, and the (Turkish) Alevis. These have often been discussed in conjunction with each other, in ways that are historically and conceptually problematic. A focus on two characteristics these communities share—endogamy and a "spiritual elite" structure—makes it possible to discuss the processes in which these communities have come into being, have crystallized, and relate to the wider Islamic setting in a new light. Three communities have continued to distance themselves from Islam, and three have been in a constant process of negotiating their relation with more mainstream versions of Islam. This has consequences for the maintenance, or gradual dissolution, of religious pluralism in the Middle East.

## Keywords

religious minorities in the contemporary Middle East – religious leadership – endogamy – religious pluralism/diversity – spiritual elites

The Middle East is home to a surprisingly large variety of distinct religious communities. Although it is customary to represent religion in the region in terms of the dominance of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—which together

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represent the vast majority of believers spread unevenly over the area—there are various other communities that are more or less defined by their religion, and that have been part of the texture of many Middle Eastern societies for a very long period. These have been treated in several distinct ways in a long tradition of scholarship. They have often been marginalized out of existence because of their numerical insignificance. In some cases, however, they have been lavished with scholarly attention because of their exotic appeal and their talent to disrupt grand narratives about the situation in the Middle East. Neither of these approaches has been very helpful in making sense of the history or the current situation of religious diversity in the region.

This article attempts to sketch an alternative scenario by focusing on three main areas: (1) the rise and persistence of religious diversity in the Middle East, and its importance for broader questions of the history of religions; (2) the merit of treating a diverse assortment of unrelated religious communities from a single perspective; and (3) the very circumscribed role played by religious leaders in these communities. The discussion focuses especially on two core characteristics: endogamy and the institutionalized nescience that is indicated in the label "spiritual elite communities." I argue that these two core characteristics have been maintained in different ways along a logic of establishing or maintaining proximity or distance to mainstream versions of Islam. This is a complicated argument, but the steps in building it are essential for a proper understanding of the role of religious leaders in these communities.

## Modelling Religious Diversity/Pluralism

Towards the end of the twentieth century, a group of prominent German students of religion began to argue forcefully for the dismantling of the narrative of a "Christian Europe" (Kippenberg, Rüpke and von Stuckrad 2009). They had recognized that mainstream representations of the history of European religion continued to convey what was essentially a religious narrative: how the conversion of Europe to Christianity and the destruction of all local traditional religions had transformed the continent into a cultural unit, and how this process of religious unification had led to global intellectual dominance. This narrative, both in its own right and in its secularized incarnation, foregrounding science and Enlightenment rationalism (or values), was so closely tied up with notions of (Western) European exceptionalism that it needed to be abandoned in favor of the recognition of what they called "a multiple pluralism." Since the group took the interpretation of Europe as the *orbis christianus* (or "Christendom") as their main target, they settled upon a strategy of presenting evidence that showed the complexity of the religious field in Europe



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from the period of late antiquity onwards. The hope was that demonstration of this complexity would provide enough evidence to assail the presumed monolithic Christian identity of pre-modern Europe.

The group's programmatic statement benefited from the much broader rise in academic interest in cultural hybridity and, like this broader trend in Western scholarship, was evidently rooted in societal and political anxieties of the contemporary Western world: debates over multiculturalism, cultural relativism, the future of the nation state, the presumed "return" of religion, etc. So, while their main ambition was to improve the academic understanding of an important subject, it is clear that their celebration of European pluralism, like that of cultural hybridity in general, can be suspected of having exchanged an outmoded ideology (European Christian triumphalism) for one that is currently considered desirable (diversity).

The main reason for suspecting that this is indeed the case is that none of the substantial literature that was produced on what became in effect a flourishing sub-branch of the study of religion ("religion in Europe") indicated an awareness that "pluralism" (or "diversity") is the *default* state of all culture (and religion). There is not currently, and there has never been, any cultural formation that did not develop in contact, and coexistence, with rivalling others. The only possible exception one could adduce are language isolates, such as Sumerian, Elamite, or Basque: these are language families that only have one member. But apart from these, which require their own explanation, "all culture is really transculture" (Pollock 2009: 533). Once this fact is recognized, the often repeated claim that European societies were religiously more complex than the notion of the *orbis christianus* seems to suggest loses much of its meaning. Apart from the fact that reality is by definition more complex than any model—the reduction of complexity is, after all, the main function of a model—pluralism can only be a relative concept. For example, Gähde and Hartmann note: "To model an object or system means to *reduce its complexity* and to provide a simplified description of it. This requires the identification of relevant features of the object or system under investigation that suffice, or so it is hoped, to serve a certain purpose (e.g. confirmation, explanation, prediction or understanding)" (2013: 2). It is possible, and even likely, that there are differences in the level or intensity of religious pluralism in different societies and cultures. This is true *within* the various parts of Europe itself, but it becomes especially clear when one compares the level of pluralism in pre-modern Europe with that of the pre-modern Islamic world in the Middle East. In both settings, one could find Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but religious diversity was far greater and far more durable in the Muslim world than it ever was in Europe. As this article shows, moreover, "external" religious pluralism, i.e., the rise of wholly distinct religious communities, almost continually


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*increased* in the Middle East, whereas pre-modern Europe almost exclusively witnessed an "internal" pluralization within the boundaries of Christianity.

### *De facto and De jure Pluralism*

The differences between these two settings are not restricted to the fact that they display different levels of pluralism, however. They are *systemic* or *institutionalized* differences. The most fruitful way to think of this institutional difference is to represent religious pluralism in pre-modern Europe as a *de facto* pluralism, whereas religious pluralism in the Middle East was a *de jure* pluralism. The Islamic Middle East was *designed* to harbor members of various distinct religions, who were *supposed* to be there. This accommodation excluded parts of the Arabian peninsula, it is true, but it was maintained in the rest of the Muslim world. As a result, the Muslim world was religiously plural from the start, whereas most Christian kingdoms in Europe extended freedom to reside in their territories only to Jews, and even that very limited willingness to accommodate religious others was highly unstable.

So, even though there is obvious merit in highlighting the complexity of the social and political accommodation of religious pluralism in European pre-modernity, the failure to recognize the very real limits to this accommodation leaves a number of imposing questions not just unasked, but unanswerable: Why did Christianity disintegrate internally, but not externally? Why did Islam fragment both internally and externally? Why did Christian Europe attempt to address (or even to undo) its internal religious fragmentation as violently as it did, through persecution, suppression, censorship, and war? Why did the Muslim world *not* do this, but largely chose the path of ignoring the very real differences in Islamic theology, ritual, and community that emerged in the Middle Ages?[1] These are very big questions that will involve specialists from many fields. The present article does not aim to address these questions directly, but they are very much present in the background, since the communities discussed in this paper are one of the most promising lenses through which to gain a clearer insight in the dynamics of religion and religious leadership in the Middle East, both historically and in modern times.

### *The Islamic Accommodation of Other Religions*

One of the finest studies of the development of the Islamic accommodation of non-Islamic religious communities is Yohanan Friedmann's 2003 book on

1 This is not to say that there were no cases of violence or attempts to suppress undesirable theologies in the Muslim world. There obviously were, but even on the level of theological reflection, more effort went into listing variant opinions (and proclaiming them false) than in actually removing them. For this doxographic process of listing opinions see van Ess (2011).



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interfaith relations in the Muslim tradition.[2] Friedmann discusses at length both the scriptural and *hadith*-based underpinnings of the status of the tolerated religious communities—Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and the theoretical community of the Sabians—and the slow and laborious process of legal reasoning that crystallized in the *dhimmi* system (a system in which a limited set of communities defined by religion had the right to dwell and practice their religion in an Islamic state). In his representation, the *dhimmi* status was only extended to religions that existed before the rise of Islam. Since the establishment of Islam marked the final stage of revelation, no legal reasoning could manage to include religions that originated *after* the life of the prophet. He writes:

> Wholly different is the case of religions which came into being after the revelation of the Qur'ān. For them the harshest treatment is reserved, especially if they are derived from Islam. Few people tried to establish a new religion in the lands ruled by Muslims in the medieval period and no toleration was accorded to those who did. In view of the dogma asserting the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, any prophetic claim in the Muslim period was nipped in the bud. (2003: 8)

Friedmann records such new religions arising in modern times, with the obvious cases of the Baha'i faith as an example of a religion that broke even formally with Islam, and that of the Ahmadiyya as an example of a movement that saw itself as a new stage in the development of Islam and its continuous process of divine revelation. While these cases are evidently relevant, Friedmann's remarks about the absence of similar movements and developments in the medieval and early modern periods are difficult to comprehend. For there is substantial evidence for an almost continuous rise of new prophets bearing new messages in a variety of Muslim lands, and the medieval and early modern periods witnessed the rise of a number of new religions in different parts of the Middle East, some of which have survived to the present. The status of all of these is, and has been for a long time, contested and precarious, and there is considerable uncertainty over the processes that led to their formation, or over the ways in which they can, or must, be classified—whether, that is, they belong to the broad Islamic tradition or not, and whether assigning them to that tradition or withholding such a label means very much.

2 See also the detailed study of facts and fiction in Levy-Rubin (2011).


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### *Pre- and Post-Islamic Religions*

This uncertainty is immediately evident from the ways in which they have been studied and classified. Within the mosaic of religious communities of the pre-modern and modern Middle East, there is a wide range of religious communities that indeed predated (sometimes by more than a millennium) the rise of Islam: Zoroastrians, Mandaeans, Samaritans, Jews, and various Christian churches, as well as the now extinct community of the Manichaeans. The main split in Judaism, the branching off of the Karaites, likely took place after the Islamic conquests. The already existing diversity in Christian churches and denominations—following complicated patterns of "ethnic," liturgical, and Christological distinctions—increased substantially after the period of the Crusades through the rise of the so-called "uniate" churches that maintained liturgical, organizational, and legal-canonical individuality while accepting the authority of the papacy.[3]

But alongside these "pre-existing" religious communities and their eventual extensions, there is a cluster of communities that decidedly came into being *after* the Islamic conquests, in various distinct geographical, religious, and social contexts. These include the Yezidis, the Ahl-e Haqq (Yaresan, Ali Ilahi, Kaka'i), the Druze, the Alevis, and the Alawis/Nusayris. The list of similar movements that existed historically but failed to survive to the present is more extensive, and includes the various so-called "neo-Mazdakite" or Khurrami movements (Crone 2012), as well as the Hurufi and Nuqtavi movements (Bashir 2005; Mir-Kasimov 2015).[4] Together, they are traceable over vast areas of the Islamic Middle East, but they are especially densely clustered in Central and Eastern Anatolia, Northern Iraq, and Northwestern Iran, as well as in Lebanon and Syria. Of many of these communities, it is certain that they developed without awareness of, or contact with, the other movements, and one of the reasonable questions to be asked is whether there is any merit in seeing them as a group. For this question to be answered, it is necessary to see how they have thus been clustered together in earlier attempts to make sense of their existence. The picture that arises from these earlier attempts is unfortunately not very promising. There is more than a hint of "Orientalist" fascination in much of the literature, which in some cases is much more extensive than the

3 In spite of many disturbing errors, Müller (2009) gives a good overview of the extent of religious diversity in part of the Middle East.

4 As a community, the Hurufis have been made extinct, but many of their ideas and practices survive to this day, especially within the Bektashi order.



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numerical strength of the various communities would seem to warrant.[5] I discuss these various attempts by focusing on the labels under which (most of) these movements have been subsumed.

## Labelling the Others: Internal and External Classifications

### *Pseudo-Islamic Sects*

The best place to start is probably a book from 1967 by the German anthropologist Klaus E. Müller, bearing the grandiloquent title *Kulturhistorische Studien zur Genese pseudo-islamischer Sektengebilde in Vorderasien* (Cultural-historical studies on the genesis of pseudo-Islamic sectarian complexes in the Near East). Müller, a prominent historian of anthropology, based his research exclusively on travelers' reports and academic works that were considered outdated even at the time of writing. The title deserves careful unpacking: the religions he discusses are subsumed into a "sectarian complex," which is characterized as being "pseudo-Islamic:" they fail a test of individuality, therefore, as well as of authenticity. His conclusion is wholly in line with his grounding in the German-Austrian school of anthropology of the so-called *Kulturkreislehre*: the religious minorities of the Middle East are seen as living remnants of an ancient Mediterranean peasant religion, as well as heirs to various early Christian movements, in particular the Ebionites. The puzzle of their origin, and of their irresistibly exotic taboos—on eating hare, lettuce, or cauliflower, wearing the color blue, etc.—can only be solved by tracing them all the way back to this agricultural Near Eastern substrate complex. Since Müller was seen as an outsider to the field, his interpretations were not eagerly adopted by any specialist in the religions he covered; but he has the merit of insisting on the fact that they *could* be treated in connection to each other.

### *Islamic Gnostics*

Although it was never intended to cover all these communities, the label "Gnosticism" has been widely applied to at least some of them, notably in the (otherwise excellent) study by Heinz Halm, *Die islamische Gnosis* (Islamic Gnosis), which focused mainly on the Alawis and on the mysterious book called *Umm al-kitāb* (the "Mother of the Book"), which has been preserved by the Ismailis of Badakhshan in an extremely recent manuscript transmission

5 A typical example of this "Orientalist" view of these communities is Russell (2014). This is a sympathetic work meant to support communities under threat, but it frames the communities more or less as romantic survivals of Near Eastern paganism.


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in Persian, but was recognized as having its roots in a purportedly "Gnostic" movement in Southern Iraq in Abbasid times (Halm 1982). Halm made the label "Gnosticism" for these (and similar) movements academically respectable, and urged a connection between the movements he discussed and the wide variety of early Christian movements that are often characterized as "gnostic." That label itself has come under attack—though not entirely convincingly—as the product of early Christian identity discourses (Williams 1996; King 2003).[6] That discussion itself came after Halm's important book, but it is clear that the label "gnostic," even in his time, already conjured up notions of heresy and deviance. As an attempt to "familiarize" the movements under discussion, the label is therefore misleading in privileging systems of thought over systems of practice (and social ties), in addition to being anachronistic and anatopistic.

### *Extremism—Ghulūww*

The "native" terms of estrangement *ghulūww* (exaggeration) and *ghulāt* (extremists), are equally anachronistic and anatopistic. They have been applied without much ado to many of these movements, especially in Matti Moosa's *Extremist Shiites* (1988), a most uncritical work with a title that also needs careful unpacking. We have "sects" again, but especially the notion of "extremist" Shi'ites, which is a technical term taken from Muslim heresiography, referring to those who went too far in their devotion to, and veneration of, Ali. Moosa's (1999: 420) conclusion on the origin of these movements—in which, most inappropriately, he sometimes even includes the Yezidis, whose ancestors were known for their special veneration of Yazid bin Muawiya and the Umayyads in general—is worth quoting:

> There is a great deal of fluidity and divergence in the religious practices of the Ghulat sects, due perhaps to the ignorance of their religious leaders, their lack of substantial body of religious literature, and the utter secrecy with which they guard their beliefs. Nevertheless, the investigation of these beliefs shows that they derive partly from heathenism, partly from Shiite Islam, and partly from Christianity.

While he tends to represent these movements in terms of their belief systems, their ritual practices are habitually rendered in terms of "idolatry." The tropes of ignorance, absence of a decent body of texts, and secrecy are commonly applied to these communities and will be taken up below.

6 See, against such proposals, van den Broek (2013: 7–10).



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### *Heresy, Heterodoxy, Syncretism*

In more recent literature, the religions under discussion are almost without exception introduced in terms of deviance. Although calling them heretical has not entirely vanished (Beinhauer-Köhler 2004: 161–75), it is more common to find them introduced with the seemingly more friendly term "heterodox," indicating departure from a most often unstated norm (Kreyenbroek 1998: 163–84). As an alternative, "syncretistic" is often used, which is an equally problematic classification (Kehl-Bodrogi and Kellner-Heinkele). The most impressive work that ties all these connections and labels together is doubtlessly Patricia Crone's *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, which focuses largely on the (extinct) Khurrami movements, but closes with a lengthy survey of those communities under discussion in this paper that have some relation with Iran. The central claim of the book is that there were "unofficial" or "regional" (non-Persian) versions of Zoroastrianism that informed the rise of these religions and survived long enough in local Muslim (especially Sufi) incarnations to inform the genesis of new systems of thought and practice, in which she notoriously included the early Safavids.[7] In stressing how these beliefs—in divine indwelling in humans (*hulul*), reincarnation, cyclical conceptions of time, etc., none of which, incidentally, can be traced in existing pre-Islamic Iranian sources—were incompatible with Islam, she brought together all these movements under the explicit label of heresy.

## A New Attempt at Understanding

The connections between these movements and traditions suggested in this large amount of literature—much of which is of outstanding quality where it discusses these communities separately—seem to have been produced by the observation of Friedmann that such religions *should* not have been thinkable in the Islamic world. It is true, of course, that mainstream Islamic systems of thought and law do not allow for the possibility of new religious identities emerging after the rise of Islam, but it is equally obvious that this has happened with great frequency. This has led to a frantic quest for origins for each community separately. While much learning has gone into debating these questions of origins, none of the proposed reconstructions is even remotely convincing. They are attempts at "familiarizing," or "domesticating," these communities along lines of thought that make sense to modern scholars, many of whom,

7 See the caustic remarks of Hamid Algar in his review of Crone's work (2015: 367–78).


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while not being believers themselves, behave as Sunni Muslim theologians.[8] They vastly privilege ideas and (systematized) beliefs, and locate the genesis of the often highly specific performative dimensions of these religions (rituals, prescriptions) either in these belief systems (frequently without much success) or in the persistence of "pre-Islamic" patterns of action. The fact that the Yezidis are not allowed to eat beans, for example, is then connected with the Pythagorean aversion to these legumes. When all of this fails, there are always the stopgaps of "popular" Islam and an expansive use of Sufism as the most likely background.

Like the other religious minorities of the Middle East, these communities—which I call "spiritual elite communities" for reasons that will become evident below—do not write their own history.[9] This seems to be more a principle of eschewing the recording of mundane events than anything else. This can be illustrated by the example of the Mandaeans. They possess a very extensive written literature, in its own language (Mandaic) and its own particular script. The writing of these texts was mainly a priestly prerogative, and the texts produced were never meant to be consulted by lay Mandaeans. Within this corpus of literary texts, there are various different genres: ritual texts, theological literature, and esoteric commentaries on the various rituals. Most manuscripts have colophons, and the practice of copying the entire colophon of the exemplar into the newly written texts, to which the name of the last scribe is added, gives us virtually the only evidence we have for the history of the community (Buckley 2005). Within the literary/theological texts there are many passages that purport to write the history of the community, but these are almost exclusively confined to a mythical history spanning many generations and do not record the history of local communities or of recent events. Unfortunately, the very rich literature of Muslim historians, including local historians, remains almost totally silent on the Mandaeans. If, in fact, they had not survived to the present, and if they had not preserved as part of their heritage the rich stock of their own literature, we would never have guessed they ever existed. The only sources on the Mandaeans that give us the bare outlines of (parts of) their history derive from travelers and Christian missionaries.

8 Like the use of the term "heresy" in what seems to be an authorial voice, even when reporting on how "locals" would have understood it, this is one of the more marked characteristics of Crone's *Nativist Prophets*; see for example, her remarks on what monotheism *should* be (2012: 453–60).

9 See the valuable remarks on the much better attested Christian communities of the Middle East in Murre-van den Berg (2015: 252–56).



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The Mandaeans are not a unique case in this regard. Roughly the same situation obtains in most of the spiritual elite communities: rich narrative traditions on mythical history, culminating in (at least partly mythical) stories about the founders of the community followed by a long period of silence that is only occasionally broken by observations from outsiders. As a result, most scholarly treatments of these religions focus on origins and on the history of the communities roughly from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, that is, from the colonial and missionary encounters to the nation state.[10] The long history in between the period of formation and the nineteenth century thus remains largely uncharted and untraceable. In that period, however, the social and ritual lives of these traditions must have taken shape.[11] Since most of these communities demonstrably came into being in comparative isolation from each other, and since their belief systems are strikingly divergent, most scholars have latterly forgone the option of studying them together. At most, communities that share certain characteristics, or eventually settled in each other's vicinity are somehow treated in conjunction; this would be the case with the Druze and the Alawis—in spite of their very different (assumed) early histories—and with the Yezidis and the Ahl-e Haqq, and, up to a certain point, even the Alevis, in spite of their very different attitudes towards Islam in general, and Shiʿite Islam in particular. There are, moreover, institutional barriers that have unduly influenced the development of the study of these religions. Turkologists have been working on the Alevi and Bektashi communities, Arabists and Islamic scholars on the Druze and the Alawis, and Iranists on the Yezidis and the Ahl-e Haqq. In all of these language-based disciplines, the study of these communities was a marginal subject, and there are few indications of contact across the language barriers. This is even more true of the study of the Mandaeans and the Zoroastrians, specialists in whose history are almost never to be found in even the best-staffed centers for Middle Eastern studies. As a result, there is frustratingly little communication between the vanishingly small number of specialists in these various religions. Attempts at bringing them together have largely done so by labeling them as deviant. With the important exception of the Alevis, moreover, the comparatively small percentage of the population these religions represent has been exploited to continue their marginalization in their current nation-states in the form of a marginalization in Western centers of Middle Eastern studies.

10 An excellent guide to this "external" literature is Heyberger and Madinier (2011).

11 A very welcome exception is Winter (2016), although he almost programmatically excludes the *religious* dimension of Alawi history from his work.


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## Two Points of Comparison: Endogamy and Spiritual Elites

There are, however, two important reasons why there could be merit in studying them together. These are two fundamental patterns of the social and religious organization of all these communities, which all of them share and which are of great importance both for the larger questions of religious diversity mentioned above, and for the question of religious leadership that forms the central theme of the present volume. The first is endogamy, and the second is the characteristic division of the community into a small section of specialists in whom knowledge of the tradition is vested and a large majority who do not (need to) know much about their religion.

### *Endogamy*

All of these communities are strictly endogamous, governed by two distinct rules: (1) marriage is only allowed between members of the community; and (2) there is no mechanism—such as full-blown conversion, or even acceptance of children from mixed marriages as full members of the community—through which "outsiders" can be brought into the community. Membership of the community is through birth alone, and requires two parents who are members. Both historically and in recent times the strict application of these rules has been the source of frequently recurring violence. There is, however, some variation in the strictness with which endogamy is enforced in the different communities, especially in more recent history. It is necessary, therefore, to give a quick survey of attitudes towards marrying members of other communities in the different traditions, even though reliable information is very difficult to acquire.

Endogamy without the option of conversion or accommodation is strictly maintained by the Druze, Yezidis, and Mandaeans. This has sponsored the notion, both within the communities themselves and in academic studies, that they represent not just religiously-defined communities, but something coming close to distinct ethnicities—in spite of the fact that they are linguistically indistinguishable from the majority populations of Kurds and Arabs.

Endogamy is an important part of the self-understanding of the Druze communities in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel.[12] All communities insist on the necessity of marrying within the tradition, and the strongly held belief in

12 For outstanding ethnographic work on the Druze community of Israel, and that of Syria, see Rivoal (2000); Armanet (2011); Bennett (1999); and Kastrinou (2016). All cover the strategies and interpretations of endogamy extensively, chiefly from an "internal" perspective—from the mouths of their informants.


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reincarnation—which takes place instantly: death is followed immediately by being reborn—is one of the important underpinnings of this attitude. Persons who "marry out" are seen as something unnatural and sacrilegious, and this frequently leads to ostracism and the expectance of a future incarnation outside the community. The sacred history of the Druze is another important factor: with the "closing of the faith" in 1043, after a period of persecution, the community became incapable of admitting outsiders, and the persistence of the community came to rely on its strategy of endogamy alone.

The case of the Mandaeans is different, but shows some similarities. Historically, the Mandaeans must be one of the earliest endogamous religious communities in the area. Mandaean texts are, however, never catechetical in nature: they do not expound, or teach, the beliefs and rituals of the Mandaeans. As a result, there is not much evidence on the rules of marriage in the early layers of Mandaean literature. But not only was Mandaeism never a proselytizing religion, there are passages that explicitly warn against taking wives from among "the godless," because their arrival in the community would destroy its purity.[13] From the earliest Western sources onwards,[14] and very clearly in living practice,[15] it is clear that Mandaeans had no intention, and no technique, of bringing any stranger into the religion, and very much frowned upon members of their own community marrying outside the fold. The most common self-appellations of the community, "the souls" and "the righteous elect," are also connected with extensive descriptions of the mythical history in which the great stem of souls survives numerous cataclysms and is promised preservation until the end of time.[16]

The Yezidis are probably the community most famous for the maintenance of the rules of endogamy, because of their great complexity. For not only are Yezidis expected to only marry other Yezidis, but there is the expectation of endogamy within the three main sections of the community: the *pir*, *sheikh*, and *murid* (Spät 2005: 42–47). It is especially for the various clans in the *pir* and *sheikh* groups that genealogical stories matter, through which they are paired with ancestors and figures from Yezidi history (Kreyenbroek 1995: 125–43).

13 See, for example, Chapter 24 in the Mandaean *Book of John* (Lidzbarski 1915).

14 Ignatius a Iesu (1652: 37): "Their women can only marry men from their own nation, and since the number of women exceeds that of men, if a man would only take a single wife, the result would be that many women would remain unmarried, because of the shortage of men." Translation by author.

15 The only published empirical evidence for this, however, is related to the Mandaean community in Baghdad in the 1970s (Alsohairy 1975: 48–60).

16 A good example is the first book of the Right *Ginza* in (Lidzbarski 1925: 5–30).


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Overarching these smaller, but equally meaningful, narratives is the crucial story of the origin of the Yezidis as a community. For while all other humans are descendants of Adam and Eve, the Yezidis claim to descend from Adam alone. He cast his semen in a jar kept for that special purpose by Melek Tawus, the supreme spiritual being of the Yezidi pantheon. After nine months of gestation, the jar gave birth to a man called *Shehid b. Jerr*, Shehid son of the Jar. He married a *huri* from Paradise and it is to their union that the Yezidis trace their origin. This special origin is important for claims of the special purity maintained by the Yezidi community; of the significance of their having their own religion; and while many modern Yezidis see it as a myth, rather than as actual history, it is very important in supporting the duty of every Yezidi to marry within the community (Spät 2013: 327–68; de Jong 2016: 52–54).

Things are less clear, or have become so, in the other communities with which this article intends to deal. Here, too, historical work is largely absent so that it is difficult to trace the development of strategies of endogamy. The history of the Samaritan community, moreover, shows that situations of acute threat can lead to swift decisions. When they were on the brink of dying out in the early twentieth century, the Samaritans switched from strictly enforced endogamy to reasonably open exogamy, accepting, in 1924, a Jewish bride for one of their sons on condition of conversion and adaptation to Samaritan life.[17] But none of the three communities to be discussed faces such a future, so that there may be other factors at work.

The hardest community to figure out in this respect is that of the Alawis. For intermarriage with Sunni Muslims and Christians is widely reported in sources from the nineteenth century onwards, and is markedly present in the contemporary communities in Syria. Some early outside sources seem to suggest that such marriages, especially with Christian wives, were frowned upon,[18] and a recent detailed ethnography of the Alawis in Turkey represents the community as heavily invested in making sure their sons and daughters marry within the community (Procházka-Eisl and Procházka 2010: 62–64). Certainly in comparison with most other communities, however, endogamy does not seem to have been, for a long time, a central issue for the Alawis. This may be part of the long process, beginning at least in the nineteenth century, in which the community vied to be recognized as belonging within the broad family of

17 For the Samaritans, we can now rely on the brilliant book by Monika Schreiber, *The Comfort of Kin: Samaritan Community, Kinship, and Marriage* (2014).

18 See, for example, Lyde (1860: 185): "It is said that an Ansaireeh who marries a Christian woman can only be purified after washing in forty fountains which have their openings turned towards the south (the direction of Mecca)."



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Shi'ite Islam (Müller 2009: 194–99). But the uncertainty does not stop there. For the same sources that report on the prevalence of mixed marriages do note that initiation—the central rite through which male Alawis properly enter the community, and which carries a very elaborate marriage symbolism (Krieger 2011: 53–75)—is only open to sons born of an Alawi father and an Alawi mother. Sons of mixed marriages could not be initiated.[19] A recently published fragment from a possible Alawi manuscript, moreover, strongly encourages sexual unions between Alawi men and non-Alawi women because these might produce new male members of the community. The manuscript in question, however, may be a forgery.[20]

A similar situation can be observed among the Alevis of Turkey. Endogamy is still very clearly preferred among them, and the rate of endogamy continues to be very high, but it is not an explicit principle of the community, and mixed marriages have become reasonably common.[21] One of the points at which the Bektashi Sufi order distinguished itself from the Alevi (historically: Kizilbash) community is precisely this: the Bektashi order was exogamous and open to converts, whereas the Kizilbash community was not (Dressler 2013: 259). There are many historical difficulties to solve here, the most important of which is once again the attempt throughout the twentieth century to "align" the Alevi religion either with more mainstream versions of Islam or with secularism, both of which would be hard to imagine accompanied by strictly enforced religious endogamy.[22] The finest study of the fate of an endogamous community under the impact of secularism is Marc David Baer's (2010) work on the Dönme community, the offspring of those Ottoman Jews who followed the messianic leader Shabbatai Tzevi in his conversion to Islam in the seventeenth century. Baer locates the dissolution of the Dönme community—which had adopted policies of strict endogamy in order to preserve its distinctiveness—in its warm support for the secularist program of modern Turkey. Something similar

19 Dussaud (1900: 105): "Among the required conditions to be initiated, the most important one is to be the offspring of a Nusayri father and mother. Thus, in Tarsus and its surroundings, many Nusayris have married local women: their children cannot know their religion. As a consequence, Nusayris forbid making converts. This has not always been the case." Translation by author.

20 Krieger (2015), page 580 for the text, and 567–69 on the question of authenticity.

21 Endogamy is repeatedly stressed in the contributions on the Alevi community in Kehl-Bodrogi and Kellner-Heinkele (1997). Information on the impact of secularism and of the diaspora is available in Olsson Ozdalga, and Raudvere, eds. (1998). See also Ozgen (2015: 33–64).

22 This is one of the subjects of Markus Dressler's important book, *Writing Religion* (2013).


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has been observed among the other famous "converted" community, that of the Hemshin of Eastern Anatolia, descendants of early Armenian converts to Islam, who attempted to maintain their linguistic distinctiveness by marrying only within the community (Bellér-Hahn 2007: 338–52).

The last community to be discussed is that of the Yaresan (Hamzeh'ee 1990; Mir-Hosseini 111–34). That community went through a split in the twentieth century, with the activities of a line of reformist thinkers starting with Hajj Ne'matullah Jeyhunabadi and his son Nur Ali Elahi (Mir-Hosseini 1994: 214–16). Both attempted, once more, to bring the beliefs of the Yaresan community in line with more conventional manifestations of Shi'ite Islam by reinterpreting the religion in terms of a generalizable mystical variety of Shi'ite Islam—that line was taken further by Nur Ali Elahi's second son, Bahram, towards an almost non-denominational system of spiritual teachings (Elahi 2002). Their reformist ideas were not adopted by all, but sparked an intense debate that may have hardened the position of those who did not follow Nur Ali Elahi's path. In the absence of detailed historical evidence around this split, it is difficult how to evaluate the distinction found in reformist sources between the two groups that are called *chekideh*, "trickled," and *chasbideh*, "stuck/adhered:" those who were born members and those who had attached themselves to the community, or converts. Given the fact that these words are Persian and not Gurani or Kurdish, and given the complexity of the marriage rules of traditional Yaresan society in Kurdistan, it is most likely that this distinction came in with the reformists, whose numbers have almost wholly increased through conversion (Ilahi 1963: 56–57; Weightman 1964: 83–103).

If this survey is correct, a clear pattern in the strategy of endogamy can be observed. Endogamy cannot have been an original part of any of these communities for the simple reason that they would not have existed without an initial stage of conversion, or of the slow crystallization of sets of beliefs and practices that made them into a community/tradition. The only clear case is that of the Druze, since it is only in Druze history that we have some (sparse) evidence on the initial period of growth and conversion, and the very quick decision to close the community (Firro 1992: 8–17). But eventually, it seems, all of them reached a stage in which marriages were allowed only among members of the community, and in which there were no ways to bring outsiders into the community. That stage continues unabated for three of these communities: the Mandaeans, Druze, and Yezidis. This is not the case for the other three—the Alawis, Alevis, and Yaresan—and it cannot be fortuitous that the difference in the strictness with which endogamy is maintained corresponds largely to the different ways in which (parts of) these communities have outlined their relation with Islam.


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### Interpreting Religious Endogamy in the Middle East

Since kinship systems and marriage rules have always been central subjects of anthropological research, it is not surprising that there exists a large literature on endogamy in general, and even on endogamy in the Middle East (Holy 1989). Much of this literature does not seem to be immediately relevant for understanding these Middle Eastern communities.[23] Most anthropological theory aims to explain small-scale traditional societies, not originally elective communities that exist(ed) in bureaucratic imperial states. Literature on Middle Eastern anthropology has, for understandable reasons, largely been devoted to different patterns of "endogamy:" the widely attested preference for first-cousin marriages in large parts of the Muslim world. These theories do not apply to our case either. With a few biological/evolutionary exceptions, they are tediously predictable in foregrounding agricultural and economic *rationales* as the only possible background to the practice. It is clear that the communities discussed in this paper display—and report—a reality that cannot so easily be reduced to materialist factors. This is also true of the other prominent strand of research on endogamy: that of sociology. This comes mainly in two varieties, reflecting the main obsessions of the most prominent theorists: American sociologists tend to study race (Rosenfeld 2008), and British theorists focus on class (Penn and Dawkins 1983: 506–23). All, however, frame their studies in terms of marriage *preference*—a focus that is quite unsuited for the cases at hand.

There exists, of course, a rich and flourishing literature on these questions as they relate to Jewish communities (Reinharz and DellaPergola 2009), and even some work on Zoroastrianism (Hinnells 2005: 118–35). But both these religions differ considerably from the pattern observed here, each in a distinct way. Jewish law explicitly accommodates conversion to the Jewish religion, and since it traces the transmission of Jewishness through the mother it has been able to accommodate children of mixed marriages comparatively easily. Conversion to Zoroastrianism is not an option, but the Parsis (the Zoroastrians of India) have gradually come to accept the children of Parsi Zoroastrian fathers and non-Zoroastrian mothers—but not the other way around—as members who can be initiated into the community and can, for example, be given access to the fire temples.

As a consequence, many modern scholars are tempted to attribute an "ethnic" identity to these communities, thinking of them in terms of "peoples" or of "ethnoreligious communities." This is clearly an attempt to make them

23 A critical overview of current theory is provided by Schreiber (2014).


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understandable to a Western audience, more or less as the secular version of the "syncretistic/heterodox/heretic" labels. But ethnic interpretations of the communities are rare in their own sources and need to be treated with suspicion. Similar suspicion should be applied to the frequent interpretations of the members of these communities as ignorant or secular, which leads us to the second defining characteristic of these traditions: their "spiritual elite" character.

## Spiritual Elite Knowledge among Middle Eastern Minorities

The considerable literature on these communities—from travelers, missionaries, unfriendly neighbors, and scholars—frequently reports on the fact that the members of the community seem to be wholly unaware of the beliefs of their religion and do not seem to give the religion a prominent place in their actual lives, with the exception of festivals and life cycle rituals, at which moments the religion tends to become very active. The key words in earlier literature are "stupid," "ignorant," and "confused;"[24] and in more recent literature, these have largely been replaced with "secretive" and "secular." The purported "secrecy" of the *contents* of the religion then quickly becomes the chief explanatory model for the ignorance of most believers. This is done in various distinct ways: some scholars stress the practice of *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, and surmise that the religion as a whole is secret and may not be divulged to others. This can be extended to the claim that the practice has been applied for such a long period that the believers have themselves forgotten whatever it was they were supposed to keep secret, so that they now keep "the religion" as a whole secret. Other scholars stress the fact that the secrets of the religion are not just withheld from outsiders, but also from most ordinary believers, who would be unqualified, or ineligible, to learn more. There is no doubt that the latter type of secrecy exists in some communities, but it is nowhere near the central focus of the community as a whole. It is, rather, a byproduct of the overarching structure.

The point seems to be that the non-specialist members of the community *do not have to know* much, or anything, about their religion. They do not have to know these things because their community has been built upon a structure that allows them to be confident that knowledge of the tradition, of the religion, of its rules, narratives, rituals, and laws, *is there* because it is vested in

24 See the disconcerting survey in Kreyenbroek (1995: 10–20), with his wholly justified critique.



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a small section of their community that they maintain collectively. These can be called, for want of a less ambiguous term, "spiritual elites." The structure itself is clear and is also clearly productive. There are variations upon it, especially in the question of the hereditary nature of these spiritual elites. In most communities, spiritual knowledge is cultivated by a hereditary class, or various hereditary classes, of specialists. Priesthood in Zoroastrianism and among the Mandaeans is hereditary, and the Yezidis are famous for the complexity of their rules of endogamy—not just of the community as a whole, but also of the family lineages of their various religious specialists. It is particularly among the Druze that the boundaries between those who possess knowledge and those who do not are permeable. In fact, crossing these boundaries is strongly encouraged—expected even—as a sign of having reached full maturity. Thus, a relatively young initiate can be referred to as a man who has reached full maturity, an *ikhtiyar*, whereas an old man who was has not chosen to "get religion" must occasionally endure being called a *shab*, a "boy" (Rivoal 2000: 131–57; Oppenheimer 1980: 621–36).

A certain division of labor is common among many religions in the world. Religious specialists are a prominent feature of many communities and traditions, and there is a wide range of roles they fulfill, and of requirements they are supposed to meet. This ranges from the very limited demands made of many of the priesthoods in ancient Greece—virtually honorary appointments requiring little training or knowledge—to full-blown ritual and moral experts whose tasks are supported by a lifetime of learning, or chosen ones who can incarnate spiritual beings. These examples largely belong to the so-called ethnospecific "community religions," which are to be seen as representing a type of religion that is older than, and differs from, "religions of choice" (Platvoet 1996: 46–102). In the former, religiosity is conditioned by birth and vested in the community as a whole; the religion coincides with the society. The contents of the religion are unspecified, almost impossible to summarize, and not subject to the requirement of assent. Since "religion" is inextricably bound up with all other domains of social life, however, the refusal to *participate* causes enormous social problems. In the latter category, religion is framed as subject to "volition" and the community is primarily constituted by the believers, who do not necessarily coincide with other social formations. Entry into the community is differently (and more strongly) ritualized and monitored; ritual life has been much reduced in complexity; and these religions can easily be summarized and believers are expected to assent at the very least to this summary, and therefore to know it. What makes these Middle Eastern "spiritual elite communities" stand out within the larger context of Middle Eastern societies is that they seem to constitute a mixture of these two basic types of religion.


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In their institutionalized nescience of the vast majority of the community, the coalescence of the religion with the community, and the impossibility of bringing outsiders into the community and of accepting marriage outside it, they correspond to the model of the "community religions." In other respects, however, they correspond to the model of "elective religious communities." This would especially be true of the fact that the community is constituted by the believers, and that the main narrative of (most of) these religions is *about* the genesis of the religion. A final aspect that supports such an interpretation is the fact that knowledge of the truth is believed to be present—albeit in the heads of, or in texts only accessed by, a small section of the community—and to be essential for the construction of reality, for the persistence of the community, and for rewards in an imagined future beyond our present reality. The former explains why they have often been characterized as pagans, and the latter why their beliefs are framed as heretical, syncretistic, or esoteric. They do not fit pre-given schemes, in two ways: they cannot be harmonized within the world view of Muslims and Christians—hence the "heresy" and "esotericism" models—and they cannot easily be framed in current academic modes of understanding religious diversity—hence the stopgap of "ethnoreligious communities." The combination of these two impasses came together, as we have seen, in the bare fact that both according to majority religions and according to mainstream scholars, they should not have existed.

## Conclusion

If there is merit in this way of placing them, together, as a group, at the intersection of imposing questions of typology, history, and pluralism (de Jong 2016b), the subject of the present volume (religious leadership) can hope to gain depth from studying these communities, most of which can otherwise safely be ignored—and most current attempts at making sense of them amount to little more than an excuse to continue to ignore them. For it is only rarely the case that the spiritual elites act as leaders of the community in matters that are not directly related to the inner life of the community. They may be seen as, or be expected to act as, moral authorities as well as ritual specialists and spiritual leaders, but since they are maintained by the wider community, interaction with the outside world does not automatically devolve on them. On the contrary, in most cases, it is members of prominent lay families who act as community leaders.

There is some variation in this pattern, but mainly where it actually involves the religious representation of the community. Historically, it was Mandaean


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priests who interacted with Muslim governors in the interest of setting up contracts of protection—precisely because they needed to enable their persistence by representing their community in terms that would fit the requirements of the *dhimmi* status. But the community life in economic, political, and broader social terms was in the hands of prominent men from non-priestly families. And this seems to be a general rule: the governing bodies of both the Irani and the Parsi Zoroastrian communities (the *anjoman* and the *panchayat*) consist of lay community leaders and involve priests only as advisers. The Yezidi *mîr* or "prince" is recognized as the "religious and secular head of the entire Yezidi nation" (Kreyenbroek 1995: 126), and his person is held to be sacred through a special connection with Melek Tawus, but the Baba Sheykh is widely seen as the true spiritual leader. The latter is rarely involved in community politics and representation, and the former less actively engaged in the spiritual life of the tradition (Kreyenbroek 1995: 127). Similar patterns can be observed in most other communities.

In many of them, moreover, scholars have noticed a very rapid decline of the prestige of the spiritual elites throughout the twentieth century.[25] In some cases, this was due to the fact that lay members of the communities gained access to Western-style education. Many of them embraced the secular ideals of the nation-state, and the socialism that many of the nation-states themselves officially embraced. They came to regard the traditional training of their spiritual elites as backward and out of touch with modernity, the specialists themselves as ignorant at best, and as an economic burden of exploitation upon the community at worst. So the domain of influence of many of these elites came to be seriously reduced; in some communities they were largely seen as service providers at the mercy of an increasingly wealthy middle class who would invite them to officiate weddings, but would hardly allow them to dictate community development. Those processes briefly outlined above, in which various communities have sought to be recognized as belonging to more mainstream varieties of Islam, also largely seem to have sidelined those in whom the tradition used to be vested.

This crisis in traditional authority is likely to strike at the heart of all of these communities, since their persistence was tied to the spiritual elite structure that is now slowly crumbling. The acute crisis in which many of these communities

25 Alsohairy (1975: 27): "Most respondents […] regard the priests as wholly uneducated, as far as general education is concerned. A large part of those who are currently in education, of academics and of 'others' label the priests as not very trustworthy persons." Translation by author.


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have been cast, with the various civil wars raging in the Middle East, and the rise of authoritarian Islamist regimes in Turkey and Iran, seems destined to speed up processes of "normalization." These, in conjunction with large-scale displacement, which has weakened the crucially important ties most of these communities maintained with their physical surroundings—with their rivers, tombs of holy people, and similar *loci* of religion—make the future of these communities highly uncertain (Kreyenbroek 2009). Thus, in less than two generations, there seem to have occurred barely noticed structural transformations of the very foundations of religious pluralism in the Islamic world.

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