

G N O S T I C A



The Religion of the Peacock Angel

The Yezidis and
their Spirit World

Garnik S. Asatrian
and Victoria Arakelova

THE RELIGION OF THE PEACOCK ANGEL



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The Yezidis and Their Spirit World

GARNIK S. ASATRIAN and VICTORIA ARAKELOVA

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PREFACE

The people known as the Yezidis or Yazidis (Arab. *yazīdiyya*, Kurdish *ēzdi*) are found scattered over a vast area – usually leading a sedentary life but also split up into nomadic clans – in the northern part of Iraq and Syria, in Eastern Turkey, Armenia and Georgia. More precisely, the Yezidis live today in the Sheikhan region of Iraq, north-west of Mosul, and Jebel Sinjar (*Ĉiyā Šangālē*), west of Mosul; in Siruj, Birjak, Klis, Afrin, Amuda and Qamishli in Syria; in Yerevan and in the districts of Aragatsotn, Artashat and Talin of Armenia; in the city of Tbilisi in Georgia; in Krasnodar *kraj* and some other regions of Russia; and in western Europe, primarily in Germany. Almost the entire Yezidi population of Turkey – earlier living in compact settlements, in the rural centres of Tur-Abdin, Nisibin, Diarbekir, Mush, Sasun, Bitlis and on the upper shores of the Tigris river – moved to Syria or Germany and other western European countries. The emergent Yezidi community of Russia is the result of economic migration from Armenia and Georgia in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the most problematic period for newly independent states' economies in the trans-Caucasus region.

The total number of the Yezidis can be estimated only approximately: in Iraq around 200,000; in Syria 80,000–100,000; Armenia 45,000–50,000; Georgia 20,000–25,000; Russia 10,000–15,000; western Europe 45,000–50,000; all in all some 400,000–450,000 people. The Yezidis speak a local variant of northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), which they call *ēzdîkî*: “the Yezidi language”. In terms of religion the Yezidis are a product of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic milieu. They are deeply rooted in a form of Sufism but with multiple elements of Christianity, Gnosticism, local pagan cults, and so on. Because of their religious idiosyncrasy they have been traditionally viewed as pagans, heretics or devil-worshippers and have therefore remained for centuries an object of persecution in the Muslim environment. Therefore, almost the entire history of this valiant people seems to have been one of unabated perseverance and almost permanent struggle for survival among the neighbouring Kurds and Turks.

Deprived of its own sacred scriptures, this closed esoteric community has developed a rich and multi-genre lore, which fixes the religious tradition and represents the only reliable source for its research.¹ The so-called holy books of the Yezidis – *Kitēbā Jalwa* (“The Book of Revelation”) and *Mashafē Raš* (“The Black Book”) – are rather late forgeries, although still definitely reflecting the genuine religious and folk tradition.² Containing much less information on the Yezidi sacred knowledge than the religious lore, these small texts, have gradually become part of tradition and are now approached as holy writings by the Yezidis themselves.

The main religious centre of the Yezidis is situated in the valley of Lalish, the Sheikhan region (north Iraq), where the sanctuaries of most of the Yezidi saints and holy men are located. It is also the centre of Yezidi traditional learning. The seat of the Yezidis’ spiritual leader, the Prince or *mīr*, is in the nearby village of Ba’dre.

The religion exclusive to the Yezidis constitutes one of the most enigmatic and least investigated phenomena of the Near Eastern non-dogmatic milieu. But it has beckoned increasing attention from scholars of religion studies, certainly more than ever before over the last three decades. Despite multiple references by travellers, missionaries, military officers and intellectuals to the existence of this mysterious people, as well as to a number of their peculiar features, customs and rites, more or less fundamental researches on the Yezidi history and religion only started appearing from the 1970s. The close character of this esoteric community and difficulties in interpreting its religious lore – the primary source for the study of the tradition – still remain serious obstacles for scholars of the field. Yet the ongoing publication and translation of the Yezidi lore, its proper interpretation and commentaries – both by traditional connoisseurs and scholars of Yezidism – have facilitated a gradual understanding of the essence of its complicated religious doctrine.

Yezidism is a unique phenomenon, one of the most remarkable illustrations of ethno-religious identity, centred on a religion the Yezidis call *Sharfadin* (see pp. 29–30). The peculiarities of this religious system are not only limited to its syncretism, some elements of which can be traced in Sufism, a number of extreme Shi’ite sects, substrate pre-Islamic beliefs, Gnosticism and other related traditions surviving from the ancient world, but they also include specific features solely characteristic of the Yezidi faith which define the belonging of its followers to the Ezdikhana (*Ēzdixāna*) – the esoteric community of the Yezidis itself. In this case, when providing characteristics of Yezidism in its current state, it is quite legitimate to speak of the unity of both the Yezidi religious identity and Yezidi ethnicity.

Historical analyses of various ethno-religious communities in the Middle East and Central Asia have shown that their development has a clearly expressed vector – the drive for ethnicity.³ The dynamics of the development of ethno-religious communities – from religious identity to ethno-religiousness and, finally, to claims of special ethnicity in the modern context – look to be

emerging as a coping stone, or at the very least a crucial paradigm, for explaining the ethnic vector in the development of any ethno-religious community in the long run.

On this reading, the ethno-religious group in its process of establishment and development passes through several stages. First of all, it dissociates itself from its own prior religious surroundings, marking a new “dominant” around which a new syncretic doctrine is being formed. This dominant provides the basic religious specificity of the new community. Then a “closing” of the community takes place: a strict endogamy, indeed, becomes a guarantee of preserving the esoteric religious knowledge inside the community. (To a certain extent, endogamy is also determined by hostile surroundings, when outsiders impute the group with distorted doctrines and heresy.) It is specifically endogamy that distinguishes an *ethno-religious* community, that is, as distinct from any other esoteric group (mystical order and others) which one could join as a member by passing some ritual of initiation. And it is namely endogamy that defines the *ethno-religious* and thus, in the final analysis, the ethnic vector of the development of a new community whereby religion still remains the main differentiative indicator.

The process of the formation of the Yezidis as a separate ethno-religious group took place in the period from the eleventh to the fourteenth century in the region of Sinjar in northern Iraq. The religious dissociation of the Yezidis from the local milieu took place in the very colourful religious scenery of Mesopotamia where different ideas of Islam and Christianity were interlaced with Gnostic ideas and local folk beliefs. In the tightly loyal surrounding of the Sufi ‘Adawīyya order, which became the core of a new community, there arose and developed a fundamentally new syncretic religious doctrine, and one curiously lacking a common dogma in the strict understanding of the term. By preserving a number of elements of mystical Islam, the Yezidis inhaled different and sometimes contradictory elements of many other religious streams in the region they inhabited. They were nourished by various marginal ideas found in their “fertile heretical” surroundings, distant from centres of orthodoxy. Some elements of Yezidism, however, are extremely specific, even unique in the whole new Iranian expanse, so that it becomes impossible to find echoes of them in other doctrines (even if typological parallels are commonly available). These peculiarities turn out, in fact, to be fundamental for Yezidi religious ideology, and have emerged as main indicators of their self-consciousness, defining the Yezidis and the conceptions of Yezidism as they are in an assortment of shibboleths.

This book is entirely dedicated to the essentials of Yezidi identity – the Yezidi religion, or more precisely the so-called Yezidi folk pantheon in its varied dimensions. The idea of one god and his incarnations, Yezidi deities, saints, holy patrons and deified personalities are the prolonged focus of this book. It is not a mere presentation of the characters in this “pantheon”, but a thorough attempt to determine their domains, to define their main functions

and features, to trace their genealogies, and, in short, to locate their niches in the system of the Yezidi faith. Some parts of this book have been published before in multiple separate articles, but the compelling need for a solid account of the Yezidi “religious personae” in such a general sourcebook as this is now quite obvious. While most of the relevant publications in the field are dedicated to the problems of Yezidi history and iconography (work by Birgül Açıkyıldız, for example), to their survival among hostile peoples (Alphonse Mingana earlier, and John Guest and Eszter Spät later on), and to general aspects of their religion in terms of rites and rituals, as well as to the textual tradition of their writings (Lady Ethel Drower, Giuseppe Furlani, Philip Kreyenbroek and others), we in our turn will explore a sphere mainly ignored by other authors, probing Yezidi conceptions of divinity in the light of a comparative religious analysis. The term “pantheon” is used in this work as a provisional term.

As an act of original research, this work is mainly based on Yezidi texts and materials collected by the authors during their fieldwork in the Yezidi communities of Armenia, Georgia, Russia and Turkey over the last fourteen years. In what follows, the Yezidis’ key texts on their spirit world and cosmic vision have been transliterated and translated into English for the first time. The idea for this book, as well as its thorough editing and numerous suggestions and comments after its compilation, belong to our friend Professor Garry Trompf, to whom the authors extend their heartfelt thanks and gratitude. Without Garry’s scholarly enthusiasm, encouragement and guidance this work could never have appeared. As the Yezidis say, *Xwadē ma bē ta naka, Garri!* – God save you, Garry!

Garnik Asatryan and Victoria Arakelova

NOTES

1. See, for example, V. Arakelova, “On Some Peculiarities of the Yezidi Lore Translation”, in *Oriental Languages in Translation* 3, A. Zaborski & M. Piela (eds.), 97–104 (Krakow: Polish Academy of Sciences, 2008).
2. See in detail A. Marie, “La découverte récente des deux livres sacrés des Yézîdis”, *Anthropos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Völker- und Sprachenkunde* 6 (1911), 1–39; M. Bittner, *Die heilige Bücher der Jeziden oder Teufelsanbeter (kurdisch und arabisch)* (Vienna: Denkschrift der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, 1913).
3. See V. Arakelova, “Ethno-religious Communities: To the Problem of Identity Markers”, *Iran and the Caucasus* 14(1) (2010), 1–19; V. Arakelova & S. Davtian, “Ezidy – vektor etničnosti”, *Iran-Namē* (Yerevan) 41 (2009), 75–84.

PART I

THE ONE GOD

Although the relevant literature will often classify the Yezidis as followers of polytheism, and thus as worshipping an array of gods with differing degrees of significance, a closer scrutiny will show this view of matters requires a radical review.

Using this older style of approach, some will identify elements of polytheism in the unambiguously monotheistic religions as well. Muslims, for instance, erroneously see the concept of the Christian Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – as a manifestation of polytheism in Christianity. Meanwhile, in Islam itself, where monotheism is an indisputable basis – even “the alpha and omega” of the entire theology – some heterodox sects (the extreme Shi‘as, for example) deify the fourth caliph, ‘Ali ibn Abi-Talib, and other figures such as Fatima. They thereby come in for criticism by orthodox Islamic theologians for their departure from the monolithic Allah – from the very idea of *tauḥīd*, monotheism.

The poly-variation in the Yezidis’ religious thought, or rather, their dismembered representation of the divine entity or of god, is none other than the personification of the functional division of the divine, which has nothing to do with polytheism in its pure form, the essential nature of which does not change even in the presence of a manifestly principal divinity within the system of gods. This principal divinity in a “polytheistic system”, while endowed with a greater power compared to others (greater attributes, functions, and so on), is, however, not the Absolute, which is the main characteristic of the One God. It is therefore necessary to differentiate clearly between the Yezidis’ dismembered representations of the divine (by different spheres of manifestation and even under differing names) reduced to the single initiation, and polytheism characterized by a dispersed representation of the divine.

In “classical” monotheism the Divine Essence in its manifestations does not in any way lose even partially the role, functions or power of God, the sole

source of divine emanation and of the Divine in its entirety, but rather manifests its qualities within different hypostases. From this viewpoint, even Zoroastrianism, often represented as a dualistic religion, can only be regarded as such with great reservations. Indeed, despite quite an impressive pantheon of gods as a whole, Ahura Mazdā is featured generally as the supreme god, with the functions of the demiurge or creator deity.¹

In the Old Iranian religion, god is designated by the term **bága-* (cf. Old Persian *baga* “god”, Avestan *baga-* “lot, good fortune”, Sogdian *bay*). This denotes one (single) God (rather, supreme god), unlike the Yazats (Avestan *yazata*, Middle Pers. *yazat*, New Pers. *īzad*, literally meaning “one [or any being] worthy of worship or of sacrifice”). As for **bága-*, this concept also means “dispenser (of good fortune)” (cf. Skt. *bhága-*). Another denotation of the supreme god in Old Iran was **dātār-*, that is, “creator” (New Pers. *dādār*). At the present time the general designation of god in New Persian and in most New Iranian dialects is *xudāy*, from Old Iranian **xwa-tāwan-*, literally “autocrat”, and basically the same term, *xwadē*, also designates the one god among the Yezidis, the subject of this study.²

As for Angra Mainyu or Ahriman in the Zoroastrian religion, he is only a manifestation of evil, a force of destruction, and to some degree a parallel of Satan, although possessing more significant attributes than the devil in Christianity because he is the author of part of creation and is hostile to Ahura Mazdā and his creation. The classical Iranian religion, which was never unambiguously monotheistic, even after Zarathustra, nonetheless tended in its various manifestations towards monotheism, with one god, Ahura Mazdā, dominating over a whole array of divinities. The situation did not change radically when the priority of Ahura Mazdā was challenged by Zurvān, even by Mithra. In effect, a thoroughgoing dualism, with equally significant god and demon locked in unending combat with an unpredictable outcome, has never been known in Iran, although the Manichaeans came to draw on Zoroastrianism to accentuate a greater dualism than that which was indigenously Iranian.³ Some students of Zoroastrianism characterize its theology as monotheism, while they read the speculative philosophy of this religion to be dualistic.⁴

In the meantime, even classical Greek religion, whose designation as “polytheism” is unambiguously substantiated, had monotheistic tendencies with ancient roots: “Der monotheistische Gedanke war alt in Griechenland”, as noted by one well-known expert of the “Old Greek religion”.⁵ This does not mean we should doubt its polytheistic nature in general terms, for clearly if we are to face up to genuine dominances of religious mentality, and not be too taken by particular ideas allowed to co-exist within a common system, pre-Christian or pagan Greek religion attended to many deities and spirits. And in any case, when characterizing any discrete religion, especially a syncretic one such as Yezidism, it is necessary to consider the entire complex of its structure without leaning mainly upon the external manifestation of the transcendental in the system of the religious dogmas.

A careful analysis of the Yezidi triad will show its component deities to be unambiguous manifestations of the one god worshipped by adherents. In establishing this, an absence of canonized dogmatic literature admittedly leaves us no choice but to lean upon the oral religious code of the Yezidis, yet the folkloric religious texts, particularly within the context of a wider analysis, provide material quite sufficient for research needs. The monotheism of the Yezidis is seen, for example, in the following prayer adopted as their Symbol of Faith called *Šahdā dīnī*:

Šahdā dīnē min ēk Allāh, ...
 Silt'ān Šēxadi pādšē mina, ...
 Silt'ān Ēzdī pādšē mina, ...
 Tāwūsī malak šahdā ū imānēd mina. ...
Haqa, xwadē kir, [am] ēzdīna,
Sar nāvē Silt'ān Ēzdīna.
Al-h'amd lillāh, am ži ōl ū tariqēd xō di-řāzīnā.

The testimony of my faith is one god,
 Sultan Sheikh 'Adi is my king,
 Sultan Yezid is my king,
 Malak-Tāwūs [The Peacock Angel] is the Symbol [of Faith] and my faith.
 Indeed, by god's will [we] are Yezidis,
 We are called by the name of Sultan Yezid.
 God be praised, we are content with our religion and our community.⁶

As for the minor deities of the Yezidi pantheon, the spirits, demons, and so on, their existence provides no reason to talk of polytheism, for similar characters (including the exact counterparts of those of the Yezidis) have been retained by many Iranian (and non-Iranian) Islamic nations at the level of so-called popular or folk Islam.

The Yezidi triad comprises the following: Malak-Tāwūs, the Peacock-Angel (in the Yezidi imagination being featured as a bird, a peacock or a cock, and sometimes even a dove); Sheikh 'Adi (Šeyx 'Ādī = Sheikh 'Adi bin Musafir, a historical personality, the founder of the proto-Yezidi community, as an old man); and Sultan Yezid (Silt'ān Ēzīd, as a youth). All three characters are manifestations of god – *xwadē* (or *xwadī*, *xudā*, the term, deriving from New Pers. *xudāy*). There are also other variations to designate god: *xudāvand*, *rab(b)ī*, as well as *Allāh* (mostly in the Arabic formulas); occurring in some religious songs is the term *ēzdān* (from New Pers. *yazdān* – “god”).

The Yezidi ideas on *xwadē* are quite hazy and blurred, and can be subjected to systemic processing only with great difficulty. The Yezidi *xwadē* resembles neither Zeus, the humanized father of the gods of Hellas, nor Yahweh, the almighty and “jealous” God of Judaism.

Xwadē is a little reminiscent of the absolute Allah in Islam or the all-forgiving and merciful God of the Christians. The main thing that makes him equivalent to the One God of the dogmatic religions, and what actually is essential, is his transcendence and his function as demiurge, as the creator. However, according to the Yezidi tradition, despite being creator of the universe, xwadē is completely indifferent to its fate; he is not concerned with worldly affairs or human fortune.

It is not an accident that in the Yezidi liturgy, as well as in the oral tradition, direct address to xwadē is made only on very rare occasions, and that he does not want any offerings. There is, however, at least one specimen of religious text dedicated to xwadē directly, which can be described rather as a glorification than an address in prayer. It is called “Madh’ē Xwadē”, that is, the “Glorification of Xwadē” or “Praise to Xwadē”.⁷ Consider the text of this prayer, emended occasionally:

Yā, řabīō, tu dāymī,
 Tu k’arīmī,
 Tu řāh’īmī,
 Tu qadīmī,
 Tu xudāye har xudāyī,
 Xudāye milk-ē k’arīmī,
 Tu xudāne a’ršē a’zīmī [rather, a’zmānī],
 A’nzaldā dānī qadīmī,
 Har xudāyē har xudāyī.
 Hin mak’āyī [that is, mak’ānī], hin maǰāyī [maǰālī],
 Tu xudāyē in ū isī [insī],
 Xudāyē a’rš ū k’ursī.
 Tu xudāyē ‘ālam ū qusī [rather, ‘ālamī qudsī],
 Har xudāyē har xudāyī.
 Hin mak’āyī, hin maǰāyī,
 Kas nizāna tu čawāyī,
 Har xudāne har xudāyī ...
 Ta na māla, ta na p’arda,
 Ta na lawma [rather, lawna], ta na ranga,
 Ta na āwāza, ta na danga,
 Kas nizāna tu čawānī,
 Har xudāyē har xudāyī.
 Waliyē farz ū nimēžanī ...
 Řuh’ā didī, ruh’ā diparēžī.
 H’ākimē šāh ū gadānī,
 H’ākimē ĵimh’ī ‘ālamī.
 Ta dīhār kir Īsā ū Maryam,
 Ta am kirin tažbatī [perhaps, ži batnī; cf. Arab. baṭn] Ādam.
 Har xudāyē har xudāyī ...

O, my lord, you are eternal,
 You are merciful,
 You are graceful,
 You are ancient,
 You are god of all gods,
 The god possessing kindness.
 You are god of the firmament of heaven,
 Initially ancient,
 [You] are god of all gods.
 [You] are both refuge and might,
 [You] are god of spirits and people,
 God of the firmament and throne.
 You are god of the realm of sanctity,
 You are god of all gods.
 [You] are both refuge and might,
 No one knows what you are,
 [You] are god of all gods.
 You have no home, no shelter,
 You have no colouration, no colour,
 You have no voice, nor sound,
 No one knows what you are,
 [You] are god of all gods.
 [You] are the master of rituals and prayers ...
 You give souls [to people] and [yourself] break the souls,
 [You] are the ruler over both kings and plebeians,
 [You] are the ruler of the entire world,
 You have created Jesus and Mary,
 You have created us [the Yezidis] from the loins of Adam.⁸
 [You] are god of all gods, [etc.].

The quoted eulogy is a typical specimen of the *maddāḥī* genre (praise of god or rulers) common in Oriental and Persian poetry.

There is also another Yezidi prayerful address to god, which is commonly read in the morning:

Yā, xwadē, wara hawārā
Hafti-du milatē,
Girtiyā havsā,
Nafsē tangiyā,
K'asīvā-k'ūsīvā;
Pāšē wara hawārā
*Milatē ma, ēzdīyā.*⁹

O god, come to the rescue of
 Seventy-two nations,

Prisoners,
 [People] in straits,
 To paupers and the downcast;
 And then only come to the rescue of
 Our people, the Yezidis.

However, there are not too many references to the singular *xwadē* in Yezidi religious knowledge and perceptions in general. Everything is done by the hand of his manifestations – the triad. *Xwadē* himself for the Yezidis is an utterly transcendent entity: his features are vague, being perceived only through the activity of the triad, particularly of Malak-Tāwūs, its main representative, often posing as the creator as well. Actually the members of the triad, as the hypostases of *xwadē*, are not always distinctly explicated; the triad is more an implication. Neither the oral tradition nor the so-called holy scriptures of the Yezidis make a note of the triad as a derivation from *xwadē*.

To all appearances, the emergence of the triad in the Yezidi doctrine seems to have moved *xwadē* aside, providing him with an implicit character also. In other words, the triad, having developed in Yezidism, was superimposed upon the already available tradition of monotheism initially present in the Yezidi religion, along with prior dogmas from proto-Yezidi formations – from bearers of the mystic Islam. Thus, the Yezidi *xwadē* looks to sit as a typical example of a *deus otiosus*, an impartial and removed god, whose image in sacred history will naturally lose its distinct outlines against the background of the trivial phenomena of creation, the aggrandizement of supernatural creatures, minor divinities, cultural heroes and ancestors directly related to human life. The initial stage of creation and the role of demiurge thus end up, in a way, falling into oblivion. In other words, as maintained by Franciscus Kuiper (in appealing to Mircea Eliade) the consecutive chain of events forming sacred history is endlessly recollected and praised, while the primordial stage, involving everything that existed prior to that sacred history – above all the majestic and solitary presence of god the creator but also the origins of the universe itself – goes dark or dim, or increasingly faint or obscure. If the great god is still remembered, they know that he created humans and the universe and that is it. The supreme god seems to have played out his role on finishing the course of his creation.¹⁰ It is tempting, and perhaps we should leave this open as a possibility, that *xwadē* is the residue of the “hidden god” of some ancient Gnostic system, and that his manifestations in the triad are comparable to emanations from the far removed divine,¹¹ but we cannot be preemptive in our judgements before assessing the extent of (other) Gnostic elements in Yezidism. The same applies to influences of Shi’a Islamic emanationism.