

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 Arme-

nia 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 Ummayads. Famously on the basis of the somewhat suspect derivation of the name ‘Yezidi’ from the Caliph Yezid ibn Mu’awiya, the name ‘Yezidi’ from the Caliph Yezid ibn Mu’awiya, the name ‘Yezidi’ from the Caliph Yezid ibn Mu’awiya. Yezidi texts and customs show that the enormous influence of Shahir-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 of 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 (Arabs) or as with the Alawis. Islamic figures thus venerated include the Peacock Angel identified by some non-Yezidis with Satan). These may be incarnated in human form many times and are called khab, enabling the Yezidis to incorporate holy figures from other religions. Islamic figures thus venerated include ‘Ali, the Caliph (‘Abu Bakr and Hasan al-Ba’al), from Christianity, Jesus is equated with the Yezidi Shemsh. 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 sys-

It is not a religion of the Book; its holy texts are oral and literacy was formerly forbidden to Yezidis. As a religion of orthodoxy 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 gen-

eralize, seven Holy Beings are venerated, Chief Melek Tawus (the Peacock Angel identified by some non-Yezidis with Satan). These may be incarnated in human form many times and are called khab, enabling the Yezidis to incorporate holy figures from other religions. Islamic figures thus venerated include ‘Ali, the Caliph (‘Abu Bakr and Hasan al-Ba’al), from Christianity, Jesus is equated with the Yezidi Shemsh. The overriding importance of respecting purity is obvious not only in the Yezidis’ attitude towards the elements, partic-

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The long, long years Yezidi war began in 1991, when Yezidis and their Arab neighbours in Sinjar fought in a conflict that raged for a decade. In 1996, the yogi Mullah Mustafa commanded the Yezidis to invade the Badush Dam in the north of Iraq. The dam was built by the British in 1958 to control floods and provide water to the region. It is a holy site to the Yezidis and is believed to have been built by the ancient Persian king Darius. In 1996, Mustafa and his followers took control of the dam and held it until 1998 when the Iraqi army forced them out. The dam remains a key site for the Yezidis and is still a place of pilgrimage for Yezidis from around the world.

The Yezidis are a religious minority in Turkey, and they have been persecuted by both the Ottoman and Turkish governments. During the 19th century, many Yezidis migrated to Europe, particularly to France, where they established communities. Today, there are an estimated 200,000 Yezidis in Turkey, and they are a significant part of the country’s cultural and religious identity. In 1999, the Turkish government officially recognized the Yezidi religion as separate from Islam, and in 2004, the Yezidi community was granted autonomy in the southeastern province of Diyarbakir.

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