

THE RELIGION OF THE KURDS

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AMONGST the Kurds there is found a considerable variety of religions, which has caused unfavourable observers to regard them as idolatrous.¹ Not only are the Christians of several dominations represented among them, but also the Muslims, who form the predominant *millah* or creed among the peoples of Kurdistân²; in addition to these there are several less important sects, of which by far the most important are the Qizilbâsh and the Yazidî Kurds.

Of the Christian sects in Kurdistân there are three, the Jacobites, the Armenians, and the Nestorians. Of these the Armenians are most important in the north, where Kurdistân and Armenia adjoin one another. The Armenians are divided into two parties: the uniate Armenians are those who are in communion with the Roman Church, while those who refuse to acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope constitute the non-uniate church. But few Kurds belong to either the Armenian or the Jacobite Church. It is the Nestorian branch which embraces the largest number of Kurds; the Nestorians and the Kurds are racially closely related through inter-marriage, and, when a Kurd adopts Christianity, it is to the Church of Nestorius that he usually turns; further, though inter-marriage between Sunnî Muslims and Christians of any sect is discountenanced, it is by no means uncommon at the present day for a Kurd to court a Nestorian girl and take her to wife.³ But the dominant religion throughout the country is naturally Islâm, the religion of a long succession of conquerors and of all the surrounding races with whom the Kurd comes into closest contact; but it is often a form of Islâm contaminated by pagan superstitions and strange rites, many of which are said to have points of resemblance with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and other heathen cults. These corruptions, grafted on to the religion

¹ Ibn-ul-Athîr calls them *mushrikîn*, "polytheists" or "idolaters" (*Kâmil*, iii, 37).

² The attitude of the Kurds towards Judaism is uncertain; for, whereas the Talmud forbids the admission of Kurdish proselytes (*Yebâmôth*, Jer. i, 6; Bab. 16a), Mas'ûdî, the Arab traveller and geographer, is said to have recorded that "Jews are often found among them" (Al-Ansâri, *Nukhbat-ul-Dahr*, p. 19).

³ It is said that Mas'ûdî found Kurds who professed Christianity in the tenth century (Al-Ansâri, *Nukhbat-ul-Dahr*, p. 19).

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of Islâm, however, await fuller investigation by an inquirer familiar with every branch of that creed. It should be added that those Kurds who are Muslims are almost entirely Sunnî or orthodox Muslims, and this partly helps to explain their hostility to the Persians, who are notorious for their Shî'î leanings.¹

But it is not here the place to explain the tenets of such well-known creeds as Christianity or Islâm, but to give some account of certain religions more or less peculiar to the Kurds.² Of these there are three, that of the Qizilbâsh, the Bâbî, and the Yazidî, the last being not only the most peculiar but by far the most important of the lesser faiths professed by the Kurds.

The word Qizilbâsh originally meant "red head" and was applied to certain Shî'î Persians, who lived on the Turkish frontier near Adharbaijân and many of whom have settled in Asia Minor in the neighbourhood of Angora and elsewhere, from the red caps which they always wore. But the religion of the modern Qizilbâsh, who are said to number 45,000 persons, bears now but little resemblance to the Shî'î faith and has become, under the influence of the Kurds, nothing but a very degraded superstition. They worship a large black dog, in which they see the image of the divinity, and seem entirely ignorant of any definite doctrines or religious practices. Once a year they unite in an isolated spot to celebrate a ceremony which leaves far behind in its shameless rites those of the oriental *Bona Dea* at Rome. There, after prayers noteworthy only for revolting cynicism and an invocation of the deity of fecundity, the lights are extinguished and the sexes intermingle without regard to age or the ties of kinship. They have no legal existence in the Turkish Empire, and their scandalous rites enjoy only a secret indulgence. They avow no beliefs, but they always give themselves out for orthodox Muslims, that they may enjoy the civil rights permitted to the adherents of that religion.

The sect of the Bâbî was founded in Persia in A.D. 1844 and 1845 by Mîrzâ 'Alî Muḥammad of Shîrâz, who was himself put to death at

¹ Saladin and his descendants, the champions of Islâm against Christianity, were Sunnî Muslims; yet their antagonism to Christianity did not prevent, if not Saladin himself, at least some of his family from making use of the services of Christian physicians; the names of two are known, Ya'qûb ibn Ḍaqlân, employed by the Aiyûbî in Jerusalem, and Ḥaşnûn, who served another branch of the same family at Urfah and Diyârbakr (Abu'l Faraj, *Târîkh Mukhtaṣar-ud-Duwal*, ed. Pococke, pp. 482-4).

² See T. Gilbert, "Note sur les Sectes dans le Kurdistan," in the *Journal Asiatique*, 1873, vii, 2, pp. 393-5.

Tabriz by the orders of the Persian Government, the execution being carried out by a company of Shiqaqî Kurds ; but the movement was carried on by a succession of devoted adherents of the Bâb and now has its headquarters at 'Akkâ in Syria. The Bâbî dispute the authenticity of the Qur'ân and as a consequence reject all the teaching derived from the commentaries upon it. They have replaced it by an enormous mass of writings, so unsystematically arranged that their teaching on many points is very obscure. They refuse to acknowledge the authority of the *mullâ* in religious matters but accept the mission of the prophet Muḥammad, at least in appearance ; for they claim that the traditions have been altered and corrupted with the course of time and that the *mullâ* is but the usurper, so to say, of the divine law. They are charged with communism and even with preaching the promiseous use of women, but probably falsely. They believe in a kind of transmigration of souls : a Bâbî who dies to-day in the true faith rests for several days in an intermediate stage, when his soul enters the body of another Bâbî, who is at once, as it were, identified with the dead man. Thanks to this doctrine, the Bâbî is immortal ; death is only an absence of short duration before the opening of another life. This transmigration is traced very far back, the soul of each chief being regarded as that of some *imâm* or legendary hero of the Shî'î faith. The number of the adherents of this creed in Kurdistân is said not to exceed 5,000 souls, who inhabit chiefly the villages of the Hakkârî country between Bâsh Qal'ah and Katur near the Turco-Persian frontier. Their chiefs exact implicit obedience from their followers and an inviolate pledge of secrecy in regard to their religious practices, and in return receive as implicit an obedience as did once the Shaikh of the Mountain.

There are also a few whole tribes which worship the trees of the forest and have altars formed of rude blocks of stone, like dolmens or menhirs, in the secret recesses of their country ; these people are probably to be identified with the Zâzâ Kurds, who are dispersed throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Of the Yazîdî Kurds it is almost impossible to estimate the numbers, for they are found scattered throughout Kurdistân from northern Syria to the Persian frontier, though the great bulk of them are naturally settled on the Jabal Sinjâr and round the religious centre of their race, the shrine of the Shaikh 'Adî, near the village of Al-Qawsh ; Gilbert, however, in the above-quoted work,¹ suggests 30,000

¹ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

in round numbers, and Jacob estimated that the total number of the Yazîdî on the Jabal Sinjâr alone is about 8,000 or 10,000 persons.¹

The origin of this sect is buried in profound obscurity. Hammer-Purgstall seems to regard them as the descendants of the old Mardi whom Strabo and others mention; ² the Mardi were an old Persian sect who worshipped the principle of evil and from them the historian thinks that the Yazîdî inherited their devil-worship just as he would derive the sun-worship of a small sect called the Shamsî, who live near Mârdîn, from the ancient Sabaeans.³ It is, at any rate, certain that their religion is centred round the shrine of a saint whose name is the Shaikh 'Adî. The Arabic historians ⁴ relate that the Shaikh was born at Bait Fâr in the district of Ba'albakk, and that he migrated to the country of the Hakkârî, where he gave himself up to a life of extraordinary asceticism and is believed even to have performed miracles. There he lived till the age of ninety years and died in A.D. 1160 or 1162. Beyond the fact that his family is supposed to have been connected with the Umayyad Caliphs, nothing further is known of him.

The origin of the name Yazîdî is even more obscure. The god Yazîd is clearly a late creation, invented to account for a title otherwise inexplicable, a view confirmed by Ibn Khallikân's statement that the sect was originally called the 'Adawîyah. Others have supposed that the name is derived from Yazîd I (A.D. 680-3), the second Umayyad Caliph. The suggestion that it is derived from *yazdân*, the Persian word for "god", is perhaps the most probable view, although still somewhat unsatisfactory.⁵

The Yazîdî are regarded by Muslims as apostates from Islâm, and consequently the accounts given of them are often distorted, not only through ignorance but also through *odium theologicum*. Their beliefs seem to be a confused medley of Jewish legends overlaid with

¹ Jacob, "Ein neuer Text über die Jezidis," in *Beiträge zur Kenntniss des Orients*, 1909, vol. vii, pp. 30-5.

² See Strabo, *Geogr.*, pp. 523, 524, and 727; Plinius, *Hist. Nat.*, vi, 27; Arrianus, *Anab.*, iii, 24.

³ Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, vol. ii, pp. 443-5.

⁴ See Ibn Khallikân, *Kitâb Wafayât-il-A'yân* (ed. MacGuckin de Slane), vol. ii, pp. 197-8, who adds that his full name was 'Adî ibn Musâfir and that a religious order, called the 'adawîyah, was named after him.

⁵ The derivation of the word from Yazd, the capital of the province of Yazd in Persia, presumably on the ground that Yazd is a stronghold of the Zoroastrians, with whose religion that of the Yazîdî is supposed to show certain affinities, is highly improbable.

the crassest superstitions, of many of which it is now quite impossible to trace the source. Thus they derive the origin of the human race from the same beginnings as the Jews, claiming that, while Christians, Jews, and Muslims were sprung from Adam and Eve, their own patriarchs were the descendants of a certain Shahîd, the son of Adam alone. After the deluge, of which Noah and his family were the sole survivors, there was a second flood, from which the Yazîdî race were preserved in the person of Na'mî, surnamed Malik Mirân, who thus became the second founder of their race. They believe in seven gods, one of whom came down onto the earth and created Adam and Eve, and all of whom descend once in every thousand years in order to perform miracles and lay down laws for the human race. Another of their gods is Yazîd,¹ whom we have seen to be in all probability a pseudonymous hero invented to account for their religious appellation, an apostate from Islâm who also has visited the world in order to teach his followers his own faith and to instruct them in the paths of justice. At the same time he is said to have bestowed on his chosen people seven *sand'jiq* or symbols, wrought in bronze in the form of a peacock, under which form the divinity is to be adored. Yet another of their gods is called Malik Tâ'ûs or the "King Peacock". They hold also that Muḥammad, whom they suppose to be a prophet of the Ismâ'îlî sect, was inspired by God, and that hell was created at the same time as Adam for the punishment of the wicked.

It is clear, however, that the Yazîdî recognize one Supreme Being, although they seem neither to pray to him nor to make any offerings to him; but at the same time they recognize an evil spirit of whom their dread is so great that they will not utter his name.² This evil spirit or the devil it is which is represented under the bronze bird known as the *Malik Tâ'ûs* or "King Peacock". The chief symbol of the *Malik Tâ'ûs* remains always with the great Shaikh, and is carried

¹ The only regular fast enjoined on them is that in honour of the death of Yazîd, which is held annually for three days in December.

² In the avoidance of ill-omened words the Yazîdî are very strict. It is forbidden to them, for example, not only to mention *shaitân* (Satan), *iblis* (the devil), *Ahriman* (the principle of evil), or to use the words *la'an* (cursed), and its derivatives *la'nah* (curse) and *ma'lûn* (accursed), and *rashîm* ("stoned", a title for Satan in the Qur'ân), but also even to employ words of a similar sound, such as *shatt* (stream), as resembling *shaitân*, and *na'l* (sandal), which sounds not unlike *la'an* inverted; they are therefore compelled to use various substitutes for these words, the devil being called, for example, *malik-ul-qûwah* or "the king of might" and *shatt* being replaced by *nahr* (river) or some other synonym.

about with him wherever he may go. But other copies of this symbol or *sanjaq*, as it is called, are taken in procession by the priests round the Yazidî districts at the appointed season.¹ Satan is believed to be the chief of the angelic host, now indeed undergoing punishment for his rebellion against the Divine will, but still all powerful and hereafter to be restored to the high celestial dignity from which he has fallen. He must still, therefore, be conciliated and propitiated as able to chastise mortals for offences against himself. Next to Satan, but inferior to him, are ranked seven archangels, who are held to exercise great influence over the world; they are Gabrâ'il, Mikhâ'il, Rafâ'il, 'Azrâ'il, Dadrâ'il, 'Azrafil, and Shamkîl.² Christ also they regard as a great angel who took the form of a man, but they deny that He died on the cross, asserting rather that He ascended into heaven without dying.

They hold in reverence the Old Testament, in so far as they are acquainted with it, nor do they reject either the New Testament or the Qur'ân, though they regard them as entitled to an inferior degree of veneration. But the texts chosen to be inscribed over their tombs are always selected from the last-mentioned book. Muḥammad, Abraham, and the other patriarchs they hold to be prophets, and they look for the second advent not only of Christ but also of the Mahdî, in regard to whom they accept the fables of the doctors of Islâm.

Their great saint is the Shaikh 'Adî,³ of whose history and life they are nevertheless completely ignorant. But to suggest that he is regarded as a god, as some Western scholars have done, is false; for this is disproved by many passages in the *Hymn of the Shaikh 'Adî*. For example, he is but the judge who rules the world, the vice-gerent here on earth of the All-merciful.⁴ But the whole poem is full of inconsistencies, for in another passage he claims that there is no God but himself.⁵ It is, in fact, impossible to formulate the canons of

¹ See Layard, *Ninereh and Babylon*, pp. 47-8, and *Ninereh and its Remains*, vol. i, p. 298. Whether the images which have been lost or confiscated by the Turkish Government were the original *sanâjiq* or, as the Yazidî assert, only copies of them, it is now impossible to say.

² Layard, *Ninereh and its Remains*, vol. i, p. 299.

³ On the Shaikh 'Adî see also Maqrîzî, *Sulûk*, vol. ii, pp. 287-8, and vol. iii, pp. 116-17.

⁴ See ll. 49-50: "And I am he to whom the Lord of heaven hath said, | Thou art the just judge and the ruler of the earth," and ll. 58-9: "Verily the All-merciful hath assigned unto me names, | The heavenly throne, and the seat and the seven [heavens] and the earth!"

⁵ See l. 60: "In the secret of my knowledge there is no God but me."

the Yazîdî faith either from this hymn or from the statements made by their priests to those who have inquired into their doctrines.¹

Their sacred village,² the religious centre at which their chief festivals are held, and to which they frequently go on pilgrimage,³ is called Shaikh 'Adî, after their founder, and is situated in the mountains about 20 miles to the north-east of Rabbân Hurmuzd. Here are preserved two of the remaining *sanâjîq* at the shrine of the saint; a third is said to be still preserved in the village of Al-Ḥasanîyah.⁴ The *sanjaq* is taken round the district in which it is kept in solemn procession, the people bowing down and worshipping it as it passes them. According to Badger, "the form of the *sanjaq*⁵ is that of a bird, more resembling a cock than any other fowl, with a swelling breast, diminutive head, and wide spreading tail. The body is full, but the tail flat and fluted, and under the throat is a small protuberance intended perhaps to represent a battle. This is fixed on the top of a candlestick, round which are two lamps, placed one above the other, and each containing seven burners, the upper being somewhat larger than the under. The whole is of brass and so constructed that it may be taken to pieces and put together with the greatest ease."⁶

Of these seven *sanâjîq* all were in safe custody apparently till after Layard's visit, but Jacob, writing in A.D. 1909, states definitely that five of them, bearing the names respectively of Ḥadrat Dâ'ûd, Shaikh Ṣhanîs-ud-Dîn, Yazîd ibn Mu'âwiyah, Shaikh 'Adî, and Shaikh 'Adî Baṣrî, have been lost or perhaps confiscated by the Turkish Government. A number of other sacred objects, however, such as a bronzen serpent and the relics of certain saints, were still in existence at that date.⁷

¹ Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, vol. i. ch. 9.

² The shrine lies in a valley along which there runs a deep ravine with a limpid stream flowing through it, lined with oaks, poplars, and olives, which form a shady avenue leading up to the temple, and the whole scene is very desolate but picturesque. The heights above are covered with dwarf-oak, amidst which rise numerous dwellings intended for the reception of pilgrims, while in the vicinity of the shrine are between forty and fifty conical-shaped buildings raised over the tombs of famous chiefs.

³ The chief annual pilgrimage is that to the *zamzam* or sacred well near the shrine of the Shaikh 'Adî, and takes place from the 15th to the 20th September.

⁴ Jacob, *loc. cit.*

⁵ The word *sanjaq* as thus used means a "banner" or "symbol", and Layard is careful to point out that the *Malik Tû'ûs* is looked upon not as an idol but as a symbol or banner of the house of the ruling chief, (Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon*, ch. 3, p. 48).

⁶ Badger, *The Nestorians and other Rituals*, vol. i, p. 124.

⁷ Jacob, *loc. cit.*

The only religious literature belonging to the Yazîdî still known to exist is the *Hymn of the Shaikh 'Adî*, a somewhat unintelligible rhapsody, of which Layard obtained a copy written on some tattered leaves of no very ancient date.¹ Of their sacred books, one of which was called *Al-Jalwah*² and the other *Mushâf-ul-Râsh* or the "Black Book", the fate is uncertain. According to one tradition they were stolen on the road to Aleppo, whither they were being sent for the instruction of the Yazîdî in those parts; according to another story they were confiscated by the Turkish general 'Umar Wabhî Pashâ on the occasion of his forcible conversion of many of the Yazîdî to orthodox Islâm. The most probable view, however, and that at which the Yazîdî themselves hint, is that they are still somewhere kept in safe hiding and secretly consulted by the faithful. Works purporting to be the sacred books of the Yazîdî, at any rate, are at present circulating in Mesopotamia, for Captain H. P. W. Hudson obtained a copy of one such work during the European war.³

The chief festival of the Yazîdî is called the *sarisâl*, and is celebrated at the New Year, which is held at the beginning of April. The ceremonies begin on the Wednesday preceding the New Year's Day, when the rich sacrifice sheep and oxen and the poor chickens, while the women and girls of the tribe roam over the hills gathering roses and every kind of red flower, which they tie up in bunches and hang about their houses, except on the doors; meanwhile the priests make the hills re-echo with the sound of their cymbals, chanting at the same time Kurdish prayers and collecting food and alms for the poor.

Every Friday offerings are made to the *sanjaq*; and the *kûjak*,⁴ who is charged with the maintenance of the sacred buildings and the collection of the alms of the faithful, if their offerings seem to him to be less than what is just, threatens them with the punishments of

¹ Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon*, pp. 89-92.

² Or Al-Jilwah; the name is Arabic and appears to mean "the Exposition" or "the Manifestation" from *jalâ*, signifying "became clear", "manifest"; "appeared", "showed himself", (Parry, *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery*).

³ Mingana, "Sacred Books of the Yazîdî," in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1921, pp. 117-19. These sacred books of the Yazîdî are said to have vanished in A.D. 1849 and to have reappeared in A.D. 1889 in India, whither they had been taken away no one knows how or when. There are, however, grounds for regarding all these works as forgeries. (See also Mingana, "Sacred Books of the Yezidis," in the same *Journal*, 1916, pp. 505-26; Dirr, "Einiges über die Jeziden," in *Anthropos*, 1918, pp. 558-74; Joseph, "Devil Worship," and Nau, "Recueil de Textes sur les Yézidis," in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 1917, pp. 142-200 and 225-77.)

⁴ See below, on the functions of the *kûjak*.

God, such as plagues and earthquakes, and urges them to increase their gifts.

On the occasion of a marriage a piece of bread is fetched from the house of the local priest and divided between the bride and the bridegroom, who eat it with prayers for the consummation of their wedding; but if this bread cannot be obtained from a priest, a morsel of earth from the nearest shrine is consumed in its stead. A small amount of this earth is also preserved in every house as a means of ensuring the divine favour to the occupants. Marriage is forbidden in the month of April, which is sacred as the first month of the year, except in the case of a *kújak*. No one may take as his wife the daughter of a *kújak*, who may only be given in marriage to another *kújak*, nor may any young man wed outside his own rank or station, except an *amír*, who is at liberty to take in marriage a girl from any family whatsoever.¹

When a Yazidî dies, the *kújak* has to administer to him the last rites of his religion and after his death to pray for his soul, at the same time keeping watch for dreams and visions which may reveal to him the fate of the dead man in the next world or under what form he may return again to this world. The spirits of the just are held to dwell in heaven and to reveal the secrets of this world to mankind, while those of the wicked undergo various transmigrations in the bodies of diverse animals till they are re-embodied in human beings.

Throughout the year pilgrimages are made to other shrines besides that of the Shaikh 'Adî, especially to that of the Shaikh Shams-ud-Dîn, who is regarded as the Messiah. At these assemblies both sexes feast together, eating, drinking, and dancing. Other important pilgrimages are those to the Jabal 'Arafât and the so-called "Road of the Qauvâl", which is held in the mountains near the shrine of the Shaikh 'Adî.

The chief of the Yazidî is called the *mír hajj*, or "prince of the pilgrimage". The *amír* enjoys an absolute supremacy and the blind obedience of his followers, even to the extent of appropriating their private possessions for his own use. His person is sacred, and whatever comes into contact with him is an object of veneration; his clothes may only be washed by a *kújak*, several of whom are attached

¹ Chabot (*Journal Asiatique*, 1896, vol. vii, p. 127) records that a daughter who refuses to marry must compensate her father, for she is regarded as an addition to his wealth, as were the "cattle-bringing" maidens of the Homeric poems.

to him as personal attendants. The emirate is hereditary in a family which traces its origin to the Shaikh 'Adî; but the history of the Yazîdî can hardly be verified, as one of the tenets of their religion is the prohibition of reading and writing, in consequence of which the only records of the sect are based on oral tradition. The revenues of the emirate depend entirely on the gifts of the faithful at the annual pilgrimages to their shrines. The seat of the *amîr* is at Ba 'Idri, which lies about eight hours' journey to the north-east of Mauşil. Next in importance to the *amîr* are ranked the spiritual chiefs, whose title is *shaiikh*,¹ and who are divided into five families. Each *shaiikh* is responsible for the administration of the rites of religion to a certain number of families, to whom they have to teach especially the laws which regulate the intercourse of sexes, and for whose welfare they are bound to pray. In return for these services they receive for their maintenance the alms of their co-religionists. The second rank in the hierarchy is that of the *pîr*,² who is the deputy and assistant of the *shaiikh*. The *faqîr*,³ who is a member of a kind of monastic order and who is bound to the practice of an ascetic life, is held in high esteem. The *faqîr* is also called *qarâbâsh*, a Turkish word meaning "black head", from the hood and robe of black wool in which he is enveloped, though over this he often wears a cloak of some bright colour. The *faqîr* also wears a turban of silk or wool, a girdle of black wool and a pair of ordinary shoes. Round his neck hangs a cord, which is never laid aside day or night. This monastic order is administered by a superior, called the *kâk*,⁴ who lives in a *mazâr* or holy place containing the tomb of a saint, in the province of Aleppo. The *kâk*, whenever he attends any of the ceremonies on the Jabal Sinjâr or elsewhere in the territory occupied by the Yazîdî, receives the precedence over all the assembled chiefs, both secular and spiritual.

In addition to these grades there are six classes of inferior religious persons: they are the *qauwâl*, the *shawîsh*, the *kûjak*, the *kâbanah*, the *fugraiyah*, and the *farrâsh*.

The duty of the *qauwâl*, or "chanter", is to go round the various districts inhabited by the Yazîdî, taking with him the local *sanjaq*, for the veneration of the faithful. During the exposition of the *sanjaq*

¹ An Arabic word meaning "old man" or "elder".

² A Persian word signifying "abbot".

³ An Arabic word denoting "poor" or "a beggar".

⁴ A Persian word for "master", "teacher".

the chanters sing religious hymns and psalms to the accompaniment of flutes and tambourines. They form a distinct class and claim to trace their descent from the attendants of the Shaikh 'Adi himself. The title of *shawîsh* is only given to four or five individuals who have the charge of the tomb of the Shaikh 'Adi; they remain unmarried, and, when one of them dies, the chief priest of the sect elects a successor from a number of candidates, celibate or widowers, who are recommended by the zeal which they have shown in practising the rites of their religion. The *kâjak*, on the contrary, is a member of a large order, numbering from two to three hundred men, under the command of the chief priest; there are no restrictions on election, any Yazîdî, whether priest or layman, being eligible. They depend for a livelihood mostly on agriculture, their ministerial duties being gratuitous and only intermittent. Their chief office is the preparation of everything needful for the feasts celebrated at the recurrent reunions and annual pilgrimages of the sect. Other less important duties which are incumbent on them in the course of the year have already been mentioned.

The signification of the word *kâbanah* is obscure. All that can be affirmed with certainty is that the *kâbanah* is an unmarried woman or widow who is the abbess in charge of the nuns, to whom are entrusted menial duties in connexion with the tomb of the Shaikh 'Adi. The *fuqraiyah*,¹ who must live unmarried or be a widow, belongs to a class of nuns which numbers as many as five hundred women, devoted exclusively to performing the meanest services connected with their religious observances.

Lastly, the *farrâsh*² is the sacristan of the shrine of the Shaikh 'Adi, on whom devolves such duties as going every evening round the holy places in the neighbourhood and lighting the lamps in them, and carrying the censers on the occasion of the great festivals.

In A.D. 1847 the Ottoman Government had attempted to conscript the Yazîdî for military service, an attempt which was frustrated by the intervention of the British Ambassador, Sir Stratford Canning. When a similar endeavour was made by the Turkish General, Muḥammad Tâhir Bak, in A.D. 1872-3, in spite of the *firmân* of A.D. 1847 guaranteeing to the Yazîdî the free exercise of their religion,

¹ This word is a feminine diminutive formed from the Arabic *fuqîr*, "poor man," "beggar," "ascetic," meaning a "poor sister".

² An Arabic word meaning "sweeper", and corresponding exactly to the Greek *νεωκόπος*.

a petition was drawn up by the religious leaders of the sect and forwarded to the Government.¹

The petition, of which the introduction is in Syriac and the text itself in Arabic, is as follows :—

In the time of the Sultân 'Abd-ul-'Azîz² in the year 1289,³ the chief of the general staff, Muḥammad Tâhir, was sent from Stambul to Mausil, in order that he might raise a force of 15,000 soldiers of the *nizâm*⁴ from the Dâsnâyê⁵ dwelling in the neighbourhood of this town, namely, of the sect of the Yazîdî. The general summoned to himself at Mausil their chief men and magistrates and read out the decree to them. Thereupon they asked him for a delay of ten days, after which they brought to him a document in which the following is written :—

We, the Dâsnâyê, cannot by any means serve in the *nizâm* on account of our religion. We rather prefer, as the Syrians and Jews, to contribute money than men. There are many reasons which deter us therefrom ; herein we lay down fourteen of them :—

First Clause. According to our religion, the Yazîdî religion, every member of our sect, young man and old, woman and girl, three times a year, namely, firstly, from the beginning to the end of the month of April, according to the Greek reckoning ; secondly, from the beginning to the end of the month of September ; thirdly, from the beginning to the end of the month of November—must visit the image of *Tâ'ûs-ul-Malik*—honoured be his state !—If he does not do so, he is an unbeliever.

Second Clause. If any member of our sect, young man and old, does not visit at least once in the year—namely, from the 15th to the 20th of September, according to the Greek reckoning—the sanctuary of the *Shaiikh* 'Adî ibn Musâfir, the holy God of the exalted mysteries of both of them, he is an unbeliever.

Third Clause. Every member of our sect must daily at sunrise visit a place whence he can see the rising sun,⁶ provided that no Moslem or Christian or Jew or any other be found there. And if any of them do it not, he is an unbeliever.

Fourth Clause. Every member of our sect must daily kiss the hand

¹ Published by M. Lidzbarski in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (Leipzig), 1897, No. 51, p. 592, from "Codex Sachau 200" in the *Königliche Bibliothek* at Berlin.

² 'Abd-ul-'Azîz reigned from A. D. 1861 until 1876.

³ The Muslim year 1289 lasted from 11th March, 1872, till 28th February, 1873.

⁴ The *nizâm* constitute the regular soldiers of the Ottoman army.

⁵ In Syriac *Dasnâyê*, in Arabic *Dasîn* (singular *Dâsîn*), is the tribal, as distinct from the religious, name of the Yazîdî Kurds.

⁶ Lit. "the place of the rising of the sun". It is interesting to notice in this connection that the Kurds whom Mâr Sabâ converted to Christianity are called sun-worshippers by the saint's biographer (Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, vol. ii, pp. 672-3).

of his brother, his brother in the Hereafter, namely, the servant of the *Mahdî*, and the hand of his *shaiikh* or of his *pir*. And if he does not perform this, unbelief is imputed into him.

Fifth Clause. A thing which is inadmissible in our religion [is the following]: In the morning, when Muslims begin to pray, they say the words—God forbid [that we should say them]—“I take refuge in God,”¹ and so on; if any of us hear this, he must kill the man who says it and kill himself. Otherwise he is an unbeliever.

Sixth Clause. If at the time, when one of our sect dies, his brother for the Hereafter or his *shaiikh* or his *pir* or one of the *qawwâlin* be not with him and say over him three sentences, namely: “O servant of *Tâ'ûs-ul-Malik*—honoured be his state!—thou must die in the religion of him who is worshipped of us, who is *Tâ'ûs-ul-Malik*—honoured be his state!—and not die in any other religion than it. And if anyone of the religion of Islâm or the religion of the Christians or the religion of the Jews or of religions other than that of the *Malik* come to thee and speak to thee, consider not that they speak truly and believe them not. And if thou considerest true or believest any other religion than that of him who is worshipped of us, *Tâ'ûs-ul-Malik*—honoured be his state!—then thou shalt die an unbeliever.” If this be so, he is an unbeliever.

Seventh Clause. There is among us a thing which is called the “benediction of the *Shaiikh* ‘Adî”, namely, earth from the tomb of the *Shaiikh* ‘Adî, even his holy mystery. Every member of our sect must carry a quantity thereof in his pocket and he must eat of it every morning; and if he eat not of it duly (?), he is an unbeliever. And also when he dies, at the approach of death, if none of this earth be duly (?) found, he dies an unbeliever.

Eighth Clause. Concerning our fasting: every member of our sect, if he wishes to fast, must fast at home, not abroad; for every single day of the fast he must go in the morning to the house of his *shaiikh* and his *pir* and begin to fast; then at the time of breakfast also he must go to the house of his *shaiikh* or *pir* and break the fast with the consecrated wine belonging to that *shaiikh* or *pir*; and if he drink not two or three glasses of that wine, his fast is not accepted, and he becomes an unbeliever.

Ninth Clause. If any of our sect travel to a foreign land and remain there less than a whole year, and he afterwards return home, then is his wife secluded from him and none of us shall give him a wife, and, if any man give him one, he is an unbeliever.

Tenth Clause. Concerning our clothing: as we have mentioned in the fourth clause, that every member of our sect has a brother for the

¹ Qur'ân, *Shûrah* 114: “Say, I take refuge in the Lord of men, the king of men, the God of men, from the evil of the Whisperer [Satan] who stealthily withdraws, who whispers in the breasts of men, from *jinn* and men.”

Hereafter, as well as a sister for the Hereafter, according to this, if any one of us wishes to have a new shirt made for himself, the above-mentioned woman, his sister for the Hereafter, must make for him the opening at the neck in every shirt with her own hand; and if she make not the opening at the neck with her own hand, if he put it on, he is an unbeliever.

Eleventh Clause. If anyone of our sect makes himself a new shirt or clothing without dipping it in the consecrated water which is to be found at the shrine of the *Shaiikh* 'Adî, even his holy mystery, if he put it on, he is an unbeliever.

Twelfth Clause. Clothing of dark blue we cannot by any means wear, nor can we ever comb our heads with the comb of a Muslim or of a Christian or of a Jew, and such like; nor do we shave our heads with a razor which any man but ourselves has used, unless we are willing to wash it in the consecrated water which is to be found at the shrine of the *Shaiikh* 'Adî; at that time, if we shave our heads therewith, it is permissible; but if it be not washed in that consecrated water and we shave our heads therewith, we are unbelievers.

Thirteenth Clause. No single Yazidî can enter a closet or go into a bath or eat with a spoon belonging to a Muslim, nor shall he drink from the cup of a Muslim or of the follower of any other creed; and if he enter a bath or a closet or eat or drink with the spoon of a Muslim or of those whom we have mentioned, he is an unbeliever.

Fourteenth Clause. In respect of food, there is a great difference between us and the rest of the creeds; we eat not such things as meat, fish, gourds, *bâmiyâ*,¹ beans, cabbage, and lettuce; nor is it possible for us to dwell in a place where lettuce and such like is sown.

For these and other reasons we cannot engage in military service, and so on.²

This document, of which a translation has been given above, is now the *locus classicus* on the subject of the Yazidî religion. But the information given above can be supplemented to a certain extent from the researches of modern travellers.

Inquiries about their religion are rarely answered by the Yazidî, being usually parried with counter-questions. But it is generally admitted by them that the *Shaiikh* 'Adî is regarded as the author of good and the Malik-ul-Tâ'ûs of evil, an admission which would seem

¹ The word *bâmiyâ* denotes probably the *hibiscus esculentus*, a plant allied to the European mallow.

² This petition was signed by the Amîr *Shaikhân* Husain, chief of the Yazidî sect, *Shaikh* Nâsir, the spiritual chief of the sect in the district of *Shaikhân*, and the *mukhtârîn* of Mâm Rashân, Mûsikân, Hatârah, Baibân, Dahkân, Huzrân, Bâqasrah, Bâ'ashiqah, Khûshâbâ, Qarâ Palû, Kabârah, Simâ, 'Ain Sifni, Qaşr 'Izz-id-Dîn, and Kibartû.

to point to a form of dualism as lying concealed behind their doctrines. They themselves never say any prayers, which are left to be recited, or rather mumbled, by the *qawwal* in classical Arabic, a language which is now unintelligible to most of the worshippers. Further, they seem to be completely in ignorance concerning the origin and the meaning of the rites which they follow. They seem to worship the rising sun indirectly by way of doing homage to a supreme deity, and they also venerate a number of saints, all of whom bear Muslim names. In this connexion it should be borne in mind that Badger, when he visited the shrine of the *Shaiikh* 'Adî, found not only many symbolical signs cut on the walls of the temple but also inscriptions in Arabic, including a long passage from the Qur'ân. They regard Christ as an angel in human form, and recognize Muḥammad as a prophet, together with Abraham and the patriarchs, in which there are the clearest signs, if not of a Muslim origin, at any rate of very strong Muslim influence.¹ Their objection to blue is probably due to its sacred character as the colour of heaven, and their veneration for it they carry so far as to resort to a Christian indigo-factory in the neighbourhood in order to kiss the doorposts.

The principle of evil is propitiated by worship and by offerings, and scarlet anemone is frequently used as a propitiatory charm as being of the colour of blood. Circumcision is common but not obligatory; for instance, the *Khalâtîyah*, the largest tribe, do not observe this custom, and yet are considered orthodox Yazîdî. The Yazîdî, at least in the neighbourhood of Mauṣil, are industrious, clean in their habits, quiet and orderly in their general behaviour; but many are very intemperate in the use of *'araq*. They are comparatively free from immorality, and the right of marrying three wives is probably responsible for the charge of lewdness which is sometimes levelled at them.²

In conclusion, therefore, it would appear that the Yazîdî religion

¹ They also employ the years of the *Hijrah* or "Flight" of Muḥammad for the purpose of dating events and observe Friday as a holy day, both customs of Muslim origin.

² Badger, *The Nestorians and other Rituals*, vol. i, ch. 10. See also O. H. Parry, *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery*; Giamil, *Monte Singar*; Forbes, "Account of the Yazidîs of Jebel Sinjar," in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, vol. ix; Chabot, "Notice sur les Yézidîs," in the *Journal Asiatique*, IX, v, pp. 100-32; Siouffi, "Notice sur la Secte des Yézidîs," and "Notice sur le Cheikh 'Adî et la Secte des Yézidîs," in the *Journal Asiatique*, VII, xx, pp. 252-68, and VIII, v, pp. 78-98.

is not a homogeneous whole but a mixture of several religions. The underlying creed on which it is based is undoubtedly Islâm. The choice of a Muslim as the chief *walî* and the worship of many saints, most of whom bear Muslim names, the acceptance of Muḥammad himself, the employment of such technical terms as *shaiikh* and *faqîr*, the belief in a single supreme being, the licence to marry more wives than one, the obligation to perform the pilgrimage, and the observance of Friday as a sacred day are all elements of the religion of Islâm, while the belief in Christ as a prophet and in the New Testament comes through Islâm, as the practice of fasting and the acceptance of the Old Testament with its cosmogony and its Patriarchs, together with the later doctrine of Archangels, are derived from Judaism through the same intermediary. To this evidence should be added the firm belief of the Muslims themselves that the Yazîdî are nothing but apostates from their religion. But there is also a large admixture of Zoroastrian tenets; of these the most important are the belief in an arch-devil and the dualism which results therefrom; and the very name Yazîdî seem to owe its origin to the Persian appellation of the deity. The gathering of roses by girls on the hill-sides and the belief in holy bread and consecrated water also are not above the suspicion of being borrowed from Zoroastrian sources. In a few points the influence of the Sabaeen religion may perhaps be seen, as in their reverence for the sun expressed in the practice of kissing the object on which its beams first fall, and the turning of their faces towards it as towards the *qiblah* during their religious ceremonies; fire they reverence as symbolical of a divine force, while the colour blue is an abomination also to the Sabaeans, whom they resemble further in their fondness for white linen, their cleanliness, and their frequent ablutions.¹ Other customs, however, such as baptism with water, the beginning of the year at the same time as the Eastern Christians, and the employment of the Christian names of the months, or the doctrine that God sits on His throne on New Year's Day to ordain his decrees and decide men's fate for the coming year, which is clearly borrowed from the Armenians,² cannot be held to show that Christianity exercised any essential influence on ideas of the Yazîdî.³

¹ Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, vol. i, pp. 300-2.

² Brockelmann, "Das Neujahrsfest der Jezidis," in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, vol. lviii, pp. 876 ff.

³ Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, vol. i, pp. 300-2.

Rather these and similar doctrines and practices may have been chosen out of antipathy to the Muslims, from whose persecutions the Yazîdî have suffered much, than for any definite religious reason, or perhaps because they have not only borrowed indiscriminately from Islâm, Zoroastrianism, Sabaeism, and all the surrounding creeds, but also have then contaminated the doctrines which they have borrowed with the half-understood rites of diverse pagan cults.
