

The Yezidis (Ezidis) and Yezidism

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It is well known that Yezidism, or Zoroastrianism, being one of the oldest religions of the Middle East, has greatly influenced the history of mankind. The truth, always evident from old and new books alike, is that this religious culture was alive and dominant there as early as in the years between 1000 and 600 BC. By analysing the elements of Zoroastrianism, which could be described as experiencing Renaissance, we come to the conclusion that it represents a deep interrelation between mankind and nature. The spiritual and physical conditions of Zoroaster himself, as well as his role as the leader of the religious movement, demonstrate that he was a philosopher rather than a prophet. Doubtless, the Renaissance of Zoroastrianism, as it has often been the case with other cultural movements, has largely been based on social structure and apparent shortcomings, characteristic of the regional reality. It might propose answers to the questions of interrelationships between Man and Eternity, not only for the Kurdish people, who once were a powerful factor in the Middle East, but also to other peoples who accepted Zoroastrianism as a basic religious system. Since developed in Kurdistan and since being the principal religion of the whole Kurdish nation, it is only logical that all the religious literature, prayers and teaching were conducted in the Kurdish language. As a particular and important case, the two Holy Books – Zend Avesta and Meshef Roj – are composed in Kurdish. Afterwards, starting from 636-641 AD, the movement of

Islam and their Arab propagators reached the soil of Kurdistan. As a result of Arab invasion, the Kurdish people were deprived of their freedom; their religion, language and culture were subjected to unprecedented robbery and destruction. It is right to claim that this policy of annihilation of the Kurds in general and the Yezidi Kurds in particular has been continuing for centuries as initiated from Islamic centers of power identified with the Arabs, Persians and Turks. Since the Yezidis have always been the bearers of their Kurdish identity, they would constantly become the main victims of the oppressing forces.

In the twentieth century, Kurdistan with the blessing of Europe was newly divided between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. All these governments, considering time factor, used hidden and open policy of fragmentation, assimilation and expulsion of the Yezidi Kurds. The regimes of the four states used their puppets to do the same against the Kurdish people as a whole. Such an outdated and unjust policy resulted in the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of the Yezidi Kurds to the various places in the world. From its beginning, the Yezidi, or Zoroastrian religion, has been everything but dogmatic. It approached human and natural factors on the bases of knowledge, opposed oppression and taught love and friendship. It is therefore sad that today, when we all try to live in freedom and with tolerance, this religion is being so visibly eliminated.

It is a shame and dramatic that the mankind, despite proclaimed ideals towards rights and freedoms, remains silent in the face of the religious and cultural assault against the Yezidis organised by the Turkish, Arab and Persian officials. This religion, displaying a leading force behind the whole process of civilization, is in danger of being totally annihilated. That would be an indispensable loss not only for the Kurds or the Yezidi believers, but also to the whole civilized world.

The Yezidis (Ezidis) and Yezidism

The question of what Yezidism is has for a long time been a subject for scientists and historians. Unfortunately, the issue has been complicated for several reasons; the chief being that the scientific truth has been exchanged

with political interests. This, of course, is related to the Kurdish issue and the problems of Kurdistan.

The enemies of Kurdish people have tried to hide the historical facts that Yezidism and Kurdishness are not separable. They tried to eradicate and misrepresent the Kurdish cultural inheritance by massacres, notoriously known as Firmans. At present, they are doing the same thing within the context of a well organized plan and the main responsibility for this goes to certain circles in the West Europe. They have succeeded to manipulate a historical and scientific framework and to place the issue onto a political tactical base. Apparently, the real reason of doing so has always been political interests rather than adherence to the historical and scholarly facts. It is for this reason that Yezidism is being ignored and given no official acknowledgment at the Treaty of Lausanne.

What is Yezidism?

According to the Kurdish language as well as many Mesopotamian cults, the words 'Ezd, Ezda, and 'Ezata' imply "God". As far as Yezidi beliefs are concerned, Ezid is one of the 1001 divine names. This interpretation is clearly mentioned in Yezidi verses such as:

"Sultan Ezid is the very King,
He has given himself 1001 names,
Yet the biggest name is Khweda [God]."

We should like to point out that there is no connection whatsoever between the Yezidism and the historical person called Yezid, who was the son of the Omeyyad caliph Muaviyah.

Sultan Ezid in the above-mentioned verse is God himself and implies nobody else. The word 'Sultan' is an Arabic word derived from Sulta (government, reign or rule). As it could be well observed, Sultan Ezid represents the one who holds the divine power in the capacity of the ruler of the world. Another verse says:

"Sultan Ezid knows how much water there is in the seas,
The world for him is only a step and an hour distance,
He made Eve the bride and Adam the groom."

Yezidism is an old and historical religion, born and developed in Mesopotamia. In terms of history and culture, it represents a synthesis of Mithraism, Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism. Remarkably, the believers and supporters of Yezidism are exclusively Kurds. It must be emphasised that all Yezidis are Kurds and there are no Yezidi from any other nationality. It maintains the existence of only one God and prays for that God who is without companions. The Yezidis also believe that God has created seven angels who are active in the world affairs. These are: Ezrail, Cibrail, Mikail, Dirdail, Simkail, Ezazil and Esrafil. Ezazil, who are respected under the name of Tawusi Melek, is the main out of them.

Who are the Yezidis?

Those who believe in one God, without any companion, and in seven angels created by Him while adhering to the rules and regulations of Yezidism are called 'Yezidis'.

After massacres and mass killings only a small number of the once numerous Yezidi population remains. According to unofficial estimates, the number of the Yezidis in the world varies between 1,5 an 2 millions.

The decreased Yezidi population is ,moreover, dispersed throughout the world. At present, the Yezidis live in South (Iraqi) Kurdistan, North (Turkish) Kurdistan, Southwest (Syrian Kurdistan) as well as in the ex-Soviet states, mostly in the Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia) and in the Ukraine and the Russian Federation. A large group of the Yezidis have migrated to the European countries, primarily to Germany.

The Origins of Yezidism

The early history of Yezidi religion is not very clear. The historians and other scholars have studied old Mesopotamian beliefs and tried to establish links between them and Yezidism. They have however not succeeded to reach a satisfactory conclusion. The main thing that is clear and definite is a high degree of interrelation between Yezidism, Mithraism and Zoroastrianism. Some of the researchers wrongly take the movement led by Shaykh Adi as the starting point of Yezidism, while forgetting that Yezidism had already existed before Shaykh Adi. Although some formal innovations were intro-

duced by or rather in the period of Shayhk Adi, these innovations do not touch upon the basic principles of the religion. Thus, Shayhk Adi applied some of Sufi elements to the existing principles of Yezidism. It is assumed that in doing so, he obtained the permission of the religious men (Pir) of the Shemsani group, who had been ruling over the community from a time immemorial. Remarkably, some researchers argue that Yesidism is actually a Zoroastrian teaching which has incorporated certain beliefs and cults from other systems such as Mithraism.

(Shekh Adi = Shaykh Adi)

The Main Principles of Yezidism

The Yezidis believe in One and the only God, without companions. God's power cannot be reduced, neither can it be fragmented. Both Virtue and Evil come from God.

There is no other powerful force above God. In other words, Ezazil has never been a bad force on its own. Never has Ezazil been thrown out from God's courtiers. Never was he symbolized as the bad principle. Ezazil is the head of the angels and he was present during the creation of Adam and Eve. He always supported the singleness of God and he has never bowed before any other force.

Sacred Elements according to the Yezidis

In accordance with Yezidism the sun, fire, water, air and the moon are the most sacred elements. Furthermore, farming and cattle-breeding together with being brave and lavish were also considered good, or rather, sacred things. The Yezidis also maintain that every man and woman from their community must possess the three following qualities:

1. Rasti (truth). Every Yezidi should be truthful, should protect himself/herself from lies. He/she should stand behind his/her word and decision and always see the truth, say the truth and defend it.
2. Nasin (knowledge). This implies to being conscious. In other words, every Yezidi should know himself/herself, his/her environment and should have a strongly and positively motivated belief.
3. Shermi (shame). This means to stay away from wrong-doing. A

person who has the sense of shame and shyness, will never do things to be later discredited. To hold their head high and to remain clean are the feelings which are of importance to the Yezidis.

The Main Religious Obligations

Every Yezidi should have a Shaykh, a Pir (spiritual guide), a hosta, a mentor and a brother/sister for the afterlife. Every Yezidi should be properly dressed.

Yezidis pray three times a day facing the sun. Their prayer differ in the morning, midday and evening. After they complete their prayer, they kiss the soil.

The sacred triangle in Yezidism: Ezid, Tawusi Melek and Shaykh Adi .

Ezid is one of the names of God. As far as Tawusi Melek is concerned, he is the head of the angels and is identified with Ezazil. According to the Yezidi belief, Shaykh Adi was a holy person who worked miracles. He carries secrets from Tawusi Melek and God. Shaykh Adi and his nephew came from the village Beyt-Far in Lebanon and settled in Lalish. Some historians stated that his father and grandfather came from Hakkari and were members of Hakkari's Zoroastrians and would later migrate to Lebanon. The return of Shaykh Adi and his nephew back to Mesopotamia and their settlement in the Lalish Temple should therefore be considered as returning to old beliefs. Since Shaykh Adi's return to Lalish, he gathered the Yezidi's around him and reincarnated Zoroastrianism and some of the old beliefs such as the sun-worship.

The Attitude of Izidism towards other Religions

Yezidism maintains that every religion reflects a truth. Therefore, everybody should cater for their own religion and should be free to exercise their beliefs. According to the Yezidis, a person who does not cater for his/her own religion, will never cater for other religions. It is for this reason that the Yezidis do not accept anybody from other religions and have no missionary intention. The Yezidis respect all religions and expect the same from the others.

Here, we can observe that the philosophy of Yesidism is based on prin-

principles of humanity, as expressed in verses such as:

"My God, give [Your Blessing] to seventy-two nations,
Give it to eighteen-thousand beings
And [then] to the Yezidis, too."

Yezidi Communal Structure

There are two main strata in the Yezidi community, known respectively as "odd names" (yeknav) and "even names" (dunav).

The odd names, laymen (Mirids), constitute the majority of the Izidy people.

The even names are subdivided into two categories: Pirs and Shaykhs. Before the arrival of Shaykh Adi, there were only Pirs and Mirids (laymen). The institution of the Shaykhs entered the Yezidi communal life during Shaykh Adi's period.

In general, the society is based on different (caste) groups and inter-marriages between these groups are not allowed. These are the (caste) groups:

Adani , Katani , Shemsani , Pirani , and Mirid.

Yezidi Fasting and Religious Feasts

1. Charshema Sor (Charshema Sere Nisane) – The Red Wednesday or the First Wednesday of April. It is celebrated as the New year and the Festival of Tawusi Melek.

2. Chile Havine – The Summer Forty. It lasts forty days.

3. Cimayi (Cejna Heciyan) – Gathering (The Feast of Pilgrimage). According to the Oriental calendar, it lasts seven days between the 23rd of September and the 1st of October.

4. Cejna Ezda – Divine (Ezda) Holiday. It is held on the first Friday of December, according to the Oriental calendar. In advance, the Yezidis fast for three days and only then celebrate the Divine Holiday. Two weeks before Cejna Ezda, three days of each week (Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays) the Yezidis fast, too. These fastings are followed by celebrations of Cejna Xwedana (Patrons' Holiday) and Cejna Sheshims (Holiday of Sheshims).

5. Pir Ali. This Feast lasts seven days, too. It starts on Sunday and ends on the following Sunday. On the basis of Oriental calendar, at least one day has to be from the first month, that is, January. This means that the feast must enter the new year.

6. Xidir Elyas and Xidir Nebi. It is celebrated every year on the 1st Thursday of February.

7. In addition, there are regional feasts.

Yezidi Pilgrimages

Pilgrimages in South Kurdistan (Iraq) . The largest Yezidi Pilgrimage is the Nurani Lalisha Temple. Lalish is situated in South Kurdistan near Mosul. The other pilgrimages in South Kurdistan are:

Qadib el-Benn , Shaykh Brahim el-Xidim , Shaykh Taqil , Shaykh Kiraz , Xatuna Fexra , Shekhsine Shemsa , Hindirisi Xeyat , Boqeter Baba , Pire Omarxala , Bazide Bistami , Shaykh Simayile Enzeli , Pir Hamali , Pire Kemal , Pire Siba , Pir Mendiqan , Pire Hesilmaman , Mehdera Bozan , Melek Shekhsin , Mere Qelendera , Quba Nasirdin , Quba Mehmed Reshan , Kaf u Mexara Melke Meran , Quba Usive Qerrani , Quba Shehide Pexember , Quba Pir Eli , Quba Shekhumus , Quba Sidiye Nefis , Shaykh Mihemed Xerib , Xidir Ilyas and Xidir Nebi , Hesene Ferdoz, Omere Qamche, Quba Nebi Nuh , Quba Hekim Feris and many other places.

Pilgrimages in North Kurdistan (Turkey) :

Helale Zewe , Shaykh Evinda , Xefure Reya , Pir Dawid , Pir Zikir , Qolbaba , Caf Teyar , Shaykh Emere Mirada , Merav , Shebil Qasim , Shaykh Xeyib , Shaykh Brahim , Pir Mamendala , Kechka Qedishke , Shaykh Xale Shemsa , Pirmend , Siware Bevana and many other places.

Yezidism in Islamic Era

As early as in 636-641 AD, the Arabs started to attack the Mesopotamian area in the name of Islam. With the occupation of the territory, there took place massacres and mass killings together with very harsh declarations (Firmans) announced against the local people.

Consequently, the Arabs succeeded to enforce their religion, language and cultural values by force. Despite the strong resistance shown by the lo-

cal population, the fear of killings and humiliation was too strong to stop the advance of the Arabs. Those who wanted to escape from this persecution, had no alternative but to accept Islam and the dominant position of the Arabs. Yet those who refused to bow before them while rejecting Islam, had to flee to the mountains and continue to survive while being cut off from civilization. Nevertheless, these people succeeded to protect their language, religion and their culture. Most of the Yezidis, too, escaped to the mountains and protected themselves from the terror of Arabs. But those Yezidis still had to face a twofold troubles being persecuted because of their both religious and national identities.

By remaining an original Kurdish religion, Yezidism represented the roots of Kurdishness. Since Kurdishness was not in line with the pan-Islamic ideology, the Yezidis were subjected to very cruel treatment by the Arabs.

The Arabs were trying to assimilate the Kurds in the name of Islam. The Kurdish culture and language were melting under the hegemony of Arabs. Since the Yezidis were protecting this language and culture, this was sufficient to annoy the enemy and attract more killings and persecution. As if this were not enough, the Arabs were using those Kurds who had been converted to Islam to attack the Yezidi Kurds. Afterwards, the Arabs would have it less complicated to commit mass killings and massacres against the very Muslim Kurds, whom they had previously used against the Yezidis.

Against such a grave background, Shaykh Adi came to Lalish and started to organize the Yezidis through dervish (Sufi) beliefs. Taking into consideration the new conditions of the era, he managed to reform Yesidism. Such a reformation activity paved a way for bringing Yezidism into the modernity.

Afterwards, the policy of persecution and ant-Yezidi campaign continued during the Ottoman era. The only thing that was changed, was the name and address of the oppressor. The core of the persecution remained the same. The Arabs were replaced by Turks but the nature of the Firmans remained the same.

The historians pass to us some examples of the Arab and Ottoman practices against Yezidis.

Extracts from the book "A History of Kurdistan" by Ethem Xemgin

The Yezidis are themselves Kurds, they are not a separate nation in Kurdistan. Whatever explanation of Yezidi culture one might propose, the basic religion of the Kurds before the forceful Islamization of the Kurds had been Yezidism. The Yezidis are essentially linked to Kurdishness and their prayers are exclusively in Kurdish. In addition, there are two sacred books of the Yezidis written in Kurdish. After Islam had been enforced upon the population of the region, those trying to remain.

In line with their expansionist and oppressive actions, the Arabs, using Islam to hide their real intentions, carried out massacres and looting against those Kurds who wished to protect their religious beliefs. From time to time the Muslim Kurds were used by the imperialist powers to annihilate the Yezidis while accusing them of being non-believers. At other times, the colonial powers have used their own armies to eliminate the Yezidis. The answer of the Yezidis was a strong resistance, but because of uneven power and unsuitable conditions, they had to leave their fertile and culturally rich homeland for the mountains. This was the only way for them to protect themselves.

During the period of the internal conflicts for power within the Muslims, the Yezidis joined the forces of Merwan, whose mother was Kurdish. Later, as a consequence of the Abbasid victory, they would also be persecuted for having chosen the wrong side, that is, the losers. If previously, the Yezidis could have counted on their neighbours, after the Islamization of the Kurds, they would be left alone in their struggle.

It is a well established truth that the Yezidis have always been ready to give abode to other victims of the Islamic rule. On the other hand, they have often been the main victims of fanatic forces: they were killed, their houses were burnt, their wives and children were taken as hostages. In doing so, the local Muslims intended to obtain sympathy from the colonial states and to achieve economic and political advantages.