

The Yezidis, People of the Spoken Word in the midst of People of the Book

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Our books are our hearts
Yezidi saying

Among the Yezidis the cross-fertilization between the so-called religions of the Book and religions with an oral tradition is reaching a climax. Over the centuries layers of heterogeneous dogmas have been piled one upon another, creating one of the most astonishing syncretisms known to humanity. But in order to penetrate the mysteries of the centuries-old cross-breeding that brought about this situation, we need to try to define what Yezidism is. For we must remember that this is a religion whose mysterious origin and process of development have not yet been traced. Its first appearances on the stage of history are still shrouded in utter darkness.

Who are the Yezidis?

According to the most recent estimates¹, 200,000 Yezidis live huddled in the isolated Kurdish valleys and mountains of the Near and Middle East, the Caucasus and the Transcaucasus, divided up among Turkey², Syria³, Iran⁴ and the ex-USSR⁵ (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and southern Russia⁶). But the core of the community lives in Iraq.⁷ As for the origin of the name Yezidi, it is thought to come from the Persian word *îzid* (Angel) or *Yezdân* (God), which is found in the *Avesta*, whence the name *îzîdî* ('worshipper of the Angel' or 'worshipper of God') which they use for themselves. The name *Yezdân* appears at the beginning of all Yezidi prayers: '*bê nâv e Yezdân e pâk e delûvân u mehrabân*' ('In the Name of *Yezdân* the Pure, the Merciful, the Generous'). But V.F. Büchner points out that the name *Yezdân* comes from the field of Zoroastrian thought⁸, and more precisely from the *Avesta's Yazata*, which derives from the Old Indian *Yadjata* ('he who deserves to be worshipped'), the alternative Vedic name for God. The only meaning of *Yezdân* in modern written Persian is 'God', and it is a synonym of *xoda* or *khodâ*, a name used particularly by non-Yezidi Persians and Kurds. However, according to the Arab heresiograph al-Shahristânî writing in *Al-milal wa al-nihal* (*Dictionary of sects and heresies*), *Yezdân* stands for the 'light principle' as opposed to the Ahramanian 'dark principle' in the Iranian system and according to the Manichees. Thus the term becomes synonymous with Ohrmazd ('principle of good') in opposition to Ahraman ('principle of evil').⁹ Their neighbours had a different name for them. In Syria they were called Dasneans or Dasnoyees from the name of an old Nestorian diocese, says T. Menzel¹⁰, or a Turko-Syrian Yezidi

tribe, according to H. Broca.¹¹ Among the Armenians they are known by the name of Thondrakians and Policheans¹² (Politians), or alternatively Arevortis,¹³ a word that means 'Worshippers of the Sun'¹⁴ in Armenian. Near Lake Van they are thought to be schismatics from Armenian dogma, which they are said to have abandoned around the middle of the ninth century.¹⁵ The Turks and the Persians call them *putperest* (idolaters), but all Muslims agree that they are *shaytân parast* or '*abedet iblis* ('Worshippers of the Devil'). A.V.W. Jackson does not rule out a possible link between the *daevayasna* ('Worshippers of the Devil') mentioned in the *Avesta* and the present-day Yezidis.¹⁶ And Rawlinson thinks their origin is in Judaism. According to the American missionary Grant there is practically no doubt about it, the Yezidis are what remains of one of the lost tribes of Israel.¹⁷ In Iran they are thought to have come from the Guebres.¹⁸ According to the Ottomans, the Yezidis were simply base *murtadd* (renegades) who had at all costs to be brought back within the Muslim fold. But the sixteenth-century Kurdish prince Sharaf al-Dîn al-Badlîsî thought the Yezidis had been in northern Mesopotamia long before Islam.¹⁹ Some, for example A. Guérinot, have no hesitation in stating that, although the Yezidis speak Kurdish, that is, the language of the people they mostly live among, they are nevertheless not Kurds. They have a different origin. They may be the last representatives of a 'race' whose roots are obscure. They could be descended either from the Assyrians, as the Anglican missionary M. Badger asserts, or from the ancient people native to Chaldea, the Akkadians.²⁰ Others think they are representatives of the Hittites, who used to occupy the area before the Assyrian conquest.²¹ Indeed the Iraqi scholar S.S. al-Ahmed considers it not impossible that a small group of Assyrians settled in the Lâlesh valley (the Mecca of Yezidism) after the fall of Niniveh in 612 B.C. and passed down their religious practices there. The same theory can be applied to the Mithraics²², who are said to have emigrated after the fall of their capital Hathra in the middle of the third century A.D., or to the Manichees, who could have retreated there after the assassination of Mani in 276.²³ Furthermore, according to what Layard reports, the Yezidis may have an era specific to them, which is supposed to begin in the year 292 A.D. and which could therefore easily be identified with the death of Mani.²⁴ According to Spiro, Yezidism descends from Manicheism mixed with Assyrian, Persian, Christian and Muslim memories.²⁵ Some Orientalist authors, among them Horten, present Yezidism as a pure cult of light and a victory for the dualism of the ancient Persians.²⁶ One hypothesis represented by Chwolsohn and Lidzbarski states that Yezidism is merely a survival of an ancient Assyro-Babylonian cult.²⁷ However, though it is mainly Islam that has influenced Yezidism's present-day character, owing to bonds created by proximity and other factors at present unknown, it is the Iranian element that seems to play the most important part in its doctrinal system, so much so that it is almost tempting to see it as a Kurdish version of Zoroastrianism. But according to some contemporary scholars, Yezidism is older than Zoroastrianism and even Vedism. It is in a way the matrix for all Indo-Aryan beliefs.²⁸ The archaeologist L. Nayo, who is working for a German programme whose aim is to preserve peoples in danger of extinction, states that he recently discovered the word 'yezidi' engraved in cuneiform characters on a third-millennium Sumerian tablet.²⁹ As for the Yezidis themselves, they say their religion was founded in the town of Yezd in Iran around 2020 B.C. by a certain Mâlik Mirân³⁰ who, like Mâlik Salâm or Mâlik Yasdâq, is simply the Arabo-Persian transcription or transposition, as G. Vadja points out, of the name and title of the mysterious Melchizedek or king of Salem from Chapter XIV of Genesis,³¹ the one who, according to certain Judeo-Christian

theories, is a superpower, sometimes identified with the Messiah and sometimes with the Holy Ghost, and resides in ineffable places, without father or genealogy.³² Furthermore, the day of Nawrûz (spring equinox), which is celebrated by all the Kurds, for Yezidis recalls Abraham's initiation into the mysteries of their old religion that was imported by the great Priest mentioned in the Bible.³³ The Yezidis say that, unlike other peoples, after the Flood they descended from this strange personage whom they consider to be their second ancestor after Adam.³⁴ Thus the Yezidis see themselves not only as the followers of a completely separate religion with no connection with other religions, but also as a 'race' without equal. To further prove their superior nobility and distinguish themselves from the rest of the world, they say they are descendants of Adam alone, without the collaboration of a woman, whereas, according to them, Jews, Christians and Muslims descend from the male and female couple Adam and Eve.³⁵ In other words, you are born a Yezidi, you cannot become one. And so, because of their religious and geographical isolation, the Yezidis are today an ethnic group in their own right, completely separate from the Kurds, with whom nevertheless they share the same language.³⁶ However, some speak Arabic. This is true of certain Yezidis from Sindjâr in Iraq. In this regard T. Menzel thinks it quite possible that at least some Yezidis previously spoke Arabic and came, as tradition relates, from Syria and Babylonia.³⁷ Yezidism could thus be a super-mix of all the ideas its followers collected from among the peoples they came into contact with. However this is really only an illustration of the way they make use of other beliefs, while at the same time distinguishing themselves from them. But in order to get closer to the peculiar position in which this atypical religion finds itself, it would be interesting to attempt to situate it in relation to the great monotheisms with which it shares the same geographical space.

An unacknowledged syncretism

Despite many attempts to reinstate Islam, the Yezidis still cling fiercely to their religious independence. During his interview with the vice-consul of France in Mossul (Iraq) on 16 October 1879, Sheikh Nasser, the Yezidis' spiritual leader, insisted that the Yezidi religion has no connection with Islam. This took place at a time when the Yezidis, subjects of the Ottoman empire, repeated their demand that they should be exempt from supplying a contingent of soldiers for active service, just like non-Muslim subjects (Jews and Christians), who benefited from this exemption. The spiritual leader went on:

It is materially impossible for us to accept military service unless we abandon our religion. Are not Christians and Jews exempted from this service? We should be treated in the same way as them. Are we not all free to practise our religion, whatever it may be? So why should you force us to abandon our beliefs by demanding that we do military service? (...) We are not Muslims, and our religion is very different from Islam. We have long been persecuted because of this (...).³⁸

A few years previously, in 1872, the emir and supreme leader of the Yezidis had addressed a petition to the Ottoman authorities, who were wishing to recruit 150,000 soldiers

from his community. In it he said it was impossible for Yezidis to join the army because of a number of doctrinal obstacles. But what then is the position of Islam vis-à-vis this strange community living on its territory? This question is a doubly thorny one. On the one hand Yezidism is complete anathema to Islam because of its belief, which in its eyes is utterly odious (worship of the Devil); the Yezidis do not categorically deny this, though they are exasperated by it³⁹, whence the epithet that has been attached to them since time immemorial. On the other hand this doctrine is not completely foreign to Islam, since Yezidis recognize the Muslim saint 'Adî ibn Musâfir⁴⁰ as their prophet.⁴¹ This individual, who is mentioned, for example, by the Muslim historians ibn al-Athîr, ibn Khillîkân and al-Maqrîzî, is one of the saints who is most venerated by the Kurds living in the Mossul region of Iraq.⁴² This twelfth-century Sufi, who was a native of Baalbek in Lebanon but died among the Kurds at the age of 90, and whose orthodoxy is not in doubt, is considered by the Yezidis, for some reason that for the moment remains one of history's unfathomable mysteries, as the person who renewed their extremely ancient religion, which they say goes back to Adam. It is this amalgam that straightaway marks out the Yezidis' mytho-history and leads one to think, rightly or wrongly, that their belief makes them a heretical sect of Islam and not a separate religion. The Arab chronicler Mohammed Amîn al-'Umarî was among the first to make the link, in his historiography entitled *Manhal al-awliyâ' wa mashrab al-asfiyâ'* ('The fountain of the pure and the saints'), between 'Adî ibn Musâfir, whom he calls the most perfect model of the anchorite, and the Yezidis as worshippers of the Devil: 'God tested him with a disaster, viz. the appearance of a sect of renegades that people call the Yezidis (. . .). They worship the sun and also the devil.'⁴³ This saint had a reputation such that even an ultra-orthodox theologian like ibn Taymiyya, who was known for his ferocious attacks on the excesses of certain Muslim mystics, spoke in his favour and said of his way: 'It is healthy and contains no innovation.'⁴⁴ As for the position adopted by his Sufi brothers, it can be summarized in the extremely favourable testimony of 'Abd al-Karîm al-Jilî, one of the most famous of them: 'If prophecy could be attained through personal effort, Sheikh 'Adî could have been a prophet.'⁴⁵ Muslim sources are thus unanimous on the strange gap between Yezidi belief and the faith of the person they claim renewed their religion. According to these sources, the Sheikh is one of Islam's most irreproachable saints of – and therefore one of the most foreign to – Yezidi faith. So it seems impossible that a Sufi brotherhood could have turned into a religion that is as distant from Islam as Yezidism, contrary to what certain recent theories state, such as that put forward by the Italian M.A. Guidi and the Frenchman R. Lescot, according to whom Yezidism is nothing other than the reverse of Shi'ism. As for the local Christians (the vast majority of whom are Nestorians), they are far from holding the same positive views as Muslims and Yezidis about this ambivalent personage. They speak of a Kurdish 'Adî of Thairahite origin (Zoroastrian Kurds), diametrically opposed to 'Adî the Arab-Muslim saint. This one is presented as a faithless and lawless brigand. Having broken into one of their famous monasteries and massacred in cold blood the monks there, the criminal is supposed to have been taken by Prince Tuman, Genghis Khan's nephew, to Maragha (in present-day Azerbaidjan), where the great Mongol Khan had his residence, in order to be tried and executed.⁴⁶ According to the area's oral tradition, the monastery, which is generally considered to be the starting-point of Yezidism, was initially dedicated to Mar-Addaï, one of the seventy-two disciples of Christ and the

evangelizer of Chaldea. The name Addaï is strikingly similar phonetically to the name of the Muslim saint 'Adî, whom the Yezidis claim to follow. Thus they are thought to have brought about one of the oddest transitions in history, that is, the identification of a Christian apostle with a Muslim saint. The personage resulting from this weird mixture was subsequently recognized as their prophet.⁴⁷ And this is by way of a gentle introduction to the Yezidis' habit of using figures borrowed from other religions.

Their divinity/ies

As is the case with their origin, the Yezidis' divinity is no less obscure. An approach to the conception they have of God is difficult to articulate. They worship a divinity called Tawûs Melek, or Peacock-Angel.⁴⁸ They put him at the apex of a celestial *pleroma*? composed of seven secondary divinities. These all act as intermediaries between a supreme abstract divinity and creation.⁴⁹ This is the destabilized polytheism syndrome, as Herrenschildt would have it.⁵⁰ In a text written in the nineteenth century in the form of questions and answers, a Chaldean priest called Isaac, who lived for a long time among the Yezidis, tells us this about their pantheon: 'They say there are seven gods and each one rules the universe for ten thousand years; one of these gods is Lucifer, the leader of the fallen angels, who also has the name Melek Taous (. . .).'⁵¹ So it is not the nature of God that would be the subject for discussion with them, but the nature of Satan promoted to the status of God. But let us not extrapolate or allow ourselves to be carried away by the traditional incrimination of the Fallen Angel, and present him as the perfect and only symbol of Evil. In fact things are far more complex than that. Since Evil is a concept unknown to the Yezidis, it is consequently hard to reason using classical dualist logic, involving the two ancient principles of Good and Evil. By refusing to speak the name of Satan, the Yezidis quite simply deny the principle of his existence as the force of Evil. Of course they do acknowledge the primal sin of the Peacock-Angel, who tried to become the equal of the Supreme Being. In this regard they tell various stories, which are more or less similar to the story in the Bible and the Koran. Having subsequently repented⁵², and recognized the Creator's rights and supremacy, the angel in question returned to a state of grace and resumed his old divine rank.⁵³ Thus Satan is no longer the accursed devil and the symbol of opposition to God, as the monotheistic religions present him. He represents the demiurgic dimension of an inert and indefinable god.⁵⁴ It is on this subtle, fragile dividing line between Good and Evil that the Yezidis justify their ambiguous worship of the Peacock-Angel.

Their virtual books

A rather peculiar thing, as T. Menzel points out⁵⁵, is that the Yezidis have never claimed to Muslims that they have their own sacred books, as do, for instance, the devotees of Mandeism.⁵⁶ Several authors specializing in this micro-religion, whose last survivors do not exceed 13,000 souls scattered along the banks of the Euphrates and the Tigris in the south of Iraq and the west of Iran, think that their ancestors did not claim John the Baptist's authority until it became necessary to gather together a specific corpus in order

to convince Muslims that they were the Sabians mentioned in the Koran.⁵⁷ In the third century after the Hegira this people was confused with another who worshipped the stars and lived in the town of Harran; the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mûn ordered the latter to embrace Islam or one of the religions of the Book, viz. Judaism (*Torah*), Christianity (*Gospel*), Sabeism (*Ginzâ*) or Zoroastrianism (*Avesta*). The Mandeans (many of whom are thought to have converted, some to Islam, some to Christianity, to save their lives) then declared they were Sabians, following the advice, as some Arab historians report, of a doctor of Muslim law.⁵⁸ And to strengthen their new claim these people, who were also Babylonian, appealed to the authority of John the Baptist, who was in any case a figure dear to Islam. They presented the region's new political authorities with a large dossier of holy writings, among which should be mentioned, apart from the famous *Ginzâ* ('Treasure'), also called *Sidrâ Rabba* ('Great Book'), two other compilations: *Sidrâ d'Yahyâ* ('Book of John') or *Drâshê d'Malk* ('Speeches of kings'), and the *Qolastâ* ('Choice'), also called *Sidrâ d'Nishmâtâ* ('Book of souls').⁵⁹ It is obvious that the Mandeans produced these texts (which were written late) only to try to pull the wool over the Muslims' eyes, for the latter respect religions whose doctrine is supported by the authority of a revealed book. Thus, where they did not convert to Islam, entire populations belonging to Gnostic, star-worshipping, Archontic etc. sects crossed over *en bloc* to Christianity at the instigation of the newly installed Muslim authorities, who were constantly demanding that their new subjects should 'regularize' their religious situation as quickly as possible. Populations that had an indefinable profile were to conform to one of the religions of the Book by becoming Muslims, Jews, Christians or at the very least Zoroastrians or Sabians, and nothing else. As for the Yezidis, they were never considered chosen *ahl al-kitâb* ('People of the Book').⁶⁰ Their response to this is very clear: 'Our books are our hearts!', they have always cried.⁶¹ Thus it has always proved impossible up to the present day to establish the authenticity of the 'virtual' writings that they are thought to possess and that still have never been available to the general public, including the Yezidis themselves. The original copy of one of the supposed sacred books, called *al-Djilwah* ('The Revelation'), a book that strangers (non-Yezidis) must neither read nor look upon, is said to be preserved in a single example, amid the greatest mystery and extraordinary precautions, in Baêdre, Iraq. Twice a year the book is paraded, wrapped in linen cloth and silk. A replica of the text of this book that the Yezidis never show to strangers is supposed to have been lost as late as the end of the last century. In Sindjâr the Carmelite father Anastase Marie claimed to have obtained a copy (disclaimed by the Yezidis) of these books in cryptographic characters in 1904 in melodramatic circumstances.⁶² According to deacon Jeremia Shamir, the original copy of the Yezidis' second sacred book, entitled *Mushaf-i Rasht* ('The Black Book'), is supposed to be kept, in a single example and amid the greatest mystery, underneath a throne, bound in wood and hidden in several wrappings, in the home of one of the Yezidi dignitaries in Qasr 'Azz al-Din, a hour west of Semale, a village to the east of the Tigris.⁶³

Their legal status

Strangely, the fact that the Yezidis go to extreme lengths to hide their purported books does not at all work to their advantage. It is even diametrically opposed to the principle

of law that used to prevail in Islamic territory relating to the legal status granted to the so-called 'religions of the Book'. The result is that today, in secular republican Turkey, all Yezidis are described as 'Muslim Turk' on their identity cards. Like the other heterodox groups descended from Islam, or assumed to be, they do not have any representation. This is not so for Sunni Turks, who speak through the powerful *diyanet isleri baskanligi* (Council for Religious Affairs), a semi-political body attached to the Prime Minister's office, nor for Jewish Turks, who have a grand rabbinate, nor for Christian Turks (mostly Orthodox), who are represented by the extremely prestigious patriarchate of Constantinople. In the Islamic Republic of Iran this principle is even stated in the constitution, so that there the People of the Book enjoy a freedom that so-called heretical Muslims do not have, such as the several thousand *Ahl-e Haqq* ('Devotees of the Truth') living there in near-illegality.⁶⁴ According to the Iranian constitution, apart from Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, only the legal schools of orthodox Islam are free to practise openly, together with duodeciman Shi'ism, which has been an official and unchanged religion in Iran since the sixteenth century:

The official religion of Iran is Islam and the dogma that of the duodeciman Djaffarite sect, which is unchanging for all eternity. Other Islamic dogmas, whether Hanefite, Chafeite, Malekite, Hanbalite or Zeydite, enjoy total respect. Disciples of these dogmas are free to carry out their religious rites in accordance with their religious teaching.

Article XII⁶⁵

Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are the sole religious minorities recognized, and are free, within the limits of the law, to carry out their religious rites and act in accordance with their liturgy, as regards their personal status and religious teaching.

Article XIII⁶⁶

We should remember that unbelievers, against whom Islam wages *djihâd* ('Holy War'), are people without the Book. They are invited either to embrace Islam or to convert to one of the monotheisms quoted in the Koran.⁶⁷ If they refuse both options, hostilities against them begin automatically, given that the status of *dhimmî* (non-Muslim subject under the protection of the Muslim state) is reserved only for the People of the Book. But let us hear what the Patriarch of the Yezidis had to say when he was answering questions put by the French vice-consul in Iraq a century ago:

- Q. You know that the religions of Moses, Jesus and Mahomet each have their inspired book. Do you have a book of this type, which distinguishes your belief from others, and that you could produce if necessary?
- A. We have two books, but no stranger can see them.
- Q. What do you call them?
- A. The title of the first book is *Jaloua* ('Revelation'), the second *Mashafi Rache* ('The Black Book').
- Q. You interest me so much that I cannot help asking you some more questions in order to learn. What language are these books in?
- A. Arabic.
- Q. And what are they about?
- A. *Mashafi-Rache* is a commentary on the *Jaloua*. It was given to us by Sheikh 'Adi when he came back from Syria. (. . .).

Q. Do these books contain religious dogmas or laws?

A. They deal only with religion.

Q. You said it was Sheikh 'Adi who gave you the *Mashafti-Rache*, but where does the *Jaloua* come from?

Q. The *Jaloua* is the ancient book.

This reply (the French vice-consul states) was also too brief; but I had to be satisfied with it for the time being, since I saw I had touched on a sensitive spot.⁶⁸

This was the most a high Yezidi dignitary would tell a stranger. The cruel lack of information explains the customary absence of Yezidism from the 'hit-parade' of religions drawn up by the so-called specialist dictionaries. At most it gets a few lines, as a sect situated on the very margins of Islam. Others quite simply fail to treat the subject, since it is almost untreatable from a methodological standpoint. There are few authors who have attempted to present Yezidism as a religion in its own right.⁶⁹ It is true that, without a codex duly written and recognized by the Yezidis themselves, it is futile to risk piecing together something of a catechistic nature. Even intellectuals from a Yezidi background appear to have difficulty in digging up and fitting together the rudimentary and often contradictory remains of their tradition, which seems to depend solely on confused memories and oral texts that have no known source and cannot be verified. Given this destabilizing situation, it is not surprising to discover that *fatwas* were promulgated very early on by the authorities representing orthodox Islam, unanimously declaring Yezidi areas to be *dâr al-harb* ('war zones'). In the fifteenth century dramatic events were reported in the Hakkârî area of Iraq, instigated by a Sunni theologian called Djalâl al-Dîn al-Halwânî; they are thought to have ended with several dead and wounded. The largest Yezidi sanctuary in Lâlesh was utterly destroyed and the ashes of their prophet burned yet again after the events that occurred two centuries earlier, when the Yezidis' supreme leader was among the victims. Much later the prefect (official of the local administration) of Van (in present-day Turkey) Shemsî Pasha led another campaign against the Yezidis with the blessing of the Ottoman sultan Mehmet IV. And the revolt of 1715 ended in a bloodbath. Historical sources tell us that after the campaign of extermination mounted by Mehmet Pasha in 1831, followed by two other campaigns separated by only a few years (1838 and 1841), three-quarters of the Yezidis had perished.⁷⁰ Finally, in 1892, the Ottoman general Ömer Vehbi Pasha threatened the Yezidis with total extermination unless they renounced their religion in favour of one of those recognized by the Koran.⁷¹ The last known Yezidi uprising dates back to 1974 in Iraq. As usual, it was put down by the army.⁷² Thus all the conditions have long been in place for Yezidism to be doomed to disappear from the religious map of a region which is firmly under the authority of the Book. It must be the Devil's work if this rebellious and unnatural cult has managed to creep through the dark tunnels of history almost unharmed and survive the brutality of age-old enemies.

The written word's monopoly

To complicate the situation, the Yezidis do not simply have no Book. Unlike their neighbours, they even deny themselves the right to read and write. In contempt of their

Mesopotamian ancestors, who invented the first form of human writing, illiteracy has become a law of nature for them, and even an article of faith. In the late nineteenth century, so it is said, those Yezidis who could read and write could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Only one family is allowed to learn to read and write, according to the community's law. For it must be remembered that among the peculiarities distinguishing the Yezidis from their Semitic neighbours is their very particular mode of social organization. Like Indo-Aryan societies, the Yezidi community is regulated in accordance with a caste system that is unique throughout the region. This system, which Yezidis see as guaranteeing the 'purity' of their race, is based on a complex combination of religious function and lineage, where each family, each bond of kinship, is a separate unit. All Yezidis are born, grow up, marry and die within the caste they belong to. Thus it is strictly forbidden to attempt to cross from one caste into another. Each must live and die within the birth caste. This form of social organization comprises a dichotomy. On one hand there are the *murîd* (novices), in other words lay-people (the *Shodra*, as we would call them in Hindu terms) and on the other the initiated, dedicated to the priesthood (corresponding to the Brahmins – in Sanskrit this word means literally 'the twice-born'). In Kurdish they are called the *dî nâv* (*binomium*), a word that means 'people with two souls'. For, according to the principle of metempsychosis to which all Yezidis hold, people belonging to the priestly caste are earthly doubles of the semi-divine heavenly figures discussed earlier. This pyramid structure, which is reminiscent of the ziggurats of ancient Babylon, contains the whole Yezidi nation in its levels, one above another, and ends in a double apex (see diagram): a supreme spiritual leader called the *Baba Sheikh*, who has the rank of patriarch, and a supreme temporal leader called the *Mîr-i Sheikhân* or 'Prince of Sheikhân', from the name of the area where the Iraqi Yezidis are concentrated (Sheikhân Province). The Yezidi Sheikhs occupying the uppermost caste are divided into five families, which all trace their lineage back to five ancestors, who were half-human, half-angel and, though they remained celibate, created male children that they adopted. These children, who were born without mothers, married, and the Sheikhs descend from them.⁷³ But only the descendants of the family of a certain Sheikh Hasan, pronounced locally Shey Sîn, are allowed to read and write; they are considered to be the chief repository of religious knowledge and the supreme interpreters of the sacred texts they conserve. Thus the Prince of the Yezidis himself and their Patriarch do not have access to them, since neither descends from this family. In 1869, when he was passing through Mossul, the governor-general of Iraq, Midhat Pasha, invited the Prince of the Yezidis, Husein Bey, who had come to greet him, to provide his sons with some education, so as not to leave them in total ignorance. In order to comply with the wish of this dignitary, whose advice to him was equivalent to an order, the emir quickly found a teacher for his sons, who taught them to read and write. This scandalized the whole community, whose spiritual leaders immediately saw it as their duty to dissuade the prince. They went so far as to persuade the young students, without their father knowing, that they were guilty of a crime in taking lessons, and so managed to put a stop to their studies, which had only just begun.⁷⁴ Despite the fierce opposition of community leaders, British administrators tried to open a school in Yezidi territory; it closed quite early on, following the accidental death of four pupils who were carried away by a flood, an event that was interpreted as a prophetic warning of imminent disaster, addressed to the whole community because it

had violated the taboo.⁷⁵ At the beginning of the century a Yezidi teacher working for the education ministry in Iraq was even shot at several times by his relatives for having infringed the sacred law. Having exhausted all peaceful deterrents, they had no solution left but to liquidate him.⁷⁶ In the course of the valuable interview the Yezidi spiritual leader granted the French vice-consul in Mossul, we read the following:

- Q. People say that the Yezidis' religion forbids them to learn to read and write. Is this so?
A. It is, apart from one family, who are allowed to read and write.
Q. If the art of reading and writing is forbidden among you, how can you get to know the contents of your books?
A. Whenever we have an important question to answer and we need to consult the books, we go to a member of the family I just referred to, so they can read and translate for us.
Q. Does this reading take place in public or in secret?
A. The public does not need to know what is in the books; that is why they are read only in the presence of a handful of us leaders and the emir.
Q. Can you read and write yourself?
A. No.
Q. So, if you need to consult the books, alone and without anyone's assistance, you cannot do so.
A. There are two ways of reading: one is deciphering the letters in a book; the other is reading what is in the heart. And we spiritual leaders read what Khoda 'God' has inscribed in our hearts through inspiration, and so we have no need of books.
Q. Is this inspiration given to all Yezidis?
A. No, it is given only to me, my family and the spiritual leaders under me.⁷⁷

Regarding the origin of this interdiction, an oral tradition says this: a Jewish magician foretold to Yezid or Izid (the semi-divine figure from the Yezidi pantheon wrongly identified with the Arab caliph Yazîd) that he would become king. This magician asked him to do what he would tell him for a year from when he came to the throne. Yezid agreed. When Yezid in fact became king, the Jew asked him to do as he had promised. Yezid told him to ask for what he wanted. The Jew said: 'Burn the books and all the images in your empire and put to death scholars of all the religions that exist in the States as well. Thus you will triumph and be raised up on high.' Yezid had all the books on earth collected up and burnt them.⁷⁸ From then on he forbade all Yezidis to learn to read and write, except the members of the family of Sheikh Sîn, an obscure figure sometimes identified with the saint Hasan al-Basrî and sometimes with Hasan, the brother or disciple of 'Adî, whom the Yezidis claim to follow. According to tradition, 'Adî did have a companion called Hasan, who followed him wherever he went. Before he died, 'Adî adopted him as his son and ordered him to place his back against his own back, so the children of Hasan were thought to descend from lineage of 'Adî.⁷⁹ However, a number of specialists in this area, among them A. Guerinot,⁸⁰ say that this Shey Sîn is none other than the moon god Sîn from the Mesopotamian pantheon, symbolizing transmission and knowledge, the figure whom the gods regularly came to consult. Nowadays the Yezidis call him 'the god of the reed and the tablet'.⁸¹ In antiquity the god Sîn used to occupy the first row in the astral triad, next to the Sun-god 'Shamash' and the Venus-goddess 'Ishtar', in whose honour the Yezidis still sacrifice a white sheep at the onset of autumn, having watched for the first

signs of its arrival, which indicates the approach of winter.⁸² Two temples, dedicated to Sîn and Shamash, topped with conical domes that are unique of their type, can still be seen in the Lalesh valley in Iraq. Standing facing the sun, away from any devotee of another religion, with their arms crossed over their chests, Yezidis recite a strange prayer each morning. This prayer was recorded on cassette by an Iraqi fakir called Hadjî and was recently issued in Berlin by the scholar H. Broca.⁸³

Ji mâlê hatâ mâlê
Shê Shems xwadânê seyîqâlê
Em ji Shê Shems nâyêrin xiyâlê
Darajê hatâ darajê
Shê Shems xwadânê farajê
Em dê dast u dâmânêd Shê
Shems shûnâ
Ka'abat ullah u hajê tawâf Keyn

From family to family
Sheikh Shams possesses clairvoyance
Apart from Sheikh Shams, we think of no one
Of all the saints (lit. 'Among the hierarchy')
It is Sheikh Shams who possesses consolation
We kiss the hands and the hem of the robe
of Sheikh Shams instead of
(observing) hajj and walking around the Ka'aba⁸⁴

Could it be that the two *igigs* (upper gods, as opposed to *anounnakis*, lower gods) from the Babylonian pantheon have been worshipped by name in Mesopotamia for 5000 years without a break? At any rate everything seems to point to this thesis. Indeed it is with these two names that Yezidis now end their creed: *Malak Shêx Sîn baxoy min e* ('The Angel Sheikh Sîn is my Creator and my Master'); *Shêx Shams masab u bînâya chavêd min e* ('Sheikh Shams is my faith and the light of my eyes').⁸⁵

The spoken work ensures doctrinal flexibility

It is clear that we have here a perfect secret society, where teaching is dispensed orally and in small portions by an élite that monopolizes it. Some even say that the doctrine is known in its entirety only to three high religious dignitaries, who are literate and all have the honorific title Pish-imam.⁸⁶ Two of them are in Iraq and the third is in Turkey.⁸⁷ So nothing is really clear in the Yezidi community. The obscurity that has always surrounded this religion is due in the first place to its very followers. They do not hesitate to say contradictory things and when confronted with details about them, they sometimes prefer to remain silent, and thus avoid being forced to confirm or deny them. Everyone who has travelled among these people must surely have suffered the same experience – being faced with individuals who are extremely obliging and always ready to encourage enquirers to believe what they want, but never prepared to contradict them. In fact it is to give Muslims the impression that they venerate their saints, says A. Guérinot, that the Yezidis claim that the afore-mentioned Sheikh Sîn is the saint Hasan al-Basrî. However, historically this Muslim saint has no connection, either close or distant, with the Yezidis. Similarly, the god Shamash for them assumes the name Sheikh Shams (pronounced Sheshems). But in reality he represents the sun. We should note that one of the two most important Yezidi fasts in fact takes place on the day of the sun (1 December).⁸⁸ According to Guérinot, this is just a slight spin, and an artificial one, designed to cover up their true beliefs, a subtle phonetic concession to their age-old persecutors, the Kurds, the Turks and the

Arabs.⁸⁹ And the French vice-consul in Mossul confirms this hypothesis. On this matter he states:

Sheikh Sinn is also a god for the Yezidis, since he takes his existence from divine nature itself. (. . .) His true name is Sheikh Sinn, but when they speak of him to people of different religions, they call him Sheikh Hasan al-Basrî, a Muslim figure who died in a state of sainthood early in the second century after the Hegira. They use this borrowed name to hide the true name and to please Muslims by making it the same as one of their saints and so trying to make them believe they venerate these holy personages.⁹⁰

Such subterfuge is even thought to affect ritual practice. So those Yezidis who live among Christians do not practise circumcision, unlike their co-religionists living among Muslims.⁹¹ Although this rite is not compulsory, it is said to be practised opportunistically in order to pass as Muslims if need be. In Yezidi areas that are not isolated and so more visible, as is the case with the Yezidis in Syria, feast-days peculiar to the community are celebrated only if they coincide with feast-days celebrated by their Christian and Muslim neighbours.⁹² Lastly, here is an explicit admission from a contemporary Yezidi dignitary confirming this: 'In the past Yezidis used to make their offering to the Peacock-Angel on Wednesday⁹³, their holiday⁹⁴ (. . .) Now, because they have been persecuted by Muslims, they celebrate their feast-day on Friday like them. They do this to accommodate them.'⁹⁵ These defensive tactics might explain, at least in part, practices that Yezidis share with their Christian neighbours, such as baptism with water, the breaking of bread and the ritual drinking of wine, which is reminiscent of the eucharist.⁹⁶ Furthermore, it is customary among the Yezidis to visit Christian churches with devotion when marriages are celebrated. R. Lescot noted that some of them even had a feast-day in honour of Jesus, which fell around Easter.⁹⁷ But according to M. Le Fevre, they honour Jesus, Mary, Moses, Zachariah and Mahomet more out of vanity than any other motive.⁹⁸ Following the same logic, M. Badger thinks that 'Adî, the Muslim saint whom Yezidis claim as their own, represents neither more nor less than a textual double of another figure who is said to have appeared on earth to bring his faith to the Yezidis, and that the title of Sheikh was given to him later by the faithful with the sole aim of concealing from Muslims the true significance of his name.⁹⁹ Starting from the principle that 'M' sometimes becomes 'W' in Kurdish, Lidzbarsky and Chwolsohn do not rule out the possibility that the name of the present-day Yezidi divinity Tawûs may correspond to the Assyro-Babylonian divinity Tammûz, lover of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar.¹⁰⁰ This view is enthusiastically shared by G. Furlani.¹⁰¹ One thing is certain and that is that, as early as the Middle Ages, the thirteenth-century Arab polygraph ibn al-Nadîm was using the name Tawûz in his famous *fihrist* (bibliographical Index) to indicate the god Tammûz.¹⁰² To cause confusion Yezidis sometimes say the etymology of their name comes from *yezu* (Jesus), when they meet Christians, and sometimes from the Arab caliph Yazîd, when they are talking to Muslims.¹⁰³ And A. al-'Azzâwî, another Iraqi scholar, tells us that his Yezidi fellow-citizens would not draw the line at mumbling the *shahâda* (creed) whenever they felt they needed to.¹⁰⁴ The Yezidis' strategy of causing confusion sometimes goes to astounding lengths. Thus, in order to justify to the Muslims reducing their fast from thirty days to three, they claim that Ramadan was almost deaf when the divine commandment came down, so that instead of hearing (in Kurdish) *sîh rûz* (three days), he heard *sî rûz* (thirty days), whence the misunderstanding that has separated them ever since.¹⁰⁵

The theories we have touched on are fascinating in themselves, but the evidence supporting them rests on conjecture and oral evidence as long as written sources are unavailable to confirm them. This chaotic situation is a reflection of the confusion the Yezidis have led us into, with the single aim of making any attempt at codifying their religion impossible to carry out. On this front their success is beyond dispute. Thus the Yezidis have a purely oral tradition. If we are to believe one of their number, the terror of the written word that they feel impelled them to destroy ancient Assyrian inscriptions they found in the Lalesh valley in Iraq, for fear they might reveal details about their religion to prying people seeking information.¹⁰⁶ However, their aversion to the written word is replaced by a clear preference for oral teaching, a teaching that alone gives them access to information going back into the far distant past. This information has incomparable significance for them, even if it seems contradictory. For these contradictions are simply the natural traces of the metempsychosis through which informants pass. Here is a characteristic specimen of this strange mode of argument:

Christians' understanding is obscured because they have so many books and even then the books teach them only what has happened since the last Adam.¹⁰⁷ As far as we are concerned, our books are our hearts. As for the different opinions that are held among us, for example, if one person says: the fire of Gehenna is extinguished, and another says not; if one says: the dead rise again, and another not; these are not errors and contradictions that can be blamed on our religion of Yezid, for those who have these differing views have not all lived at the same time but at different times, and consequently each of them says what God has shown them in the first times from those that preceded the last Adam up to today. Christians do not know Christ, for if they knew him they would worship the sun, who is Christ and whom we call Sheikh Shems ed-Din (Shams = Sun). Christians do not have any more prophets, while we still do; these are the Kodjaks, who teach us what God reveals to them in dreams and visions. We have one Kodjak who told us he was in a boat with the prophet Jonah, whom he threw into the water, and he stayed forty days and forty nights. So we have to believe the man who saw it rather than books that say three days and three nights.¹⁰⁸

It was this highly developed polysemy that allowed the Yezidis to acquire extraordinary doctrinal flexibility and defend themselves over a period of many centuries against the excesses of the powerful followers of the written word. Thus there can be no doubt that we are dealing with a fundamentally ascholastic religion, based on the prophecy of the *koçak*, Kurdish shamans whose caste is confirmed by succeeding generations. So how should we record this huge corpus other than by keeping up with the passage of time! This religion is constantly changing and any attempt to pin it down is doomed to failure from the outset. Nowadays almost all Yezidis are educated in schools and universities, even though a few scattered pockets of resistance still praise the virtues of illiteracy. It is thus possible to predict that they will be integrated, even totally assimilated. Today there are even representatives in the parliaments of Iraq and Armenia. All the same, it is sad that, on the threshold of the third millennium, the devotees of the Peacock-Angel have not yet thought the time ripe to set down their beliefs in writing, or at least the most stable of them. They still prefer to use the oral mode.¹⁰⁹

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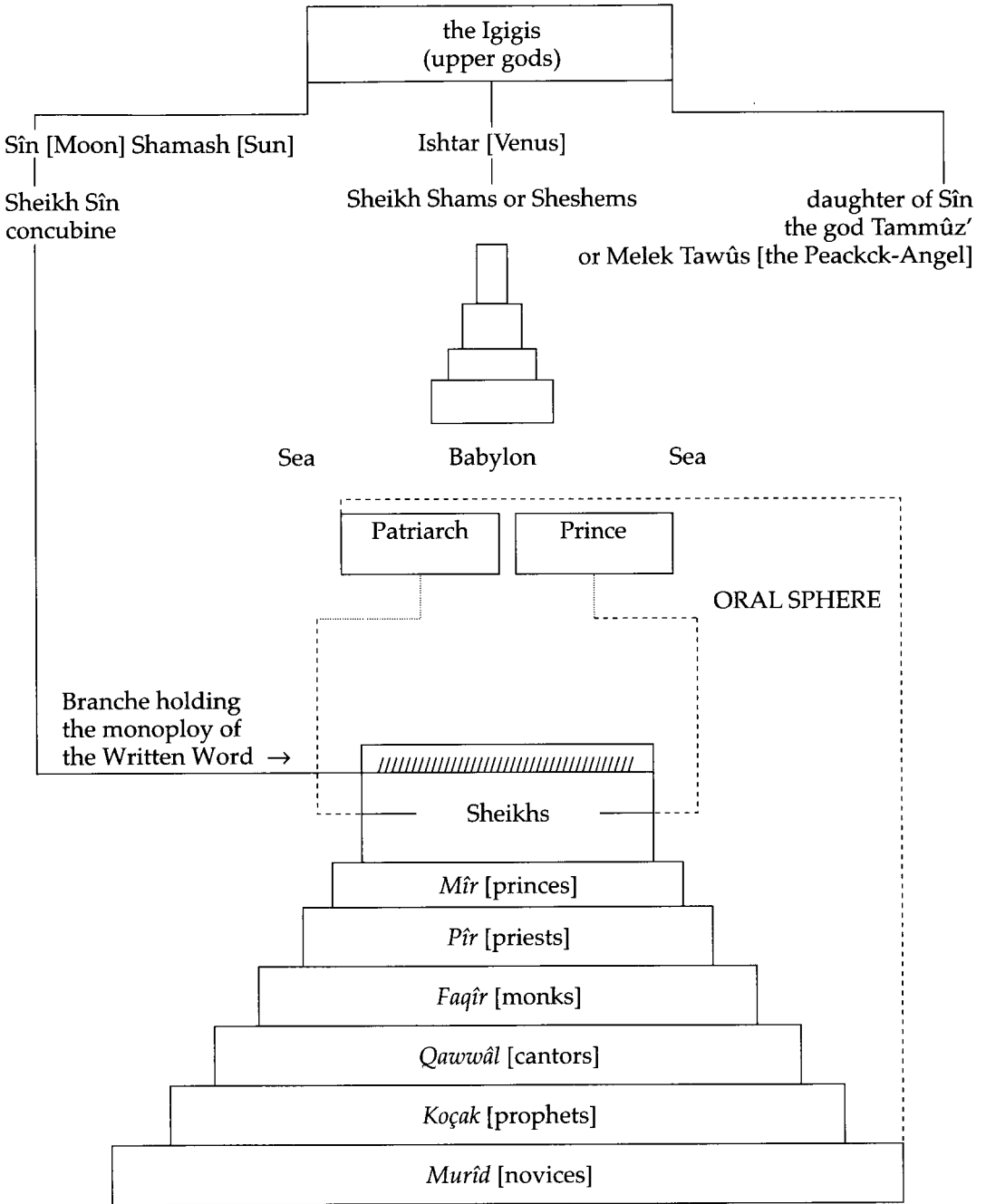


DIAGRAM OF YEZIDI CASTE SYTEM

Notes

1. J.S. Guest (1987, new ed. 1993), *Survival Among the Kurds: A History of the Yezidis* (London & New York, Kegan Paul International), p. XIII.
2. Urfa, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Sivas, Siirt, Antakiya and Entab districts.
3. al'Hasaka, Halep, Lataquieh and Damascus districts.
4. Tabriz, Mahabâd, Karamanshâh and Khorasân districts.
5. According to statistics dating from the late 1970s, in the former USSR there were 40–50,000 Yezidis in a community totalling 150,000 Kurds. See A. Bennigsen & C. Lemerrier-Quelquejay (1986), *Le Soufi et le commissaire. Les confréries musulmanes en URSS* (Paris, Editions du Seuil), pp. 19–29.
6. Around the city of Rostov.
7. Mossul, Dahûk, Erbil, Karkûk and Sulaymâniya districts.
8. During solemn ceremonies Yezidi priests wear robes similar to their Zoroastrian counterparts in India and Iran. See G. Furlani (1940), *The Religion of the Yezidis, Religious texts of the Yezidis, translation, introduction and notes* (Bombay), pp. 82–93.
9. V.F. Büchner (1934), Yazdan in *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, 1st ed. E.J. Brill & C. Klincksieck (Leiden-Paris), vol. IV, pp. 1225–1226.
10. T. Menzel (1934) Yazidi, *ibid.*, p. 1228.
11. H. Broca (1995), *Dirâsât fi mithlôlôjiyâ al-diyâna al-yazidiya* (*Studies on the mythology of the Yezidi religion*), private publication (Berlin), p. 22.
12. T. Menzel, *loc. cit.*, p. 1228.
13. H. Broca, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
14. The Arab-Iranian cosmographer al-Bîrûnî (eleventh century) also mentions a people he calls 'al-shamsiyye' (Worshippers of the Sun) in *Al-âthâr al-bâqiya fi al-'umam al-khâlia* (*the Chronology of the Ancient Nations*) (Leipzig 1878, republished Frankfurt 1998, Institut für Geschichte de Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaft), p. 318.
15. A. Guérinot (1908), Les Yézidis, *Revue du Monde Musulman*, May, no. 5, p. 583.
16. A.V.W. Jackson (1906), *Persia Past and Present* (New York), p. 12.
17. S.S. al-Ahmed (1971), *Al-yazidiyya: ahwâluhum wa mu'taqadâtuhum* (*The Yezidis: their origin and their beliefs*), (Baghdad, Edition Presse Universitaire), p. 24.
18. A. Guérinot, *op. cit.*, p. 583.
19. S. al-Badlîsî (undated), *Sharaf nâmeḥ fi târîkh al-duwal wa al-imârât al-kurdiyya* (*History of the Kurdish states and principalities*) (Cairo), p. 156.
20. A. Guérinot, *op. cit.*, p. 593.
21. J. Menant (1892), *Les Yezidis, Episodes de l'histoire des adorateurs du Diable* (Paris, Ernest Leroux), p. 48.
22. The cult of the god Mithra was Christianity's most formidable competitor and this situation lasted for several centuries. On this subject Renan wrote: 'If the growth of Christianity had been halted by some fatal disease, the world would have been Mithraic.' The sacrifice of the bull, which the Yezidis still practise at their annual celebrations, was the subject of a large number of bas-reliefs decorating the main portion of the sanctuaries of Mithra; it was the symbolic image par excellence which summarized the whole doctrine of its mysteries for the initiate. We should remember that the Bull-God is one of the primal divinities that appeared in the Near East and in Asia Minor in the Neolithic, between the tenth and the fourth millennium. There are numerous monuments attesting to the presence of Mithra in the Rhine and Danube valleys. Many examples can be seen in the Louvre, including one huge one from the Capitol in Rome. The Guimet museum holds one, which was also found in Italy. Belief in the divinity of the stars came from the Chaldees and then was passed on to the Gnostic and Manichean sects, which came later. Could Yezidism be another form of this cult, which was once very widespread? See in particular M.G. Lafaye (1906) L'initiation mithraïque in *Annales du Musée Guimet* (Paris, Ernest Leroux), pp. 89–111.
23. S.S. al-Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
24. T. Menzel, *loc. cit.*, p. 1232.
25. *ibid.*, p. 1229.
26. *ibid.*, p. 1229.

27. *ibid.*, p. 1230.
28. H. Broca, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
29. *ibid.*, p. 31.
30. S.S. al-Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
31. 'And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine; and he was the priest of the most high God.' (Genesis XIV, 18).
32. G. Vadja (1943–1945), Melchisédec dans la mythologie ismaélienne in *Journal Asiatique*, pp. 173–183.
33. S.S. al-Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 191.
34. F. Nau (1915–1917), Recueil de textes et de documents sur les Yézidis, *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, vol. X, p. 255.
35. According to extracts from manuscripts 306 and 324 in the Bibliothèque Nationale's Syriac collection relating to the Yezidis: 'Adam and Eve quarrelled and there was an argument between them about the reproduction of the human race, each saying: "I shall be the one to bring it forth." They saw the beasts reproducing by coupling of male with female. Then each one placed (the fruit of) their desire in a jar which they closed with their seals. After nine months they opened them. They saw a pair of children, male and female, in Adam's jar, and our race originates from them; but when they opened Eve's jar, they saw only stinking maggots, fetid and filthy. Then God made Adam grow breasts with which he suckled his children for two years; and since that time men have breasts. After that Adam lay with Eve and she brought forth twins, a male and female pair, from whom Christians, Jews and Muslims are descended. Seth, Enoch, Noah, just men, our patriarchs, come from Adam alone.' See J.B. Chabot (1896), Notice sur les Yézidis, *Journal Asiatique*, January–February, p. 118.
36. The Yezidis hold that God speaks neither Syriac, as the Christians say, nor Hebrew, as the Jews would have it, but Kurdish, which is the true tongue. See F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, p. 255.
37. T. Menzel, *loc. cit.*, p. 1229.
38. N. Siouffi (1880) Une courte conversation avec le chef de la secte des Yézidis ou les adorateurs du Diable, *Journal Asiatique*, January, pp. 79–80.
39. According to the Iraqi scholar 'Abd al-Razzâq al-Hasanî, all the words that appear in the copies of the Koran preserved by Yezidi dignitaries, and that allude to Satan or his curse, were systematically blotted out by them with wax, for they say it was Muslims who added them later. According to the same scholar, during a class a Yezidi pupil who comes across the name of Satan in a book automatically puts a finger on it to hide it. Sometimes it even happens that the pupil shuts the book and leaves the class, for a Yezidi should neither speak nor even hear the name of Satan. In order to lessen Yezidis' daily mental torment, it is correct social behaviour in Iran for non-Yezidis to respect this taboo in the presence of people from the Yezidi community. K. al-Djarrâd (1995), *al-yazîdiyya wa al-yazîdiyyun (Yezidism and the Yezidis)*, (Lattaquié), p. 85.
40. F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, pp. 149–154.
41. For reasons that are still quite obscure other Muslim saints are venerated by the Yezidis, in particular al-Hallâdj, Hasan al-Basrî and 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Djîlânî. See K. al-Djarrâd, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
42. F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, pp. 150–153.
43. N. Siouffi (1885), Notice sur le Cheikh Adi et la secte des Yézidis, *Journal Asiatique*, January, p. 80.
44. K. al-Djarrâd, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
45. *ibid.*, p. 83.
46. *ibid.*, pp. 188–189; 192–193.
47. *ibid.*, pp. 185–186.
48. According to some versions of the Muslim myth of original sin, the peacock is an intermediary between the serpent and Satan and meets the same fate as them.
49. Though these Archangels are all venerated by the Yezidis, who establish places to worship them at various points around the main sanctuary in Lâlesh, Iraq, only the Peacock-Angel is worshipped regularly and centrally. See K. al-Djarrâd, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
50. C. Herrenschildt (1988), Le mazdéisme in *Le grand Atlas des religions* (Paris, Editions Encyclopaedia Universalis), p. 70.
51. F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, p. 271.

52. He is supposed to have filled seven pitchers with his tears over a period of 7000 years of penitence, and the flames of hell were extinguished forever by them. The Yezidis do not believe in either devil or hell. See T. Menzel, *loc. cit.*, p. 1229.
53. N. Siouffi (1882), Notice sur la secte des Yézidis, *Journal Asiatique*, August–September, pp. 254–255.
54. F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, p. 143.
55. T. Menzel, *loc. cit.*, p. 1233.
56. Mistakenly called ‘John the Baptist Christians’ by the first missionaries to come across them, although they consider the ‘Roman’ or ‘Byzantine’ Christ, as they call him, to be an imposter. This what Hibil-Ziwa, leader of the *uthras* (eons) of the Mandaean pantheon, says on this subject (extract from the community’s sacred texts, which are in Babylo-Aramaic): ‘(. . .) But then he (Jesus) shall corrupt John’s preaching, alter the baptism in the Jordan, denature the words of fidelity and preach fraud and malice everywhere. (. . .) The Roman Christ shall cause upheaval among the peoples, the twelve seducers shall travel about the world, for thirty years the Roman shall appear to humankind.’ See J. Steinman (1972), *Saint Jean Baptiste et la spiritualité du désert* (Paris, Editions du Seuil), pp. 128–129.
57. ‘Those that believe, both the followers of Judaism and also the Sabians and the Christians, provided they believe in God and the last Day, and carry out the work of salvation, no fear of them should be entertained, nor shall they have regrets . . .’ (*The Table Spread*, V: 69).
58. Ibn al-Nadīm (1971), *Kitāb al-fihrist* (Book of bibliographical index) (Tehran), p. 385.
59. See J. Hadot (1995), Mandéisme in *Encyclopédie Universalis*, Corpus XIV (Paris), pp. 422–423.
60. This is what the Koran says about the *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book): ‘Do not debate (you Muslims) with the People of the Book except in the gentlest way (. . .) – It is good that it be so: We have sent the written Word down upon you (upon Mohammed), and those to whom We have already given the Scripture believe in it, and there are those among them who believe in the written Word (. . .).’ (*The Spider*, XXIX: 47–48)
61. Prince Ismael Gül (1934), *Al-yazīdiyya qadīman wa hadīthan* (Yezidism, past and present) (Beirut), p. 84.
62. This sacred Book, as well as *mushaf-i rasht* (the Black Book), was translated into English from the Arabic text by E.H. Browne and published as an appendix to O.H. Parry (1895), *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery* (London). The Arabic text was edited and translated into English by Isya Joseph (1908–1909), *Yezidi Texts in The American Journal of Semitic Languages*, vol. XXV. A replica of the Kurdish text was edited, with a French translation of two Arabic manuscripts, by Father Anastase Marie (1911) in *Anthropos*, vol. VI, pp. 1–39. The Kurdish text, written in cryptographic characters, was edited by M. Max Bittner, *ibid*, pp. 628–639. Finally a collection of texts and documents on the Yezidis was selected, translated and edited by F. Nau (1915–1917) in *La Revue de l’Orient Chrétien*, vol. X, pp. 142–200, 225–252.
63. F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, p. 156.
64. According to the 1986 official census, 89,000 Iranians are classed as ‘other’, as opposed to 97,557 Christians, 90,891 Zoroastrians and 24,722 Jews. The Bahai minority is not recognized. See S.M. Hachemi (1998) La République islamique au regard de sa constitution, *Les Cahiers d’Orient*, Iran special edition, first quarter, p. 14.
65. *ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
66. *ibid.*, p. 17.
67. ‘Those who believe, followers of Judaism, Sabians, Christians, Zoroastrians, those associated: among all of them God shall decide on the Day of resurrection. God is witness to everything.’ (*Pilgrimage*, XXII: 17)
68. N. Siouffi (1880), *loc. cit.*, pp. 80–82.
69. Marguerite-Marie Thiollier (1966–71) did as much, generously allowing it space in her little *Dictionnaire des religions* (Paris, Larousse; new edition Le Sycomore & L’Asiatique, 1980).
70. K. al-Djarrād, *op. cit.*, pp. 30–31, 41–42.
71. L. & A. Chabry (1987), *Politique et minorités au Proche-Orient, les raisons sacrées d’une explosion* (Paris, Maisonneuve et Leroise), p. 108.
72. *ibid.*, p. 111.
73. N. Siouffi (1885), *loc. cit.*, p. 87.
74. N. Siouffi (1880), *loc. cit.*, pp. 81–82.
75. S.S. al-Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 183.
76. *ibid.*, p. 19.

77. N. Siouffi (1880), *loc. cit.*, pp. 81–82.
78. F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, p. 196.
79. *ibid.*, p. 153.
80. A. Guérinot, *op. cit.*, pp. 595–598.
81. H. Broca, *op. cit.*, pp. 105–106.
82. J. Menant, *op. cit.*, pp. 116–117, and A. Guérinot, *op. cit.*, p. 630.
83. H. Broca, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
84. The French translation of this most revealing text, which is published here in English for the first time, was kindly carried out by J. Blau, lecturer in Kurdish at INALCO, to whom we are most grateful.
85. *ibid.*, p. 98.
86. S.S. al-Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
87. L. & A. Chabry, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
88. R. Lescot (1938), *Enquête sur les Yézidi de Syrie et du Djebel Sindjâr* (Beirut), pp. 70–71.
89. A. Guérinot, *op. cit.*, 595–598.
90. N. Siouffi (1882), *loc. cit.*, p. 253.
91. S.S. al-Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
92. L. & A. Chabry, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
93. This day is especially unlucky in Muslim tradition.
94. All Yezidis are in agreement about the fact that the first time this entity came down to earth was on an eastern Wednesday 1 April (western 14 April) on Mount Lâlesh in Iraq. From that time Wednesday became the equivalent for them of Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews and Sunday for Christians. Indeed it is in honour of that date that they celebrate *Sri-Sâl* (New Year) as the first day of the Yezidi calendar. We should remember that this date (1 April) is in fact the feast-day of *Akito*, which marks the New Year in the ancient Babylonian calendar, the day when the god *Mardûk*'s victory over cosmic chaos was celebrated. See H. Broca, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
95. I. Gül, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
96. L. & A. Chabry, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
97. R. Lescot, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
98. F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, p. 251.
99. J. Menant, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
100. T. Menzel, *loc. cit.*, p. 1230.
101. G. Furlani, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–16.
102. Ibn al-Nadîm, *op. cit.*, p. 387.
103. S.S. al-Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
104. A. al-'Azzâwî (1935), *Târîkh al-yazîdiyya wa asl 'aqâ'dihim* (The history of the Yezidis and the origin of their beliefs), p. 80.
105. S.S. al-Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
106. *ibid.*, p. 69.
107. Yezidis criticize Jews, Christians and Muslims for recognizing only one Adam, when according to them there were 72 Adams (71 were created on earth after the first) and each one's rule lasted 10,000 years. Yezidis say the Bible and the Koran tell us only what happened after the last Adam. See F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, pp. 254–255, 260.
108. F. Nau, *loc. cit.*, pp. 260–261.
109. The most popular magazine among Yezidis of the diaspora bears the highly significant name *Dênge Êzîdiyyan* (The Yezidi Voice).