

# YEZIDIS IN RELATION TO OTHER KURDISH MINORITIES AT PRESENT

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A recent publication, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: beyond the Mainstream*, edited by Khanna Omarkhali (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014) provides more data about the Yazidis and other Kurdish minorities that share some beliefs in common. As Philip G Kreyenbroek notes, not only Yazidism, but also “like Yazidism and some branches of Alevism, Yaresanism has preserved many ancient Iranian elements, particularly in the spheres of belief, myth, and ritual. In the course of time these were combined with elements deriving from Islamic mysticism and Shi’ite Islam.” However, he maintains that in Iran “communities in the mountainous and isolated Guran region to the west of Kermanshah generally regard their religion as being independent of Islam, (but) in other communities the question is disputed. He adds: “The Gurani Yaresen have in the past been exposed to considerable persecution and continue to be under pressure. But the heterodox communities in Iraq such as the Yazidis and Yaresanis “have always had a strong fear of outsiders and preferred to keep themselves to themselves. Among the Yazidis, (however), such fears have to some extent been counteracted by the positive attention given the religion by the leadership of the Autonomous Region.” (p. 3). Khanna Omarkhali also holds that “Throughout their history Yazidis have suffered greatly from religious persecution and partly due to this they have become a closed religious community, which has also led to many accounts about them being published in the literature,” as already reviewed by me. She observed that almost all Yazidis claim to have a Kurdish origin but those in the Caucasus area call themselves Serfedin. She adds that Yazidis live mostly in Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, Turkey and Iran but some also live in Georgia and Armenia and their total population is 550,000. What she narrates as Yazidi beliefs are more or less in consonance with what we have already observed. In conclusion she notes that modernity and all that follows in its train including migrations to the West, have tended “to continuously disrupt and challenge the traditional forms of Yazidi religious authority. “The individualization of religious beliefs as a major development can be observed not just in the Yazidi diaspora, but also in the homelands. “All these changes should not be interpreted strictly as the “death knell of the Yazidi tradition, however, as the Internet and writing are also creating new opportunities for Yazidism.” (pp. 67-77), which could serve as a model for the Zoroastrians and other minorities

in the western diaspora.

As Maisel Sebstion observes, “Most Muslims consider Yezidis heretics, deviators, or worse, devil worshippers,” unbelievers, unclean, impure and “their life should be made as difficult as possible.” What he further observes may spark new interest of Zoroastrians: “Among some Muslim scholars and communities it has become good practice to consider Zoroastrians as People of the Book, i.e., followers of a religion that is closely related to Islam and has Holy Scripture. As mentioned earlier many Yezidis see themselves as believers in the original Middle Eastern faith. For many the two (Yezidism and Zoroastrianism) became one, an idea that was quickly picked up by some Yezidi groups who sought better protection from Muslim persecution. The idea of a common Yezidi-Zoroastrian origin or at least shared history was well received by many educated Yezidis who often wear bracelets with Zarathustra's image as a symbol of their Yezidiness or display posters and other paraphernalia in their homes.” (pp. 91-92).

The Yezidis also lived in the territory of the former USSR and in 2010 their total number was around 100,000 but many of them “have converted to other religions”, and also have a very low birth rate and the Kurdish language is now entirely replaced by the Russian even in their everyday communication. The Yezidis in Georgia too have adopted Georgian language totally. (pp. 131-3). This seems to be the ultimate fate of all minorities, including Zoroastrians in the western diaspora unless they take initiative to reverse this trend.

The prayers of Kurdish Alevis often mention Zurvan which is phonetically so similar to the Pahlavi Zoroastrian deity Zurvan, Time, that incorporated the monotheistic idea of Zurvan being the creator of both Ohrmazd and Ahreman. If so, “then we could talk about one of the rare elements of the Zoroastrian faith preserved in Kurdistan, “We should mention here that Alevism and Yezidism, both stress a very strong monotheism emphasizing the one God (respectively Heq and Xweda, which is not at all at odds with Zurvanism.” (p. 162). The Yezidi cosmogony clearly emphasizes one God as primeval creator, as per Ph. G. Kreyenbroek, *Yezidism: It's Background, Observances and Textual Tradition*, Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995, p. 56.

Some scholars such as M. Bayrak contend that Alevism at least as practiced by Kurds “does not relate to orthodox Islamic rites, but is influenced by various pre-Islamic religions such as Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism and other major religions, that have passed by or coexisted amongst Alevis.” Some scholars see similarities between the Yarsan religion and the Kurdish Alevis religion. However, “Alevism cannot be limited to a particular ethnicity, culture or religion” as it has a wide and diverse range of backgrounds, leading to different interpretations among the Alevis themselves (pp. 179-80).

There are several scholars, writing in Kurdish, Turkish and other languages, particularly E. Xemgin and Cem who have concluded that “Kurdish Alevism is a mixture of the Kurdish tradition and pre-Islamic religions such as Zoroastrianism and Mazdaism.” However, some current studies “are politicized” and tend “to produce a juxtaposition to a Turkish-centric version of Alevism. --- But what needs to be understood is that Kurdish Alevism is not only an under-researched subject, but one that needs to be researched systematically regardless of ideological and nationalistic juxtapositions. As GEZIK states the relationship between Nusayris, Druzes, Yezidis, Yarsan (Ahl-e Haqq), [Kaka I, Shabaks, Mandaean, Zoroastrianism] can help to understand the origin of Alevism and the influence of other religions and sects on Alevism. These religions have crossover boundaries and overlapping rituals and religious practices and discourse. Features of millenarism, egalitarianism, metempsychosis and angelology as well as dualism can be found in these religions, albeit with different perspectives.” (p. 190).

While this book provides extensive information about the Kurdish religious minorities and their present status and history, it is not designed to provide elaborate details about their religious beliefs and dogmas and therefore touches them briefly.