

Chapter 5

RELIGION

OVERVIEW

The infusion of an Indo-European (Iranic) language, culture, and genetic element into the Kurdish population over the two millennia preceding the Christian era also entailed the incorporation of Aryan religious practices and deities into indigenous Kurdish faith(s). Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Manichaeism, and Christianity successively made inroads into Kurdistan. The most holy of Zoroastrianism's three grand fire temples, that of Âzargushasp, was built at the holy site of Ganzak (modern Takâb) in eastern Kurdistan in the northern environs of the Kurdish city of Bijâr. The imposing ruins of the temple are still extant. Despite this, Zoroastrianism did not succeed in converting any appreciable proportion of the Kurds. In fact, it was the indigenous Kurdish religions that, in addition to deeply influencing Zoroastrianism, on two instances attempted to absorb that religion.

There also existed a large community of exiled Jews in Kurdistan from the time of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. These exiled Jews, according to the Talmud, were granted permission by the Jewish authorities to proselytize and succeeded spectacularly in converting nearly all of central Kurdistan to Judaism. Christianity was even more successful. Large numbers of Kurds in far western and central Kurdistan converted to Christianity. The introduction of Christianity was soon followed by Islam, which added further to the religious diversity of Kurdistan.

From various state statistics, ethnographic field work, and independent observations set forth in the bibliography, [Table 5](#) quantifying the religious

composition of Kurdistan has been constructed ([Map 38](#)). (Further information on the provincial boundaries is provided under the entry **Internal Subdivisions**).

Very valuable background information on Islam, its denominations, cults, and movements, as well as on non-Islamic religions that have influenced or come into sustained contact with Islam during and shortly before the Islamic era can be found in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (1960-present). The 1st edition (1913–36) should also be considered, as the second edition is not yet complete. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is also a valuable resource, particularly for the pre-Islamic religions and movements, such as Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Manichaeism, and the Mazdakite movement.

Further Readings and Bibliography: A. Gabriel, *Religionsgeographie von Persien* (Vienna, 1971); K.E. Müller, *Kulturhistorische Studien zur Genese pseudo-islamischer Sekterngehilde in Vorderasien* (Wiesbaden, 1969); Thomas Bois, *Connaissance des Kurdes* (Beirut: Khayats, 1965); Köy Envanter Etüdüleri (“Village Inventory Studies [of Turkey]”) in Peter Andrews, ed., *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1989); *Annual Abstract of Statistics, 1970* (Baghdad: Government of Iraq, 1971); *Statistical Abstract 1973* (Damascus: Government of Syria, 1973); *Population Census 1970* (Damascus: Government of Syria, 1972); *The Population and Household Census, 1986* (Teheran: Iranian Census Bureau, 1987), “the secret edition,” text available in English. An excellent resource on the Iranian Kurds, remains A. Razmara, ed., *Geographical Dictionary of Iran*, 10 vols. (Teheran: The Iranian Armed Forces Geographical Bureau, 1949–51); the text is in Persian, and still in print.

Table 5. RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS WITH A KURDISH POPULATION, BY PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION.

Province	Islam		Cult of Angels			Christian	Other
	Sunni	Shi'ite	Alevi	Yârsân	Yezidi		
TURKEY							
Adana*#	72.7%		27.3%				
Adiyaman	77.8		22.2				
Âgri	95	5					
Amasya*	69		31				
Antep	96.1		3.9				
Antioch*	62		38				
Bingöl	86.7		13.3				
Bitlis	98		2				
Cankri**	99		1				
Çurum*	83.4		16.6				
Diyârbakir	96.6		3.4				
Elâzig	87.5		12.5				
Erzincan	93.7		6.3				
Erzurum*	93.7		6.3				
Hakkâri	99			1			
Gümüşhane**	95.5		4.5				
Kayseri**	97.5		2.5				
Kârs	84.8	8.2	5			2	
Kirshehir*	92.3		7.8				
Konya*	98.2		1.8				
Malâtya	72.2		28.8				
Maras*	79.5		20.5				
Mardin	95.2		2.5		5	3	
Nevshehir*	95		5				
Nigde**	97		3				
Siirt	86		4		6	4	
Mus	90		10				
Sivas*	67.5		32.5				
Tokat*	75.5		24.5				
Tunçeli/Darsim	13.4		86.6				
Urfâ#	95.1		3.9				
Vân	95	4				1	
Yozgat*	97.7		2.3				
IRAN							
E. Azerbaijan**	8.8	76.9		14.2			
W. Azerbaijan	35	55		9		1	
Gilan**	15.3	75.6		9.2			
Hamadân*	17	77.8		4			1.2 (Jewish)
Ilâm	34	46		20			
Khurâsân*	17	68	4	2	1		8 (Ismâ'ili)
Kirmânshâh	47.1	13.8		37.3			10.8 (Jewish)
Kordestan	70	13		16			1 (Jewish)
Luristan*	8.6	71.4		20			
Mazandaran**	21.1	71.1		7.8			

Province	Islam		Cult of Angels			Christian	Other
	Sunni	Shi'ite	Alevi	Yârsân	Yezidi		
IRAQ							
Arbil	94					6	
Diyâla	52.5	47.5					
Dohuk	80.5	6.5			6.5	6.5	
Kirkuk#	87.5	8.3				4.2	
Mosul (Nineveh)	78.5	6			10	5.5	
Sulaymânia#	97.5					2.5	
SYRIA							
Hasaka (Jazira)	73				3.5	23.5	
Deyr az-Zor*	97					3	
Aleppo*	85						132 (Ismâ'ili)
Hama**	58.6		22			9.4	10 (Druze)
Latakia**	24		64			12	
Hims**	60		16			24	
Idlib**	38		47			15	

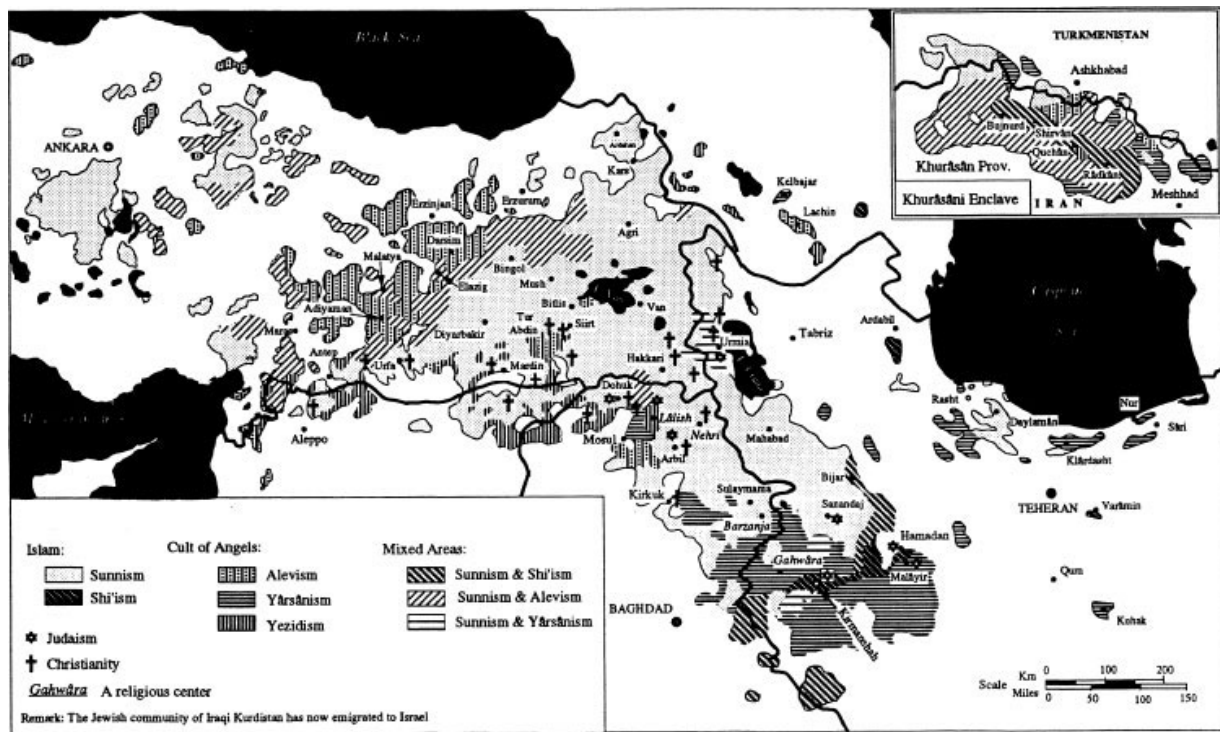
For provincial boundaries, see [Map 4](#).

Legend: Provinces without asterisks have a Kurdish majority. One asterisk denotes provinces with a large Kurdish minority. Two asterisks denote provinces where Kurds constitute 10–20% of the total population. See Remarks for provinces with # sign.

Remarks: In Turkey, religious designators such as Çeferi/Ja'fari, Qizilbâsh, Alevi, and Nuseyri/Nusayri are applied loosely to various branches of Alevism. There are very few, primarily Azeri, followers of the standard Imâmi Shi'ism in Turkey, with concentrations are in Âgri, Kârs, and Vân provinces in northern Kurdistan. In all other regions, those reported by such religious designators have been counted here as Alevi. A good deal of confusion and false reporting mar these censuses, as even the followers of the minority religions report varying local appellations for the same religion; some are simply apprehensive about reporting their actual religion out fear of harassment, and falsely report themselves as followers of the mainstream, state religion. The provinces of Urfâ and Antep in Turkey and Sulaymânia, Diyâla, and Kirkuk in Iraq are good examples of areas where the followers of minority religions (Alevism and Yârsânism, respectively), practice this religious dissimulation. Figures of 25–30% Alevi for Urfâ and Antep are conservative estimates, as are the 15–20% Yârsân for Sulaymânia, Diyâla, and Kirkuk. In the late 1970s the Iraqi province of Kirkuk was disbanded. Kirkuk city and its immediate environs formed the new province of Tamim. The rest of the territories were incorporated into a newly created province, Salâh al-Din (Saladin), with its capital at Tikrit, and other neighboring provinces. Spellings here follow the official state spellings of the names of the localities.

ISLAM

About three-fifths of the Kurds, nearly all of them Kurmânji speakers, are today at least nominally Sunni Muslims of the Shafi‘ite rite. There are also followers of mainstream Imâmi (Twelver) Shi‘ite Islam among the Kurds, particularly in and around the cities of Kirmânshâh, Kangawar, Hamadân, Qurva, and Bijâr in southern and eastern Kurdistan in Iran, and in much smaller numbers in and around Malâtya, Adiyâman, and Maras in far western Kurdistan in Turkey. There are a large number of Shi‘ite Kurds in the Khurâsâni enclave as well, but they are not a majority there, as some sources have erroneously reported. The Shi‘ite Kurds number no more than 1 to 1.5 million, i.e., between 5 and 7% of the total Kurdish population.



Map 38. Religious Composition of Kurdistan.

The Shafi‘ite Sunni rites emerged among the Kurmânj in medieval times when Iran was also primarily Shafi‘ite Sunni Muslim. Arriving from the east toward the end of the medieval period, the Turkic tribes that proceeded to populate the better part of Anatolia brought with them the Hanafite rite prevalent in central Asia. The Hanafite rite became quite influential in the formerly Christian Byzantine lands to the west of Kurdistan, but did not

change the Shafi'ism of the Kurds. It did, however, succeed in introducing the Naqshbandi Sufi order, an order indigenous to central Asia, into Kurdistan (see **Sufi Mystic Orders**). Kurdish Shafi'ite Muslims now constitute the single largest community of adherents to this once pervasive Sunni rite in the northern Middle East. They are now sandwiched between the Shi'ite Persians and Azeris on the east, Hanafite Sunni Turks on the west and north, and Hanafite Arabs of Syria and northern Iraq (the birth place of Hanafism per se) on the south.

Kurdistan straddles the very heartland of Islam, coming within 50 miles of Baghdad and 200 miles of Damascus, the two medieval cultural and spiritual capitals of the Islamic caliphates. The land was among the first to be breached by the Muslim forces, as early as the 7th century AD. Despite this centrality, there are very few mosques to be seen in Kurdistan, including in the cities. Why so?

Until at least the 12th century the Kurds were mostly, and rightly, reckoned as non-Muslims by influential medieval Muslim writers like Nizâm al-Mulk, Abu Mansur al-Baghdâdi, and Ibn Athir, who referred to the Kurds as *mushrikin*, i.e., polytheists. It appears that Islam touched Kurdistan rather superficially, and primarily on its peripheries. While there existed a notable minority of Kurdish Muslims, the majority adhered to the old religions (Cult of Angels, Judaism, and Christianity) resisting conversion until a gradual change in the socioeconomic life of the predominantly agriculturalist Kurdistan began to take shape from the 12th to the 15th centuries, and the destructive migration of the Turkic nomads through Kurdistan (see **Historical Migrations**).

The fact that most early Kurdish Muslim thinkers and men of fame come from cities like Dinawar, Suhraward, and Hamadân, or tribes like the Khalkâns and Fadhlâns, all bordering on the neighboring Muslim ethnic groups, further strengthens the contention that the majority of the Kurdish Muslims were relatively late converts to Islam, perhaps as late as the 16th century. This time coincides with the onset of an extended socioeconomic decline in Kurdistan, which may indicate a lack of the necessary stability and finances to construct durable and/or monumental mosques, accounting for their dearth today.

By the end of the 15th century, the old religions had been undercut steadily by the socioeconomic stress caused by the influx of nomads. From

the beginning of the 16th century, the expansion of these nomads came at the expense of settled agriculturalists. The deterioration of their strength enabled the native Kurmânji-speaking Kurdish nomads to expand their dominance of the Hakkâri region (southwest of Lake Urmîâ) to cover most of Kurdistan. The Kurmânj were Shâfi'ite Sunnis, and as they expanded their power and numbers they expanded their religion, Islam. They gained the decisive momentum in the beginning of the 16th century, with the collapse of the trade routes through Kurdistan and its disruption of the Kurdish economy (see **Early Modern History, Nomadic Economy, and Trade**). The Kurmânj nomads soon overwhelmed and converted the sedentary, Pahlawâni-speaking, non-Muslim Kurds in most of Kurdistan. This pattern of intertwined linguistic and religious change had also occurred earlier, when Kurds of the southern Zagros mountains assumed new identities when they converted to Shi'ite Islam. These southern Kurds gave up their Kurdish language for Persian, and became the ancestors of the modern Lurs and other ethnic groups in the southern Zagros (see **Integration & Assimilation**). Kurdish society is now approaching a period of homogenization under the Kurmânji language, through conversion to Sunni Islam of the Shâfi'ite rite.

The lateness of their conversion should not however be interpreted to discount the importance of Islam to the Kurds, particularly now and specifically in major cities and towns where the majority of inhabitants truly adhere to conventionally recognized Islamic denominations. In fact, even in medieval times Kurds produced many Muslim thinkers and authors whose works are of great value to the entire Islamic world. Kurds like al-Dinawari, Ibn Athir, Ibn Fadlân, Ibn Khalkân, Suhrawardi, and Ba'di ul-Zamân al-Hamadâni are well known for their contributions to Islamic civilization (see **Medieval History**).

Since their conversion to Islam, conflict has existed between Muslim Kurdish groups following various Islamic denominations, and particularly between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. This is not, however, any different in nature, intensity, or frequency from similar factional conflicts in other parts of the Muslim world. In the region around the city of Kirmânshâh in southern Kurdistan, for example, where Imâmi Shi'ism is the religion of the plurality, annual feasts are held in which effigies of 'Umar, the Muslim caliph revered by the Sunnis, is burned with fanfare (see **Popular Culture**).

This is done despite the presence of many Sunni Kurds in the city and region, and sometimes just to provoke them. Kurdish Shi'ism, with its extremist traits, has created a large body of provocative rituals, figures of speech, and literature just for the purpose, going back to the vigorous re-introduction of extremist Shi'ism in Persia under the later Safavids, whose Kurdish connections and background are discussed below under **Cult of Angels** (see also **Early Modern History**).

The suppression of the Shi'ites by the Sunnis has been much more pervasive in Anatolia than in Iran, where for centuries the Shi'ite Persian government would have harshly punished such acts. In Anatolia, when the Ottoman sultan Selim the Grim embarked in the early 16th century on a series of widespread massacres of Shi'ite and Alevi inhabitants (Turkmen as well as Kurd), the Sunni Kurdish clergy provided a willing helping hand in the pogroms.

In the last decades of the 19th century, and particularly the early decades of the present, the fervor of the Germanic thinkers to rediscover their "Aryan" roots led them to study, elaborate, and glorify Aryan religions over the Semitic Judeo-Christian religions. The religions of India and the Zoroastrianism of Persia were prime points of departure for these "Aryan nationalists." The Kurdish intelligentsia, which frequented European capitals and were strongly influenced by their trends, came to view Islam—the other Semitic religion—as their fellow Germanic "Aryans" viewed Judaism and Christianity. Abjuring Islam, the "Arab" religion, the Kurdish literary-cultural journal *Hewâr* (published 1932–43, see **Press & Electronic Mass Media**) championed Yezidism as the native Kurdish religion that had kept its native purity despite centuries of aliens' suppressions. Their erroneous supposition was that Yezidism was a direct offshoot of Zoroastrianism, the "Aryan" religion glorified by the Germanic authors.

The degradation of Islam and the downplaying of its relevance to Kurds (or rather Kurdish nationalism) was a well-developed vogue until the end of World War II and the violent death of Aryanism in the ashes of the Third Reich.

Despite this, many educated Kurds continued their fascination with the pre-Islamic religions of their people, paying misplaced attention to the primarily Persian religion of Zoroastrianism as a source of inspiration. The poet Jagarkhwin (1903–84) exalted Zoroastrianism at the expense of Islam

for a good deal of his life and work. It was only towards the end of his life, and a change of tides in the Middle East toward an Islamic identity, that he tilted toward Islam, albeit a vague, idealized, non-Arabian, clergy-free Islam.

Even today, there are many older Kurdish intellectuals whose fascination with Zoroastrianism, Yezidism, and other native religions is equaled only by their distaste for Islam. Now, however, they have to be more careful in openly attacking Islam at a time when the religion's radical revival happens to be a chief preoccupation of many governments and political groups in the area.

Further Readings and Bibliography: Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurdischer Nationalismus und Sunni-Schi'i Konflikt," in *Geschichte und Politik religiöser Bewegungen im Iran, Jahrbuch zur Geschichte und Gesellschaft des Mittleren Orients* (Berlin/Frankfurt, 1981).

CULT OF ANGELS

Most non-Muslim Kurds follow one of several indigenous Kurdish faiths of great antiquity and originality, each of which is a variation on and permutation of an ancient religion that can loosely be labeled the "Cult of Angels," *Yazdâni* in Kurdish. The actual name of the religion is all but lost to its modern followers, who retain only the names of its surviving denominations. The name *Yazdânism* or *Cult of Angels* is a variation of the Kurdish name of one of its isolated branches, *Yezidism*, which literally means "the angelicans." There are some indications that Yazdânism was in fact the name of the religion before its fragmentation. An even older name for this creed may have been *Hâk* (or *Haq*), which is the name given by this religion to its pre-eternal, all-encompassing deity, the Universal Spirit. A brief argument in favor of the former view is presented in this section under **Yezidism**.

Only three branches of the Cult of Angels have survived from ancient times. They are Yezidism, Alevism, and Yârsânism (also known as *Aliullâhi* or *Ahl-i Haq*). Alevism now also encompasses Nusayrism, which is followed primarily by a minority of Arabs in Syria and most of the Arab minority in Turkey.

All denominations of the Cult, past and present, hold a fundamental belief in luminous, angelic beings of ether, numbering seven, that protect the universe from an equal number of balancing dark forces of matter. Another shared belief, and a cornerstone of the Cult, is the belief in the transmigration of souls through numerous reincarnations, with reincarnations of the deity constituting major and minor avatars.

The Cult believes in a boundless, all-encompassing, yet fully detached “Universal Spirit” (*Haq*), whose only involvement in the material world has been his primeval manifestation as a supreme avatar who, after coming into being himself, created the material universe. (*Haq*, incidentally, is not derived from the Arabic homophone *haqq*, meaning “truth,” as commonly and erroneously believed.) The Spirit has stayed out of the affairs of the material world except to contain and bind it together within his essence. The prime avatar who became the Creator is identified as the Lord God in all branches of the Cult except Yezidism, as discussed below. Following or in conjunction with the acts of creation, the Creator also manifested himself in five additional avatars (*Bâbâ* or *Bâb*, perhaps from the Aramaic *bâbâ*, “portal” or “gate”), who then assumed the position of his deputies in maintaining and administering the creation. These are the archangels, who with the Creator and the ever-present Spirit, number the sacred Seven of the First Epoch of the universal life. This epoch was to be followed by six more, a new epoch occurring each time the soul or essence of the avatars of the previous epoch transmigrates into new avatars, to again achieve with the Spirit the holy number 7. Following these original seven epochs and major avatars, new, but minor, avatars may emerge from time to time. However, their importance is limited, as are their contributions, to the time period in which they live.

In this century three individuals have risen to the station of *Bâb*, or “avatar”: Shaykh Ahmad Bârzâni (supposedly a Muslim), Sulaymân Murshid (a Syrian Arab Alevi) (see **Modern History**), and Nurali Ilâhi (a Yârsân leader). Their impact, however, has been ephemeral. This was not the case with another avatar who appeared a century earlier.

In the 19th century, Mirzâ Ali Muhammad, now commonly known as *The Bâb*, rose to establish the religion of Bâbism, which soon evolved into the world religion of Bâhâ’ism. The religion spread at the same wild-fire pace as

Mithraism in classical times, from the Persian Gulf to Britain in less than a century's time (see **Bâbism & Bâhâ'ism**).

The rites and tenets of the Cult have traditionally been kept secret from non-believing outsiders, even when followers were not subject to persecution. In the present century an appreciable number of the scriptures of various branches of the Cult of Angels have been studied and published, allowing for better understanding of the nature of this native Kurdish religion, as well as the extent of its contribution to other religions.

The Cult is a genuinely universalist religion. It views all other religions as legitimate manifestations of the same original idea of human faith in the Spirit. The founders of these religions are examples of the Creator's continuous involvement in world affairs in the form of periodic incarnations as a new prophet who brings salvation to the living. Thus, a believer in the Cult has little difficulty being associated with Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, or any other religion, as to him these are all just other versions of the old idea. He also has little difficulty in passing as a follower of any one of these religions if need be. Other religions that view themselves as unique systems of approach to the divinity, with an exclusive monopoly on truth, are viewed as unique as the images in a kaleidoscope: they are unique only in the configuration of their elements, but are all identical in that the elements that are involved in forming each image were supplied by the Creator at the moment of the universal Genesis of the material world. Hinduism and its similar cosmopolitan approach to other religions come readily to mind.

Meanwhile, the Cult has always been apt to absorb other religions, whole or in part, that have come into contact with it. To do so, new branches of the Cult have formed by incorporating into their dynamic cosmogonic system of continuing avatars the highest personages of these external religions. Alevism, for instance, was formed in the process of the Cult's movement to swallow Shi'ite Islam beginning in the 15th century. Such movements, which recur throughout the history of the Cult, should not be interpreted as organized and sinister efforts directed by a central, priestly body in the Cult. Far from it, the Cult as a whole could not have been any more indifferent to such events. These movements were all spontaneous creations of various segments of the followers of the Cult who through intensive exposure to an outside religion would in time adopt and adapt enough of it to be able to

pass as insiders, raise a messianic scepter, and try to overtake that neighboring religion.

Several old, and now extinct, movements and religions also appear to have begun their existence as branches of the Cult of Angels, under circumstances similar to those that gave rise to Alevism. Among these, with due caution and reservation, one may place the Gnostic religions of Mithraism and Zorvânism, and the socioeconomically motivated messianic movements of the Mazdakites, Khurramiyya, and the Qarmatites. The Cult also has fundamentally influenced another Gnostic religion, Manichaeism, as well as Ismâ'ili (Sevener) Shi'ism, Druzism, and Bâbism, and to a lesser extent, Zoroastrianism, Imâmi Shi'ism, and Bahâ'ism. The Mithraist religious movement seems now to have been a guise under which Cult followers attempted to take over the old Greco-Roman pantheistic religion, with which the Cult had been in contact since the start of the Hellenistic period in the 4th century BC. Mithraism succeeded impressively. By the time of Constantine and the prevalence of Christianity, Mithraism had become so influential in the Roman Empire that it may be that the Roman state observance of the birth of the god Mithras on December 25 inspired the traditional dating of the birth of Christ. This date was the one on which the Universal Spirit first manifested itself in its prime avatar, Lord Creator, whom Mithraism presumed to be Mithras.

The Yezidi branch of the Cult of Angels, and the Nusayri movement within Alevism, still retain vestiges of this primary position of Mithras, particularly in their festivals and annual communal religious observations.

Despite the shrinking of its earlier domain and loss of ground to Islam, the Cult still influences all the Kurds at the levels of popular culture and quasi-religious rituals. The reverence for Khidir or Nabi Khizir “the living green man of the ponds,” is a well-accepted practice among the Muslim Kurds. Khidir’s shrines are found all over Kurdistan beside natural springs (see **Folklore & Folk Tales**). The Muslims have connected the lore of Khidir to that of the Prophet Elijah, who like Khidir, having drunk from the Fountain of Life, is also ever-living. An earth and water spirit, the immortal Khidir (whose name might mean “green” or a “crawler”) lives within the deep waters of the lakes and ponds. Assuming various guises, Khidir appears among the people who call upon him to grant them their wishes.

Many communal and religious ceremonies belonging to various faiths of the Kurds take place at Khidir's shrines, which are a transreligious institution (see **Popular Culture and Festivals, Ceremonies, & Calendar**). Khidir's longevity is symbolized in the longevous pond turtles found at the ponds and springs where his shrines are located. As such, realistic, but more often stylized, turtles are common motifs in Kurdish decorative and religious arts (see **Decorative Designs & Motifs**). The feast of Khidir falls in the spring, when nature renews itself. The exact observation date, however, varies from religion to religion, and even community to community. All branches of the Cult observe the feast, as do many Muslim commoners.

In ancient times the Cult came to be regarded as a contender to the ascendancy of early Zoroastrianism. This must have been before the end of the Median period, and the movement to overtake Zoroastrianism was perhaps sponsored by the last Median ruler, Rshti-vegâ Âzhi Dahâk (r. 584–549 BC). There is now compelling evidence that the slaying of Zoroaster himself and the overthrowing of his patron king Vishtaspa were at the hands of the troops of King Rshti-vegâ Âzhi Dahâk, as he advanced eastward into Harirud-Murghâb river basins in northwest Afghanistan in 552 BC. This did not help Âzhi Dahâk's reputation among the early Zoroastrians. The Median king Âzhi Dahâk has since been assigned a demonic character and is seen as the arch villain in both Zoroastrianism and the Iranian national mythology and epic literature, like the *Shâhnâma*. In fact, *Azhdahâ* has become the only word in the Persian language for "dragon." The controversial title *Âzhi Dahâk* for the last Median king was already known to Herodotus, albeit in a corrupted form, as *Astyages*.

A lasting legacy of this encounter between the two religions was the Cult's introduction of a hereditary priestly class, the Magi, into the simpler, priestless religion that Zoroaster had founded.

Zoroastrianism and the Cult of Angels share many features, among which are the belief in seven good angels and seven "bad" ones in charge of the world, and a hereditary priestly class. These common features are natural results of the long and eventful contact between the two religions. Other common features may be the result of the religious imprint of the Aryan settlers of Kurdistan, whose original religion must have been the same as that which the Prophet Zoroaster later reformed and reconstituted into the religion of Zoroastrianism. In its present form, however, the Cult shows the

greatest mutuality with Islam, which has been its neighbor for the past 14 centuries. Nearly a thousand years after the first attempt on Zoroastrianism, followers of the Cult made another, less successful, bid to take over, or eliminate, Zoroastrianism. This was in the form of the Mazdakite movement.

The cult or movement of Mazdak rose in the 5th century AD in response to the rigid social and economic class system instituted by the Zoroastrian state religion of Sasanian Persia. The movement spread out from the Zagros region led by a native son, Mazdak, who eventually even succeeded in converting the Sasanian king Kavât or Qubâd (r. AD 488–531).

The Mazdakites' fundamental belief in the social equality of people, still largely present in the Cult of Angels, gave this religion special attraction to the poor and the objects of discrimination. Mazdak (whose name may mean "lesser Mazdâ," with Mazdâ being the shortened form for the name of the Zoroastrian supreme god *Ahurâ Mazdâ*), preached communal ownership of many worldly possessions, and was accused of having included women in this same category—an accusation of sexual promiscuity still levied on the Cult of Angels. The practice of communal ownership has prompted many modern writers to flamboyantly brand the cult of Mazdak as the first world communist system (see **Classical History**). In this religion was also embedded a militancy that continued to manifest itself in several socioreligious movements in the Islamic era, and indirectly through the militant Shi'ism of modern times.

Despite, or perhaps because of, their earlier successes, the Mazdakites were soon subjected to widespread massacres towards the end of Kavât's rule ca. AD 528 (as he had by then reverted to Zoroastrianism). Under the rule of Kavât's son and successor, Chosroes I Anoshervân, pogroms were extended to all corners of the country, prompting the king soon to declare them all destroyed. Far from being destroyed, the movement resurfaced, albeit fragmented, after the destruction of the staunchly Zoroastrian Sasanian Persian Empire. Mazdak remains one of the two patron saints of the populous Khushnow Kurdish tribe in central Kurdistan (Sykes 1908, 457).

Muslim rulers in their turn had to face and put down successive waves of economically driven messianic religious movements originating in this same area of Jibâl (Arabic for "[Zagros] mountains," i.e., old Media). The most important movement, that of the *Khurramiyya*, was led by religious and military leader Bâbak. The *Khurramiyya* believed in transmigration of souls,

especially those of their leaders and religious figures. Bâbak and his followers, like Mazdak and the Mazdakites earlier, were known for their practice of communal ownership of all properties and means of economic production, and lack of social distinctions.

Simultaneously with Bâbak, whose headquarters were among the migrant Kurdish tribes in Azerbaijan, a Kurd named Nârseh (known to the medieval Muslim historian Mas'udi as "Nasir the Kurd"), led a Khurrami uprising in southern Kurdistan (the heartland of the Cult of Angels), which was finally put down under the 'Abbâsid caliph Mu'tasim. Muslim historian Tabari reports that about 60,000 of Nârseh's followers were killed by the Muslims, forcing the rest, along with Nârseh, to flee into the Byzantine Empire in AD 833 (see **Medieval History**).

The hallmark of the Mazdakites and the Khurramis was their use of the color red for their banners and clothing. They were thus called the *Surkhalamân*, "the people of red banners," or *Surkhjâmagân*, "the people of red cloths." This signature reappeared in the 14th and 15th centuries in another movement from among the followers of the Cult, when the Alevis came to be called the *Qizilbâsh*, or "the red heads," from their red headgear (see **Alevism** and **Medieval History**).

After its suppression under the early 'Abbâsid caliphs, an offshoot of Khurramiyya appeared in southern Iraq and later in Lahsâ or Ahsâ (modern Al-Ahsâ in eastern Saudi Arabia). These were called the Qarmatites, and shared with the parent movement the ideals of socioeconomic equality, as well as its cosmogony and theology. The medieval Ismâ'ili traveller Nâsir Khusraw records such practices of the inhabitants of Lahsâ as communal ownership of property and pointing to the connection between the old Mazdakite movement and Qarmatism. A hotbed of "schism," Lahsâ remains a predominantly non-Sunni region in the otherwise fanatically Sunni Saudi Arabia. The population is now reported to be mainstream Imâmi Shi'ite, which may well turn out to be the same kind of inaccurate generalization as that which classified the Cult of Angels itself as a Shi'ite Muslim sect.

In the 15th century, Muhammad Nurbakhsh, whose Sufi movement turned out to closely parallel the tenets of the Cult of Angels (see **Sufi Mystic Orders**), came from Lahsâ. In the early 19th century, another mystic from Lahsâ, Shaykh Ahmad Lahsâ'i, moved to Persia to lay the foundations for the Bâbi movement of the middle of the 19th century. A socioeconomic,

messianic movement with striking similarities to the old Mazdakite movement, the ideas of Shaykh Ahmad (which were popularized by Ali-Muhammad Bâb), on which it was based, share at least as much with the Cult of Angels as did the Nurbakhshi movement (see **Bâbism & Bahâ'ism**).

All branches of the Cult, from the Mazdakites to the modern-day Alevi, have been commonly accused of sexual promiscuity. The Muslims believe they share their women at their communal religious gatherings. Even today the fiction of this notorious ceremony (called *mum söndü*, “candle blown out” in Anatolia, or *chirâgh kushân*, “killing of the lights” in Iran) is used by the Cult’s Muslim neighbors to demean its followers. The accusation is levied against many other religious minorities connected in various ways to the Cult of Angels, such as the Ismâ’ilis in Afghanistan (Canfield 1978), the Alevi of Turkey (Yalman 1969) and Syria, and the Druze of the Levant (Eickelman 1981). Oddly, even scholars of the stature of Henry Rawlinson, Macdonald Kinnier, and G.R. Driver chose to believe rumors of this ceremony. Driver compares it with the oriental *Bona Dea* at Rome, and declares it even more shameless (Driver 1921–23). Rawlinson states that, although he did not believe it was still practiced in his time (1836), he thought it had been until half a century earlier. He further adds that it must have been the remnant of the ancient worship of fertility deities found in the cults of Mithra and Anahita, and also in the cult of Sesostris, which practiced the worship of genitalia. Kinnier claimed to have witnessed, if not actually participated in, one in 1818.

The followers of all branches of the Cult of Angels have ritual gatherings called *Jam*, *Âyini Jam*, or *Jamkhâna* (spelled *Çemhane* in Turkey), in a designated enclosure where holy scripture is recited, religious masters speak, and community bonds are renewed by the shaking of hands of all those present. Social equality is demonstrated by the forbidding of any hierarchical seating arrangements. The gatherings are closed to non-believers for fear of persecution, and the secrecy enshrouding the ceremony may have been the cause of the myth of communal sexual improprieties. The fact that women now are forbidden even to enter the *Jamkhâna* by some branches of the Yârsân is a reaction to these accusations, even though it runs against the grain of Kurdish society and its traditionally high status of women (see **Status of Women & Family life**).

The minor Jam ceremonies occur once every seven days. The all-important major Jam occurs once a year, at different times for different branches of the cult, as discussed under their entries below.

In the Islamic era the religion has influenced and been influenced by many branches of Islam, particularly by the Shi'ism of the Imâmi (Twelver) and the Isma'ili (Sevener) sects. The most important and lasting contribution of the Cult of Angels to Islam, however, came at the time of the Qara Qoyunlu dynasty of eastern Anatolia and western Iran (1380–1468), as well as during the formative early decades of the Safavid dynasty, beginning in AD 1501. The dynasty's founder, Ismâ'il I, had strong Alevi sentiments, and in fact claimed to be an avatar of the Divinity. He is still revered by the Alevis as such, and as a *Sâhabi Zamân*, a living "Time Lord." It took many generations of Safavid endeavor to adjust to, and largely expunge, the elements of the Cult of Angels from their original religion. They did succeed, however, and the traditional, standard Imâmi Shi'ite Islam has since dominated Persia/Iran. Nonetheless, every impartial report concerning the faith and practices of the early Safavids points toward the Cult of Angels (Alevism in particular), and not Shi'ite Islam, as their religion.

To distinguish themselves from these non-Muslim "infidels," the mainstream Imâmi Shi'ites began from the start of the 16th century to refer to themselves as *Ja'fari* (after the 6th Shi'ite imam, Ja 'far al-Sâdiq), instead of by their earlier, and cherished, title: the Shi'a. *Shi'a*, short for *shi'at al-'Ali*, is Arabic for "the party of Ali," Muhammad's son-in-law. Convinced that the names *Alevi* and *Aliullâhi*, by which these non-Muslim Kurds, and later Turkmens and Arabs, called themselves, are derived from the name of imam Ali (a notion fortified by the semi-deification of Ali, as one of the most important earthly avatars of the Universal Spirit, by two out of three branches of the Cult of Angels), the Imâmi Shi'ites opted for the less-than-desirable, but safer title of *Ja'fari*. By the time of the fall of the Safavids in 1720, this had become the almost exclusive title observed by mainstream Shi'ites, so real was their fear of association and confusion with the manifestly non-Muslim Alevis and Aliullâhis. To their chagrin, some Alevis in Anatolia began to embrace the name *Ja'fari* in the 20th century, and have reported themselves as such to the Turkish census takers (see [Table 5](#), Remarks).

The ability of the Cult to adapt and absorb alien religions through its belief in the transmigration and reincarnation of souls again reminds one of Hinduism. Indian Buddhism was absorbed by Hinduism when the latter declared Buddha to be yet another, albeit important, avatar of the Spirit, just as Vishnu, Shiva, and Rama are. Some Hindus did unsuccessfully claim such status for the Prophet Muhammad as well.

The “high-jacking” of Ali and Muhammad for a while seemed to have given the Cult the means it needed to absorb Shi’ite Islam from the beginning of the 15th century to the time of the Ascension of Abbâs the Great on the Safavid throne in AD 1588. His enthusiastic sponsorship of the mainstream Imâmi Shi’ite theologians, attracted from as far away as Medina, Lebanon, Mesopotamia, and Khurâsân, finally blew away the smoke screen of Ali-worship by the Cult of Angels. Abbâs’ Islamic scholars codified and strictly delineated Imâmi Shi’ism within its traditional boundaries prior to the Cult’s offensive. The most important of these Shi’ite theologians, Allâma Majlisi, goes to great lengths to damn the followers of the Cult of Angels in his seminal treatise upholding traditional Shi’ism, *Bihâr al-Anwâr*. Despite all this, Shi’ism in its modern form bears the influence of the Cult in its rituals, specifically those that are considered the most offensive and unorthodox by the Sunnis. After all, it was under the sharp and punishing pressure of the Qara Qoyunlu and the early Safavids (i.e., in their “Alevi period”) that most Muslims of Iran and the Caucasus were converted from Sunnism. The later reforms and introduction of traditional Shi’ism after the 17th century never succeeded in doing away with the imprint of the Cult of Angels on the common practice of the religion. The Cult survives today in the radicalism, economic and social egalitarianism, and martyr syndrome of Iranian and Caucasian Shi’ism, but not so much of Iraqi Shi’ism. The inhabitants of what is now Iraq were mostly Shi’ite before the arrival of the revolutionary Alevis out of Anatolia and never converted to Alevism. Iraq was not, however, left unaffected by the Cult. It was another branch of the Cult, Yârsânism, that had more peacefully been influencing Mesopotamia since the early days of Islam.

In words once interpreted as slander, but that now appear to have been true, the famous 15th century Sunni theologian, Sufi master, and poet, Abdul-Rahmân Muhammad Jâmi (in the *Rashahât-i Jâmi*) refers clearly to the “Shi’ites” he encounters in Baghdad as the “people of *Dun ba Dun*” (a

fundamental religious tenet of the Cult, denoting continuous reincarnation of the soul; see **Yârsânism**). Jâmi habitually respects the traditional Shi'ite Muslims of central Asia and his home province of Khurâsân. His great antagonism toward the "Shi'ites" of the western Middle East, including Baghdad, is demonstrated by his adamant refusal to call them Shi'ites, but instead *Râfidi*, i.e., "the apostates." This and the similarly hostile reception of western Shi'ism by the Sunni theologians of eastern Islamdom (who well tolerated traditional Imâmi Shi'ism), occurred at a time when the Cult of Angels was busily absorbing traditional Islamic Shi'ism.

The Shi'ite beliefs in many saints, the messiah, a living *Sâhib al-Zamâm*, "Time Lord," and the like, all naturally appeal to the followers of the Cult of Angels. The Cult embraces all such notions, except that of a messiah to come at the end of the world. It has not, therefore, been difficult for them to pass themselves off as Shi'ites if need be. Even today, some branches of the Cult of Angels comfortably declare themselves bona fide Shi'ite Muslims, despite the fact that their fundamental beliefs clash with the principles of Islam as set forth in the Koran.

The Cult contains an impressive body of cosmogonical and eschatological literature, which is best preserved in the Yârsân branch, and is discussed under **Yârsânism**. The number 7 is sacred in this religion, and is the number of heavens, the number of luminous angels (as well as of their opposing dark forces of matter), the number of major avatars of the Universal Spirit, the number of epochs in the life of the material world, and the number of venerable families that maintain a hereditary priestly office in the religion. At the heart of number 7 also lies another, more sacred but less often employed, number: 3, which denotes things pertaining to the almighty himself. These numbers of course are sacred, more or less, in many other religions and disciplines of Middle Eastern origin as well. We need only remember the Trinity in Christianity, and the veneration of the number 7 in traditional astrology. What is missing from the Cult of Angels is the veneration of the number 12, which is sacred to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (e.g., 12 tribes of Israel, apostles of Christ, Shi'ite imams).

Fasting requirements in this religion are limited to three days, while prayers are required only on the occasion of the communal gathering of Jamkhâna. Dietary laws vary from denomination to denomination, but are

lax, or rather vague, at best. Alcohol and ham, for example, are often permitted because they are not directly prohibited in the scripture.

The Cult is fundamentally a non-Semitic religion, with an Aryan superstructure overlaying a religious foundation indigenous to the Zagros. To identify the Cult or any of its denominations as Islamic is a simple mistake, born of a lack of knowledge of the religion, which pre-dates Islam by millennia. Even though there has been strong mutual impact of the Alevi and Yârsân branches of the Cult and Shi'ite Islam, it is equally a mistake to consider these branches as Shi'ite Muslim sects, or vice versa.

The causes of this common mistake are several, but most important is the high station of Ali, the first Muslim Shi'ite imam, in both Yârsânism and Alevism. Through the elevation of Ali to status of primary avatar of the Spirit, Alevism and Yârsânsim have earned the title *Aliullâhi* (those who deify Ali) from their Muslim neighbors. The ongoing practice of religious dissimulation—like the Muslim *taquiyah*—has been also an important factor in confusing outsiders. The Cult's past attempts to absorb Shi'ism through pretensions of a shared identity have also confused many a hapless historian. As extremist Shi'ites, or *ghulât*, was how the embarrassed Muslim neighbors of the followers of the Cult used to identify them. Today, if asked, most Muslims would readily call Cult followers (with the exception of the Yezidis) Shi'ite Muslims of a “peculiar” kind.

The dwindling number of followers of the Cult over the past 4 centuries, coupled with the religious dissimulation of their leaders, who have openly and persistently called the Cult a Shi'ite Muslim sect, have relegated the question to the realm of unimportance for Muslims. The exception is, perhaps, the Kurdish Muslims themselves, whose persecution of Cult followers in the 19th and early 20th centuries was instigated by the fame- and follower-seeking, demagogue Muslim mullahs. These Muslims alone have kept up the pressure on Cult members (see **Early Modern History**).

Unlike many major religions, the Cult lacks a divinely inspired, single holy book. In fact such a book would have been out of place, given the multiplicity of the avatars of the Spirit, and the fact that revelation and reincarnation are an on-going affair in this regenerative religion. Instead there are many venerated scriptures, produced at various dates, in various languages, and covering various themes by holy figures in the Cult. In fact Nurali Ilâhi, himself a minor avatar and the author of the most recent “holy

scripture,” the *Burhân* (see **Yârsânism**), passed on in 1975. Lack of a single holy book has not by any means hindered the Cult from developing a most impressive cosmogony, catechesis, eschatology, and liturgy, which are shared with minor variations in all denominations of the Cult to this day.

Good and evil are believed by the Cult to be equally important and fundamental to the creation and continuation of the material world. The good Angels, are therefore, as venerable as the bad ones, if one may call them so. In fact, without this binary opposition the world would not exist. Cold exists only because there is also its opposite, warm; up is what it is only because there is also down. Good would cease to exist if evil ceased to balance its existence. “Knowledge” and “awareness” in man exist only because good and evil exist in equal force, to be used as points of reference by man to comprehend and balance his being. Good, traditionally represented by the symbol of a dog and evil by the symbol of a serpent, join each other in a dog-headed serpent to represent the embodiment of the act of world creation: the mixture of ether and matter, good and evil, and all other opposites that make up this world. Some reports by European travellers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries regarding the veneration of dogs by the Alevi, if true, may point to worship of the symbol of good, since there is plenty of evidence of veneration of the symbol of the serpent (and hence evil) in the Yezidi arts, particularly at their shrines in Lâlish (see **Yezidism**).

The symbol of a dog-headed serpent finds its precedent in the Kurdish art of the Mannaeen period of the 9th century BC. Side-by-side representation of the dog and serpent symbols is already well-known through the ancient Mithraic temple art from England to Iran.

The Cult does not believe in a physical hell or heaven, filled with devils or angels to come at the end of time. The horrors of hell and pleasures of paradise take place in this world as people reincarnate after death into a life of bounty and health or conversely into one of misery and destitution, depending on the nature of the life they lived within their previous body. At the end of time, however, only the righteous and complete “humans” who succeed in crossing the tricky bridge of final judgment (*Perdivari*) will join the eternity of the Universal Spirit. The failed souls will be annihilated along with the material world forever.

The Cult's belief in the figurative nature of hell and heaven is shared prominently by many Sufi orders, but particularly those that have come under the influence of the Cult (see **Sufi Mystic Orders**).

In addition to their attempt to absorb Shi'ite Islam, in the past thousand years, the followers of the Cult of Angels went through a period of successful proselytization of the Turkmens of Anatolia and the Arabs of the Levantine coasts of the eastern Mediterranean. There are also notable groups of Azeris, Gilânis, and Mâzandarânis who follow the Cult ([Table 5](#)).

It must be noted, however, that not all non-Kurdish followers of the various branches of this religion are just foreign converts. While most non-Kurdish followers of the Alevi branch of the Cult in Anatolia are actually Turkmen converts, the Arabs of the southern Amanus mountains and the Syrian coastal regions are in large part assimilated Kurds who inhabited the region in the medieval period. The same is true of the followers of the Cult in Azerbaijan, and in Gilân and Mâzandarân on the Caspian Sea, most of whom are the descendants of assimilated Kurds who have lost all traces of their former ethnic identity short of this religion (see **Historical Migrations and Integration & Assimilation**). The multilingualism of the sacred works of this religion may be the result of a desire to communicate with these ethnically metamorphosed followers of the Cult, and to convey the Word to all interested people in the tongue most native to them. This practice is also found in the Manichaean (now extinct), Druze, and Ismâ'ili religions, all of which have had strong past contact with the Cult of Angels.

In the past the religion has also lost major communities of adherents: almost all the Lurs have gone over to mainstream Shi'ite Islam, while the population in Kurdistan itself has become primarily Sunni Muslim. The Laks are fast following the suit of the Lurs. This religious change seems almost always to parallel a change in language and lifestyle among the affected Kurds. The Lurs went from various dialects of Gurâni Kurdish to Persian, an evolved form of which they still speak today. Most of the agriculturalist Kurdish followers of the Cult of Angels switched from Pahlawâni to Kurmânji and its dialects when converting to Islam. Except for the Mukri regions around the town of Mahâbâd, the area now dominated by the South Kurmânji dialect of Sorâni (see **Language**) was a domain of Yârsânism and the Gurâni dialect until about three centuries ago (see **Historical**

Migrations), while the domain of North Kurmânji was primarily that of the Dimili language and Alevi faith until the 16th century.

At the turn of the century, 33–40% of all Kurds followed this old religion. The proportion of the followers of the Cult converting to Islam has slowed down in this century, and now about 30–35% of all Kurds follow various branches of the Cult. More statistics are provided below under relevant denominations of the Cult.

The followers of the Cult have been the primary targets of missionary work, particularly Christian. Christian missionaries began work in Kurdistan on various denominations of the Cult as early as the 18th century. These produced the earliest Kurdish dictionaries, along with some of the earliest surviving pieces of written Kurdish, in the form of translated Bibles (see **Literature**). The missionaries have traditionally found these Kurds (who were mostly agriculturalists) more receptive to their works than the Muslim Kurds (who were mostly pastoralist nomads). Even today, the primary focus of the Christian and Bâhâ'i missionaries remains the Kurds following the Cult.

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Yârsânism The followers of Yârsânism, also known as the Yârisân, Aliullâhi, Ali-Ilâhi (i.e., “those who deify Ali”), Alihaq, Ahl-i Haqq (“the People of Truth”) or Ahl-i Haq (“the People of the Spirit” [*Hâk* or *Haq*]),

Shaytânparass (devil-worshippers), Nusayri (“the Nazarenes,” i.e., Christians), etc., are concentrated in southern Kurdistan in both Iran and Iraq. Their domain roughly coincides with that of the Gurâni (including the Laki) Kurdish dialect, with some major exceptions. The faith is loosely divided at present into two or three, very unequal sects.

1) The Ahl-i Haq have been increasingly identified with mainstream Shi‘ite Islam, yet follow for their religious instruction the mystic order led by Nurali Ilâhi (himself a minor avatar, d. 1974) and his father Ni‘matullah Jayhunâbâdi. Nurali Ilâhi is the author of the venerated book *Burhân*, which serves as the religious manual for the Ahl-i Haq. Despite Ahl-i Haq’s apparent enthusiasm to at least appear to have merged with mainstream Imâmi Shi‘ism (or claim that the religion is an independent Shi‘ite sect), a short review of the *Burhan* and study of the discourses of Nurali Ilâhi and his father leave not a shred of doubt that this is only a pretense intended to protect the Ahl-i Haq from the wrath of their Muslim neighbors. As late as the 1920s, as Nurali relates, the Muslims were lynching and crucifying Yârsân followers.

2) The Tâyifasân have only recently begun to associate with the pragmatic approach and teachings of Nurali vis-a-vis Islam. However, they are not as enthusiastic about an open association with Shi‘ism as Ahl-i Haq. Nurali claims the Tâyifasân to be his followers, not very different from the Ahl-i Haq. These two groups are the most urban and urbane of the Yârsân sects, and show the most influence from modern Iranian society. Their small branch in Iraq follows their lead.

3) The traditionalists consist of the commoners and village folk, who constitute the overwhelming majority, and call themselves the Yârsân, but also on occasion the Nusayri or Aliullâhi. They are the most readily targeted for abuse by their Muslim neighbors, but they are also the ones who are the most faithful to the tenets of the ancient religion. They make no pretense to be Muslims. Since they constitute by far the largest group, the appellation *Yârsân* here is considered to represent this entire branch of the Cult of Angels. The name is believed by the Yârsâns to have evolved from *yâr-i sân*, “the companion, or people of the Sultan,” i.e., Sultan Sahâk. This seems to be a folk etymology, and the true meaning waits to be discovered.

Yârsânism possesses an impressive body of religious cosmogony. It holds that the world was created when the Universal Spirit (*Haq*) who resided in

Azal, “Pre-Eternity,” in (or as) a pearl, manifested itself in a primary avatar (*Zâti Bashâr*) the Lord God (*Khâwandagâr*), and signaled the First of the Seven Epochs (*Biyâbas*) of universal life. The Lord God then proceeded to create the world. The Spirit further manifested itself in five secondary avatars (*Zâti Mihmân*), to form the Holy Seven with the Spirit itself. And this was the original Epoch of Creation, the *Sâjnâri*, or “Genesis.” (See [Table 6.](#))

The First Epoch was followed by another six (one *Zâti Bashâr* and five *Zâti Mihmân*). In each one the Spirit manifested itself in six new avatars, to form the seven for that epoch of the universal life. While the avatars of the First Epoch can be closely matched by name to the archangels of the Semitic religions, the avatars of the Second Epoch, which begins with Ali as the primary avatar, are all Muslim figures, except for Nusayr. Nusayr may be interpreted as referring to the “Nazarene,” i.e., Jesus Christ, or as *Nârseh*, the minor avatar who later came to be known as Theophobus (see **Classical History**). The Third Epoch belongs to *Shâh Khushin* or *Khurshid*, “the Sun,” that is, the God Mithras or *Mihr* and his cycle (see also **Folklore & Folk Tales**).

The Fourth Epoch begins with *Sultan Sahâk*, whose accompanying avatars are primarily Jewish figures, like Moses, David, and Benjamin. The avatars of the Seventh Epoch bear names followed by the Turkic honorific title *beg*, “master.” These changes in the character and origin of the names of the avatars of each epoch may reflect the social and historical events that were occurring in the national life of the Kurds at the time. Possible influential events include the outbreak of the Mithraist movement (2nd century BC to 3rd century AD) in northern and western Kurdistan; the introduction of the Judeo-Christian tradition into central Kurdistan in the 1st century BC and in the rest of Kurdistan up to the 7th century AD; the coming of Islam in the 7th century; the Turkic invasions of the 12th-15th centuries; and the nomadization of Kurdish society in the 17th-19th centuries (see **History**).

The names of the avatars of the Fifth Epoch may also signify early medieval revolutionary movements within the Cult. The name of the primary avatar of the epoch, *Qirmizi*, meaning “the Red One,” may be either *Bâbak* or *Nârseh*. The red clothing and banner of these revolutionaries have already been mentioned above. The element *yâr*, “companion, disciple,” found in the names of the two secondary avatars of this epoch was

commonly found in the given names of individuals in the early medieval period. A relevant example is *Mâzyâr* (*Mâh Yazd Yâr*, meaning “the companion of the Angel of Media”), the name of a Cult revolutionary who rose up simultaneously with Bâbak and Nârseh in the Caspian Sea regions (Rekaya 1973). There was, meanwhile, a secret society or brotherhood of plebeians and their revolutionary reformers operating in nearby Baghdad under the title the *Ayyârs*, “the companions.”

The avatars of the Fourth Epoch and Sahâk himself are now held by the Yârsâns to have been the most important of the Spirit’s manifestations after the First, and ethereal one, headed by the Lord God. The Alevis consider the Second Epoch and Ali to occupy this primary station, while the much-corrupted Yezidi cosmogonical tradition entitles Shaykh Adi and his avatars to that place of importance, even though it is not clear to which Epoch they are assigned.

Khâwandagâr, Ali, and Sahâk form a Supreme Three within the Seven for the Yârsâns; the Alevis have Khâwandagâr, Ali, and Bektâsh (see **Sufi Mystic Orders**); while Lucifer, Adi, and Yezid serve the purpose for the Yezidis. The Yezidis place Lucifer or Malak Tâwus among the avatars of the primary or First Epoch. On [Table 6](#) this translates into Lucifer replacing Khâwandagâr himself, as otherwise Lucifer would not both fit in the First Epoch and have Adi as one of his primary avatars in the following Epochs. Each manifestation reincarnates into his or her successor in station in the next Epoch. Thus Khâwandagâr reincarnates into Ali in the Second Epoch, into Shâh Khushin in the Third, into Sultân Sahâk in the Fourth, and so on.

In each epoch there is a female avatar of the Universal Spirit, a reflection of the higher status of women in the Kurdish culture and tradition (see **Status of Women & Family life**).

The greatest personage in Yârsânism, Sultan Sahâk, is with increasing frequency referred to as *Sultan Is’hâq*, i.e., an Islamicized form of Isaac, by some apologetic Ahl-i Haq and Tâyifasây. This title would obviously fit rather nicely with the other Judaic names of the avatars of the Fourth Epoch. In his new garb, Sahâk, or “Is’haâq,” is contended to have been born sometime between the 11th and 13th centuries in the venerated city of Barzanja, southeast of Sulaymânia (now the center of the Qâdiri Sufi order; see **Sufi Mystic Orders**). In fact Shaykh Mahmud, the Qâdiri Sufi master who following World War I led a 12-year-long revolt against the British

administration in Iraq and subsequently proclaimed himself the “King of Kurdistan” (see **Modern History**) claimed to be descended from a brother of Sultan Sahâk in the twelfth generation. The traditionalist Yârsâns, on the other hand, believe Sahâk to have been superhuman, a supreme avatar of the Universal Spirit, who lived many centuries, possessed mysterious powers, and lives on as a protective mountain spirit in caves on the high peaks.

Sahâk is the much corrupted form of *Dhahâk* or *Dahâk*, which also served as the royal title of the last Median ruler, Rshti-vegâ Âzhi Dahâk (see **Ancient History**). The name is encountered in various versions throughout the classical and medieval periods in the Zagros region, and everywhere else that the Kurds happened to settle, including Armenia. There is a St. Sâhâk Barteve, an Armenian Catholicos who lived in the late 4th and early 5th centuries AD; there are many other luminaries in early medieval Armenia with this name. At the time Armenia was receiving a large number of Kurdish immigrants from the southeast (see **Classical History** and **Historical Migrations**).

According to Yârsânism, humans are the end product of the worldly evolutionary journey of the soul. The soul begins its journey by entering inanimate objects. Upon completion of that experience, the soul lives within plants, then animals. Eventually, the soul enters the body of a man or a woman. Thus he or she contains four natures: those of objects, plants, animals, and mankind. At the moment of entry into the human body, the soul begins a new transmigratory journey, which can last for 1001 reincarnations, equivalent in time to the 50,000 years allotted to the universe. This is called the *Dun ba Dun* stage (variously interpreted to mean “oblivion to oblivion,” i.e., indicating movement from one mortal body to another, or “garb to garb,” implying the same thing). At the end of this evolutionary journey, a man/woman reaches salvation and becomes a human, a holy, perfect being worthy of his/her new station in the high heavens and his/her total union with the Universal Spirit.

Salvation in Yârsânism is the responsibility of the individual. The community has no responsibility to help one reach humanity. Even the assistance provided by religious teachers and masters is voluntary guidance and not a duty. The presence or absence of this guidance at any rate has no bearing on the status of the soul of the pupil. Theoretically it is possible for man to reach the high station of humanity through a single life period of

high endeavor. Conversely, it may require the entire cycle of 1000 reincarnated lives (the last life after the one-thousandth is the life of salvation and does not count in the Dun ba Dun). Sinning individuals may be reincarnated in the regressed form of an animal, the life of which is not then counted among the 1000 lives. Nor is reincarnation into the body of a newborn who dies before reaching 40 days of age counted. If after the 1000 lives of Dun ba Dun or at the end of universe's 50,000 years (which ever comes first) a soul has not yet succeeded in elevating itself to the station of a human, then it will be judged, along with other failed souls, at the Final Judgment or *Pardivari*, "the bridge crossing."

Table 6: COSMOGONICAL EPOCHS AND THE AVATARS OF THE UNIVERSAL SPIRIT IN YARSANISM.

Universal Spirit (Hâq)	Epoch	Avatars (Bâbâ)				
		Primary (Zâti Bashar)	Secondary (Zâti Mihmân)			Female
1	Khâwandagâr	Jibrâ'il	Mikâ'il	Isrâfil	Izrâ'il	?
2	Ali	Salmân	Qanbar	Muhammed	Nusayr	Fâtima
3	*Shâh Khushin (Mithras)	Bâbâ Buzurg	Kâka Redâ	Pir Shâliyâr	Bâbâ Tâhir	Mâmâ Jalâla
4	*Sultan Sahâk	Khidir (Benyâmin)	Dâwud	Pir Musi *Bâbâ Yâdgâr	**Ibrâhim Tayyâr	Dâyirâk Razbâr
5	Qirmizi (Shâh Ways)	Qambar Dastawar	Yâri Jân	Yâr Ali	Shâh Swâr	Zar Bânu
6	MuhammadBeg (Nurbakhsh)	Kâ Mahrijân	Kâ Malak	?	Qara Pust	Dusti
7	Âtish Beg	Jamshid Beg	Almâs Beg	Alâdin Khân	Abdâl Beg	Pari Khânim

Legend: * Conceived without a father
 ** Conceived without a mother
 ? Too many or no candidates

Sources: *Khazâna, Shâhnâma-i Haqiqat, and Burhân.*

Because of this strong belief in reincarnation, the dead are scarcely mourned by the Yârsâns, as they are expected to return soon, if not immediately, in the body of a newborn. Indeed, it was not uncommon until

relatively recently for priests to try to identify the exact newborn to whom the soul of a deceased person had transmigrated.

Like other branches of the Cult of Angels, Yarsânism does not have a divine holy book as such. They possess instead a body of sayings, or *kalâm*, and traditions, or *deftar*, which they treat as their holy scriptures. These have been composed at various times and languages, each at an epoch-making turn in the long history of the religion. The most important kalâm is that of *Saranjâm* (“Conclusion”) also known as the kalâm of *Khazâna* (perhaps meaning “Repository”), and contains the sayings of Sultan Sahâk, his contemporary saints, and other Yârsân religious figures who preceded him. This is considered to be the paramount work and supersedes all others in authority. The work is in verse and written in the Awrâmani dialect of Gurâni (see **Language**). Other kalâms and deftars are in Gurâni, but also in Luri, Persian, and various Turkic dialects. Other major works are the *Dawrai Bahlul*, ascribed to the mysterious Bahlul Mâhi (Bahlul the Median) of the 8th century AD, written in verse in an archaic form of Gurâni. *Shâhnâma-i Haqiqat*, by Ni‘matullah Jayhunâbâdi Mukri and the *Burhân* by Nurali Ilâhi, both are, on the other hand, written recently in Persian with a smattering of Gurâni and Koranic quotations in Arabic.

The center of Yârsânism is deep inside the Gurân region at the town of Gahwâra (or Gawâra), 40 miles west of Kirmânshâh. The shrine of Bâbâ Yâdigâr, in an eponymous village 50 miles northwest of Gahwâra, now serves as one of Yârsânism’s holiest sites. Two days before the festival of the new year, or New Ruz (see **Festivals, Ceremonies, & Calendar**), believers visit the shrine and participate in chants that assume the form of a dialectic on the principles of Yârsânism. The religious teacher and master, or *pir*, recites a formula posing a question, which is answered by the believers by another formula. The tradition of dialectics in religious discourse and ceremonial chants has deep roots in the Zagros region. It is also found in the Zoroastrian religious commentaries of the *Zand-i Avestâ* and the poetic style of all peoples inhabiting the Zagros chain. A ritual also practiced by the Yârsâns on this occasion is the sacrifice of a rooster. (To the Yezidis, the rooster serves as the venerated announcer of the Sun, so to them this Yârsân practice would be a sacrilege beyond all bounds.)

Despite the impressiveness of what remains of the religious beliefs and tradition, much more has been forgotten, garbled, and fabricated in all

branches of the Cult of Angels. The most important religious terminologies, cycles of events, and pivotal points of the religion are derived from popular etymologies, common superstitions, pseudo-histories, and plain fabrications by the imaginative minds of the Yârsân religious masters, the *pirs*. The important cosmogonical events of *Sâjnâri* and *Perdivari* are celebrated and venerated with very little knowledge of even their literal meaning beyond a flimsy popular etymology.

The striking physical attribute of the followers of Yârsânism is the tradition among men of not cutting or trimming their mustaches. In fact, they are allowed to grow to extreme sizes. The beard, on the other hand, is always shaved. The habit is prohibited by Islam (according to which the mustache must always be kept very short) but became the outward hallmark of the extremist Shi'ites, who adopted it from the Alevis. The faces of the Safavid kings, clean-shaven other than their great bushy mustaches as they are recorded in the paintings of the period, could be those of any of the followers of the Cult of Angels as seen today. The habit is no longer practiced by the mainstream Shi'ites because it is disallowed under Islam. The practice has thus once again become the exclusive habit of the followers of the Cult of Angels, particularly the Yârsâns and the Yezidis.

The followers of Yârsânism are now found in one large concentration in southern Kurdistan and many secondary concentrations outside Kurdistan proper, in the Alburz Mountains, Azerbaijan, and Iraq (see [Table 5](#)). The famous medieval poet Bâbâ Tâhir and the 19th-century poet Adib al-Mamâlik were adherents of this faith. (In fact, Bâbâ Tâhir is among the secondary avatars of the Third Epoch.) The Sârili, the Kâka'i, and the Bazhalân (also known as the Bajalân and the Bajarwân) Kurds, occupying in separate pockets the area between Qasri Shirin, Kirkuk, and Mosul, practice some variations of Yârsânism as well. Presently the followers of Yârsânism constitute roughly 10–15% of the Kurds.

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Alevism A majority of the Dimila Kurds of Anatolia and some of their Kurmânji-speaking neighbors are followers of another denomination of the Cult of Angels. These have been called collectively the Alawis ("the Followers of Ali"), the Alevis ("the People of Fire," implying fire-worship or Zoroastrianism, from *alev*, "fire"), the Qizilbâsh ("the red heads," from their red head gear; see **Costumes & Jewelry**), and the Nusayri (which can be interpreted as the "Nazarenes," implying Christianity, or as the "followers of Nârseh," the early medieval Kurdish revolutionary of the Khurrami movement who settled with his followers in Anatolia). See *Medieval History*). The Alevis believe in Ali as the most important primary avatar of the Universal Spirit in the Second Epoch of the universal life (see **Yârsânism**), hence their exaggerated feelings for this first Shi'ite Muslim

imam. This may be the root of their communal appellation, just as the title *Aliullâhi* (“the deifiers of Ali”) serves as one of the titles the outsiders call the Yârsâns. A point to note is that unlike in Yârsânism, Ali is a double figure in Alevism. Alevi join the Imâm Ali and the Prophet Muhammad together to form *Alimuhammad*, who is then considered a single avatar, albeit with double manifestations. The founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shâh Ismâ‘il I, often referred to himself in his writings with the formula “Alimuhammad,” when he was not calling himself *Haq*, the Spirit.

Despite the importance of Ali in the religion and its modern communal appellation, Alevism remains a thoroughly non-Islamic religion, and a part of the Cult of Angels. Like other branches of the Cult, the fundamental theology of Alevism sharply contradicts the letter and spirit of the Koran in every important manner, as any independent, non-Semitic religion might.

Alevism is now also practiced by many Syrian Arabs, where Alevi constitute over 13% of the total population of the state. In Syria they are more often known as the Nusayris and are the predominant religious group in coastal Syria, centered on the ports of Latakia and Tartus. Ethnic Kurds were once numerous here and are still found not just to the north, but also to the east, toward the city of Hama. The Alevi Arabs are thus a mixture of Arab converts and assimilated Kurds (see **Historical Migrations**). The current president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad is an Alevi (more precisely, a Nusayri; see below). Under the French Mandate, this section of Syria was made autonomous for this religious reason.

Many Turkmens of Turkey, who neighbor the Kurds in the Taurus and Pontus mountains near the cities of Adana, Sivas, Tokat, and Amasya are also adherents of Alevism. Contrary to the Syrian case, the non-Kurdish Alevi of Anatolia are primarily Turkic converts and not assimilated Kurds. Along with the Kurdish Alevi, these Turkmens were the backbone of the armed forces that powered the rise of the Safavids of Persia (see **Early Modern History**). There may now be as many Turkmen Alevi as Kurds, if not actually more. The Shabaks, who live to the immediate south-southeast of Mosul in central Kurdistan, neighboring the Yârsân Bajalâns, also practice a form of this Dimili Alevism.

Dimili Alevism bears closer links to ancient Aryan cults than does Yârsânism. Its rites include daily bowing to the rising sun and moon and the incantation of hymns for the occasion. The communal ritual gathering of

Jamkhâna is observed by these Dimili Alevi as the *Âyini Jam*, “the Tradition of Jam.” The major Jam, or the grand annual communal gathering, coincides with the great Muslim Feast of Abraham that concludes the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and includes the sacrifice of a lamb. Jam (known as *Jamshid* in Zoroastrianism and *Yamâ* in the Veda) was the great Aryan hero in the tradition of the Zoroastrians to whom is ascribed the creation of the feast of New Ruz—the Kurdish and Iranian new year. The myth holds that Jam was sacrificed at the end of his own days to the rising sun by none else than *Âzhi Dahâk*. In fact, in the renowned Iranian national epic, the *Shâhnâma* of Firdawsi, Jamshid is depicted as “the worshipper of the Sun and Moon” (chapter on the Advent of Zoroaster, line 71), as are the Alevi.

The *Âyini Jam* constitutes basically the same religious occasion as that of Jamkhâna of the *Yârsâns* and Jam of the *Yezidis*. The Alevi, despite the verbal torments of outsiders, still allow full participation of women in their rituals and religious gatherings, particularly the occasion of the major *Âyini Jam*. This is therefore the specific occasion to which outsiders point for their accusation of the communal sex ritual of the “candle blown out” mentioned earlier.

Some Dimili Alevi, as well as the *Yezidi* clans, still maintain the ancient Iranian rite of worshipping the deity represented as a sword stuck into the ground. Mark Sykes in 1908 mentions this practice among a few Dimili tribes: the *Bosikân*, *Kuriân*, and apparently also the *Zekiri*, *Musi*, and *Sarmi*, but he adds that at the time the last three no longer practiced it. This rite is mentioned by Herodotus for the Iranian Scythians and Sarmatians (kinsmen of the Kurds and other Iranian peoples) in Ukraine of 2300 years ago. (The resemblance between the Dimili tribal name *Sarmi* and the that of Sarmatians is also worthy of note.) The image of the sword stuck in the ground or a rock is of course similar to that of the British Excalibur and King Arthur. There is a strong possibility that the two are related. In AD 175, Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius assigned a legion of Sarmatians from Pannonia (modern Hungary) to serve in England and Scotland (the Sarmatians’ commander’s name was Lucius Artorius Castus!). According to Nickel, the basic elements of the legend may have been introduced into Britain by these Sarmatian settlers, and the familiar story of Excalibur may thus be akin to this Dimili Alevi religious practice. The Dimili are the last Iranian people still practicing the ancient rite.

Some modern European travellers have reported, as hearsay, that some Qizilbâsh worship a large (black) dog as the embodiment of the deity (Driver 1921–23). Even though Driver’s account is rather derogatory toward the Alevis and to the practice, of which he clearly does not approve, veneration of the dog as a symbol of good (the serpent standing for evil) is a very ancient rite. The binary opposition in which the dog and serpent symbols represent the basic poles is found in almost all Gnostic religions of the old, particularly Mithraism (Jonas 1963).

The divine reverence for Ali practiced by the Alevis became the most conspicuous religious sign of the Qara Qoyunlu and the early Safavid dynasties. Added to their other non-Islamic rites and beliefs, this alienated them from the Muslim surroundings, to which they sought to extend their political domination and their Alevi religion under the pretense of Shi‘ism. They were commonly referred to as the Qizilbâsh, a name still carried by the modern Alevi Dimila Kurds of east-central Anatolia—the area where the movement began in the 15th century.

To form the critical human force necessary for the outburst of the Alevis in the 15th and 16th centuries, two factors proved crucial: 1) the unprecedented demographic gains by the Kurds in the period between 1400 and the 1520’s (see **Demography**), and 2) the earlier successful conversion to the Cult of Angels of vast numbers of the neighboring Turkmen tribes of Anatolia and the Caucasus. The early patrons of this Alevism, better known to historians as extremist Shi‘ites, were the Turkmen royal house of Qara Qoyunlu, which ruled basically the entire area of contemporary Iran, as well as the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia (see **Medieval History**). The inclinations of the Qara Qoyunlu toward the Cult of Angels and away from Islam were too clear at their own time. Even today, the last remnant of the royal Turkmen Qara Qoyunlu tribe living in ex-Soviet and Iranian Azerbaijan are followers of the Cult of Angels according to Minorsky. The list of the primary Kurdish tribes that participated in the Safavid Alevi revolution included the Shâmlu, Shaykhâwand, Shâdlu, Khâjawand, Zafrânlu (Za‘farânlu), Stâjlu (Istâjlu), and Quvânlu (Qovâ). All these tribes are still extant and Kurdish (see [Table 1](#)).

The red headgear that gave the name *Qizilbâsh*, Turkic for “red heads,” to these socioreligious revolutionaries, are still worn among the Alevi Dimila Kurds. Among the non-Alevi Kurds, it finds its last remnants in the tradition

of the Bârzânis. The chiefs of the Bârzâni Confederacy, who have traditionally commanded high religious leadership as well, carry the exclusive privilege of wearing red turbans to their family as a sacred tradition (see **Costumes & Jewelry**). This red color was also the hallmark of the Mazdakite and the Khurramite movements, which are the direct predecessors of Alevism.

As in Yârsânism, some branches of Alevism have for various reasons grown ever closer to the mainstream Shi'ite Islam they helped form in its current state in the course of the 15th-17th centuries. The most transformed branches of Alevism are similar in their association with Shi'ism to the Ahl-i Haq followers of Nurali Ilâhi (see **Yârsânism**). Even at their most advanced stage of convergence, neither the Ahl-i Haq nor the Alevis qualify as Shi'ites or Muslims by any Koranic standards.

Alevism was a disfavored religion in the Ottoman Empire, whose ruling sultans wore the mantle of the Prophet Muhammad and championed the cause of orthodox Sunni Islam. The Alevis were exposed to many massacres and state-sponsored pogroms immediately after the annexation of eastern Anatolia from Persia under the Ottoman sultan Selim in 1514.

Despite this, the Alevis have seen far less oppression than the Yezidis. This has been due to their larger numbers. Even today followers of this religion constitute roughly 20% of all Kurds.

The centuries-long underprivileged status of the Alevi community under the Ottomans and the suspicion of their Persian sympathies was inadvertently carried over into the Turkish Republican period after 1922, even though the Republic confessed total secularism, and Persia/Iran had ceased to be a threat. Only recently has it occurred to Ankara that there is no logic in disfavoring the Alevis, and the Bektâshi Sufi order which is strongly associated with it. On the contrary, there is much to be lost by continuing the old anti-Alevi policies. These policies have turned the Alevi Kurds (who saw themselves discriminated against on two counts, being Kurds and being Alevis) into some of the most radical insurgents and most extremist of all political groups. The rebellious attitude of these contemporary Alevis towards an oppressive state reminds one of the earlier movements by the followers of the Cult of Angels (e.g., the Mazdakites and the Khurramis), and the radicalism it has imparted to Shi'ism.

Alevism is now recognized in Turkey as an “indigenous” Anatolian religion worthy of respect. Cloaked in nationalist garb, and a useful counterweight to the rising militancy among the Sunni Muslims, Ankara even officially sponsors some Alevi festivals (see **Festivals, Ceremonies, & Calendar**).

Attention must be also given to Nusayrism, the branch of Alevism that was formed by the introduction of Arabian values into the practice of the Cult of Angels when it was introduced into the Syrian coastal regions by immigrating Kurds. Since Nusayrism is now followed by peoples who do not consider themselves to be ethnic Kurds, a brief observation of its tenets is all that is given here. Instead of Ali, Nusayrism takes Salmân to be the most important avatar of the Spirit after the Lord God. Salmân was a Persian companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Other Islamic figures fill in the Second Epoch (the most important earthly one) of the universal life, as they do in Alevism. The dates of the major annual celebrations of the Nusayris closely parallel those of the Yezidis, with New Ruz (March 21), Mithrâkân (called *Mihrajân* by the Nusayris, October 6–13), the Feast of Yezid (December 25) all being celebrated. The fourth celebration, observed on the occasion of the Tiragân by the Yezidis in late July, is replaced by *Sada* among the Nusayris, and is held in January about the time of the Christian feast of Epiphany.

The marked difference between Nusayrism and Alevism, and in fact the rest of the Cult of Angels, is not in their theology but in their sociology, particularly their treatment of women. In a very un-Kurdish fashion, but on par with other Semitic religions, women are held in a very low station by the Nusayris. They actually believe women, like objects and animals, lack souls, and that the soul of a sinful man may reincarnate into a woman after his death, so that he may spend one life span in the purgatory of a woman’s soulless body. In fact, while retaining Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, on the list of the major avatars of the Spirit, Nusayris turn the name into *Fâtîm*, a masculine form of Fatima’s name. They believe her to have been a man, manifesting himself as a woman only to give birth to Ali’s sons and imams, Hasan and Husayn. This is a clear challenge to the high status that women enjoy in virtually all other branches of the Cult of Angels, belief in which requires the presence of one female Major Avatar in

every stage of reincarnations of the Spirit, as set forth in [Table 6](#) (see also [Status of Women & Family Life](#)).

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Yezidism. The followers of the Yezidi religion, who have variously referred to themselves also as the Yazidi, Yazdâni, Izadi, and Dasna'i, have often been pejoratively referred to by outsiders as "devil worshippers." They constitute less than 5% of the Kurdish population. At present they live in fragmented pockets, primarily in northwest and northeast Syria, the Caucasus, southeast Turkey, in the Jabal Sanjâr highlands on the Iraqi-Syrian border, and regions north of the Iraqi city of Mosul.

As a branch of the Cult of Angels, Yezidism places a special emphasis on the angels. The name *Yezidi* is derived from the Old and Middle Iranian term *yazata* or *yezad*, for "angel," rendering it to mean "angelicans." Among these angels, the Yezidis include also Lucifer, who is referred to as *Malak Tâwus* ("Peacock Angel"). Far from being the prince of darkness and evil, Lucifer is of the same nature as other archangels, albeit with far more authority and power over worldly affairs. In fact, it is Malak Tâwus who creates the material world using the dismembered pieces of the original cosmic egg, or pearl, in which the Spirit once resided.

Despite the publication of (reportedly) all major Yezidi religious scriptures, and the availability of their translations, the most basic questions regarding the Yezidi cosmogony are left to speculation. For example, it is left to deductive reasoning to figure out in which epoch of the universal life Lucifer belongs, or what his exact station is. He naturally cannot be the same as the Universal Spirit, as the Spirit does not enter into the act of creation. In Yârsânism and Alevism it is Khâwandagâr, the "Lord God," who as the first avatar of the Spirit undertakes the task of *Sâjnâri*—world genesis. It is tempting to conclude that Lucifer replaces Khâwandagâr himself in the Yezidi cosmogony. Two Yezidi holy scriptures, *Jilwa* and *Mes'haf*, both discussed later, substantiate this conclusion. The following translations of these texts are adopted almost entirely from Guest (1987). *Jilwa* reads, "Malak Tâwus existed before all creatures," and "I (Malak Tâwus) was, and am now, and will continue unto eternity, ruling over all creatures....Neither is there any place void of me where I am not present....Every Epoch has an Avatar, and this by my counsel. Every generation changes with the Chief of

this world, so that each one of the chiefs in his turn and cycle fulfills his charge. The other angels may not interfere in my deeds and work: Whatsoever I determine, that is.” The implied attributes are all those of Khâwandagâr in Yârsânism and Alevism. Mes’haf asserts, “In the beginning God [which must mean the Universal Spirit] created the White Pearl out of his most precious Essence; and He created a bird named *Anfar*. And he placed the pearl upon its back, and dwelt thereon forty thousand years. On the first day [of Creation], Sunday, He created an angel named ‘Azâzil, which is Malak Tâwus, the chief of all...” Mes’haf goes on to name six other angels, each created in the following days of this first week of creation in the First Epoch. The names of these angels closely match those of Yârsânism and Alevism, as given in [Table 6](#). The problem is that there are *seven* rather than six avatars, leaving out, therefore, the Spirit himself from the world affairs. This is, however, the result of the later corruption of the original cosmogony, perhaps under Judeo-Christian influence. The rest of the opening chapter of the Mes’haf provides a version of human origin close to the Judeo-Christian story of Adam and Eve, and their interaction with Satan, even though Satan, here Lucifer, serves them only as an honest councillor and educator. Thereafter, he is left in charge of all creatures of the world.

The real story of the First Epoch however surfaces rather inconspicuously, in a single sentence at the end of the Mes’haf’s first chapter. As it turns out, the sentence is very much in agreement with the basic tenets of the Cult of Angels. It reads, “From his essence and light He created six Avatars, whose creation was as one lighteth a lamp from another lamp.” It is then safe to assume that the original Yezidi belief was that Lucifer was the primary avatar of the Universal Spirit in the First Epoch, and the rest of the cosmogony of the Cult of Angels remains more or less intact. Lucifer himself, in the form of Malak Tawus, “Peacock Angel,” is represented by a sculptured bronze bird. This icon, called *Anzal*, “the Ancient One,” is presented to worshippers annually at the major *Jam* at Lâlîsh.

Lâlîsh and its environs are also the burial site of Shaykh Adi, the most important personage of the Yezidi religion. Adi’s role in Yezidism is similar to those played by Sahâk in Yârsânism and Ali in Alevism. To the Yezidis, Shaykh Adi is the most important avatar of the Universal Spirit of the epochs following the First Epoch. Adi being a primary avatar, he is therefore a reincarnation of Malak Tawus himself. In its modern, garbled form, Adi is

assigned a founding role in Yezidism, and interestingly is believed to have lived at about the same time in history as Sultan Sahâk is believed by the modern Yârsâns, i.e., sometime in the 12–13th centuries. (This is about the same time that Bektâsh of Alevism is believed to have lived and founded that branch of the Cult.) Both Adi and Sahâk are believed to have lived well in excess of a century.

In addition to the main sculptured bird icon Anzal, there are six other similar relics of the Peacock Angel. These are called the *sanjaqs*, meaning “dioceses” (of the Yezidi community), and each is assigned to a different diocese of Yezidi concentration. Each year these are brought forth for worship to the dioceses of Syria, Zozan (i.e., Sasoon/Sasun or western and northern Kurdistan in Anatolia), Sanjâr, Shaykhân (of the Greater Zâb basin), Tabriz (Azerbaijan), and Musquf (Moscow, i.e., ex-Soviet Caucasus). The *sanjaqs* of Tabriz and Musquf no longer circulate, since there are not many Yezidis left in Azerbaijan, and the anti-religious Soviet government did not permit the icon to enter the bustling Yezidi community of the Caucasus.

Like other branches of the Cult of Angels, Yezidism lacks a holy book of divine origin. There are however many sacred works that contain the body of their beliefs. There is a very short volume (about 500 words) of Arabic-language hymns, ascribed to Shaykh Adi himself and named *Jilwa*, or “Revelation.” Another, more detailed book is the *Mes’haf i Resh*, “the Black Book” in Kurdish, which has been credited to Adi’s son, Shaykh Hasan ibn Adi (b. ca. AD 1195), a great-grandnephew of Adi.

Mes’haf is the most informative of the Yezidi scriptures, as it contains the body of the religion’s cosmogony, catechesis, eschatology, and liturgy, despite many contradictions and vagaries (far more than in the works of the Yârsâns). The Mes’haf may in fact date back to the 13th century. Mes’haf was written in an old form of Kurmânji Kurdish. Kurmânji in the 13th century was primarily restricted to its stronghold in the ultra-rugged Hakkâri highlands (see **Kurmânji**). But Hakkâri is in fact exactly where the most ardent followers of Adi and Hasan arose. Adi himself, despite the Yezidi’s belief that he was born in Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, came to be called *Adi al-Hakkâri* (“Adi of Hakkâri”).

Of the Yezidis’ four major annual celebrations (see **Festivals, Ceremonies, & Calendar**), two are of special interest here, the Jam and the

feast of Yezid.

The most important Yezidi feast is the seven-day-long feast of *Jam*, when the bird icon of Anzal is presented to the worshippers. It occurs between the 6th and 13th of October, which is obligatory to all believers to attend, and is held at Lâlish, north of Mosul, the burial site of Adi and other important Yezidi holy figures, including Hasan. It coincides with the great ancient Aryan feast of *Mithrâkân* (Zoroastrian Mihragân, Nusayri Mihrajân; see **Alevism**), held customarily around the middle of October. Ancient Mithrâkân celebrated the act of world creation by the sun god Mithras, who killing the bull of heaven, used its dismembered body to create the material world. On the occasion of the feast at Lâlish, riding men pretend to capture a bull, with which they then circumambulate the Lâlish shrine of *Shams al-Din* (the “Sun of the Faith”), before sacrificing the bull and distributing its flesh to the pilgrims.

Yezid, a puzzling personage, is venerated by the Yezidis in a somewhat confused fashion. Yezid is credited with founding Yezidism (the religion, obviously, shares his name), or to have been the most important avatar of the Spirit after Malak Tâwus (some even claiming he is the same as Malak Tâwus). He is occasionally identified by the Yezidis as the Umayyad caliph, Yazid ibn Mu’awiyya (r. AD 680–683), the archvillain to Shi‘ite Muslims. This faulty identification is encouraged by the Syrian and Iraqi governments (who hope thus to detach the Yezidis from other Kurds, and to connect them instead with the Umayyads, hence the Arabs). It has also prompted the leading Yezidi family, the chols, to adopt Arabic costumes and Umayyad caliphal names. Yet, far from being the ‘Umayyad caliph, the name is certainly derived from *yezad*, “angel,” and judging by its importance, he must be *the* angel of the Yezidis. This comical confusion, which permeates the Yezidi leadership to the extent that they doubt their own ethnic identity, is not unexpected, given the intensity of their persecution in the past, and the destruction of whatever religious and historical literature Yezidism may have had in the past, in addition to the little that remains today.

Is it possible that Malak Tâwus, who created the material world in Yezidi cosmogony by utilizing a piece of the original cosmic egg or pearl that he had dismembered earlier, originally represented Mithras in early Yezidism, and only later Lucifer? The second most important Yezidi celebration points toward this possibility. It is held between middle and late December and

commemorates the birth of Yezid. His birthday at or near the winter solstice, links him to Mithras. (Mithraism did after all expand into the Roman Empire from this general geographical area in the course of the first century BC, and Mithras' mythical birth was celebrated on December 25 as already has been discussed.) The celebration parallels in importance the major Jam ceremony in October. It is commemorated with three days of fasting before the jubilees.

In the Yezidi version of world creation, birds play a central role in all major events—too numerous in fact to permit summary here. The reverence of the Yezidis for divine manifestations in the form of a bird, the Peacock Angel, and the sacredness of roosters are just two better-known examples. What is fascinating, but less known, is that within 30 miles of the shrines of Lâlish are the Shanidar-Zawi Chami archaeological sites of central Kurdistan, where the archaeologist Solecki has unearthed the remains of shrines and large bird wings, particularly those of the great bustards, dated to 10,800±300 years ago. The remains are indicative of a religious ritual that involved birds and employed their wings, possibly as part of the priestly costume (Solecki 1977).

The representation of bird wings on gods was later to become common in Mesopotamian art, and particularly in the royal rock carvings of the Assyrians, whose capital Nineveh can literally be seen on the horizon from Lâlish. The artistic combination of wings and non-flying beings like humans (to form gods), lions (to form sphinxes), bulls (to form royal symbols), and horses (to form the Pegasus), as well as wing-like adornments to priestly costumes, are common in many cultures, but the representation of the supreme deity as a full-fledged bird is peculiarly Yezidi. The evidence of sacrificial rites practiced at ancient Zawi Chami may substantiate an indigenous precursor to modern Yezidi practice.

The bird icon of Lâlish has always been readily identified, as the name implies, as a peacock. However, there are no peacocks native to Kurdistan or this part of Asia. In light of the discoveries at Zawi Chami, the great bustard is a much more likely the bird of the Yezidi icon. The great bustard (Kurdish *shawât*) is native to Kurdistan (see **Flora & Fauna**). It too possesses a colorful tail, similar to that of a turkey (similar to, though much smaller than, that of a peacock, which is seen on the icon). The great bustard far

more logically suits the archaic tradition of the Yezidis than does the peacock, a native bird of India.

The practice of bowing three times before the rising sun and chanting hymns for the occasion is practiced by the Yezidis, as among the traditional Alevis (Nikitine 1956). The Yezidis also practice the rite of embracing the “very body of the sun,” by kissing its beams as they first fall on the trunks of the trees at the dawn (Kamurân Ali Badir-Khân 1934).

Another Alevi hallmark, the representation of the deity in the shape of a sword or dagger stuck into the ground, is also found among the Yezidis, albeit not for worship but to take oaths upon it (Alexander 1928, Bellino 1816).

In addition to an entrenched aristocracy, the social class system of the Yezidis shows interesting similarities to the rigid social stratification of the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire. Zoroastrian priests forbade anyone who did not belong to the priestly or princely class to gain literacy, and traditionally Yezidism barred such luxury altogether. (Some Yarsans also believe that this should be so, and also practice it.) In fact, it has been asserted that until the beginning of this century only one man among the Yezidis, the custodian of the *Jilwa*, knew how to read (Guest 1987, 33). This ban is largely gone now, although through force of habit the Yezidi commoners are still not keen on literacy.

Interestingly, the wealthier Yezidi shaykhs and mullahs wear Arab bedouin clothes and headdress, speak both Arabic and Kurdish, and usually have Arabic names. The poorer Yezidi social and religious leaders, on the other hand, have Kurdish names, speak only Kurdish, and wear Kurdish traditional clothes and headgear (Lescot 1938).

Leadership of the Yezidi community has traditionally rested with one of the old Kurdish princely houses, the Chols, who took over in the 17th century. They replaced the line of rulers who claimed descent from Shaykh Hasan, the author of *Mes'haf*. They are supported financially and otherwise by every Yezidi. The priestly duties reside, as in Yârsânism, with the members of the seven hereditary priestly houses, which include the Chols.

The relative smallness of the current Yezidi community can be misleading. At the time of Saladin's conquest of Antioch, the Yezidis were dominant in the neighboring valleys in the Amanus coastal mountains, and by the 13th and 14th centuries Yezidis had expanded their domains by converting many

Muslims and Christians to their faith, from Antioch to Urmiâ, and from Sivâs to Kirkuk. They also mustered a good deal of political and military power. In this period, the emirs of the Jazira region (upper Mesopotamia) were Yezidis, as was one of the emirs of Damascus. A Yezidi preacher, Zayn al-Din Yusuf, established Yezidi communities of converts in Damascus and Cairo, where he died in 1297. His imposing tomb in Cairo remains to this day. Of 30 major tribal confederacies enumerated by the Kurdish historian Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi in *Sharafnâma* (1596), he contends seven were fully Yezidi in times past. Among these tribes was the historic and populous Buhtâns (the *Bokhtanoi* of Herodotus).

An early Muslim encyclopedist, Shahâb al-Din Fadlullâh al-'Umari, declares as Yezidi in AD 1338 also the Dunbuli/Dumbuli. This reference carries a very important piece of information, which can be the only known reference to the Cult of Angels before its fragmentation into its present state and the loss of its common name. Since the Dunbuli were a well-known branch of the Alevi Daylamites, and since the reporting by al-'Umari is normally astute, the declaration of this tribe as Yezidi may indicate that at the time the appellation *Yazidi* ("angelicans") was that of the Cult of Angels in general. (The historical designation *Yazdâni* here for the Cult of Angels has been used to avoid confusion with the modern Yezidism.)

There have been persistent attempts by their Muslim and Christian neighbors to convert the Yezidis, peacefully or otherwise. The Ottoman government and military schools recruited many Yezidis, who were then converted to Sunni Islam, while in the mountains the Yezidis maintained their faith. A petition submitted in 1872 to the Ottoman authorities to exempt the Yezidis from military service has become the *locus classicus* on the subject of Yezidi religious codes and beliefs (for the English translation of the text, see Driver 1921–23).

Failing peaceful conversion, the Ottomans carried out massacres against the Yezidis in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries. The massacres recurred in Ottoman domains in the middle of the 19th century, resulting in a great migration of Ottoman Yezidis into the Russian territories in the Caucasus. Twenty major massacres between 1640 and 1910 were counted by Lescot (see **Deportations & Forced Resettlements**).

Many Yezidis escaped into the forbidding mountain areas, but others converted, at least nominally, to Sunni Islam. The Ottoman Land

Registration Law of 1859 particularly pressed for conversion by refusing to honor ownership claims of Yezidis. Many Yezidi shaykhs, who were the primary property owners, maintained their lands and property by converting. The Yezidi leaders whose holdings were in the inaccessible higher mountains were spared the need for conversion, and so were the landless sharecroppers or herders. Before 1858, the Yezidis in the Antioch-Amanus region on the Mediterranean littoral numbered 200,000, constituting the majority of the inhabitants. In 1938, Lescot counted only 60,000—a small minority.

Even today the Yezidis are still subject to great pressure for conversion. There is now also a movement to strip the Yezidis of their Kurdish identity by either declaring them an independent ethnic group apart from the Kurds or by attaching them to the Arabs. Hence, the Yezidis are now called “Umayyad Arabs” by the governments of Iraq and Syria, capitalizing on the aforementioned confusion that exists among the Yezidis with respect to the irrelevant Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu’awiyya.

Most Yezidis are now in Syria, in the Jazira region and the Jabal Sanjâr heights, and in the Afrin region northwest of Aleppo. The next largest population of Yezidis is found in the Caucasus, where up to half the Kurds are followers of Yezidism. In Iraq, where the holiest Yezidi shrines of Lâlîsh are located, they are found in a band from eastern Jabal Sanjâr toward Dohuk and to Lâlîsh, northeast of Mosul. There used to be a large number of Yezidis in Anatolia, prior to the massacres of the last century. Those who now live within the borders of Turkey are thinly spread from Mardin to Siirt, and from Antioch and Antep to Urfâ. There are also a relatively small number of Yezidis in Iran, particularly between the towns of Quchân and Dughâ’i in the Khurâsâni enclave, and in Azerbaijan province.

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SUFI MYSTIC ORDERS

An overwhelming majority of Muslim and non-Muslim Kurds are followers of one of many mystic Sufi orders (or *tariqa*). The bonds of the Muslim Kurds, for example, to different Sufi orders have traditionally been stronger than to orthodox Muslim practices. Sufi rituals in Kurdistan, led by Sufi masters, or *shaykhs*, contain so many clearly non-Islamic rites and practices that an objective observer would not consider them Islamic in the orthodox sense.

The Sufi shaykhs train deputies (*khalifa*), who represent and supervise the followers of various districts in the name of the shaykh, collecting allegiance, and dues, for the shaykh. Anyone may follow a shaykh, but to actually join the order of a specific shaykh, he/she must go through a process of initiation. These members (*murids*) then participate in many rituals, including the Sufi dances, chants, and prayers. When necessary they will go into combat for their shaykhs. Shaykh Ubaydullâh, Shaykh Sa'id, Shaykh Ahmad Bârzâni, and Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji, among others, were

Sufi masters who asked for and received armed support from their murids in their political adventures (see **Early Modern** and **Modern History**).

The close shaykh-murid relationship is also an excellent vote-gathering mechanism for modern democratic elections. As such, in Turkey at least, the shaykhs curry favor with various political parties by delivering their followers' votes (van Bruinessen 1991).

Three of the stormiest and most controversial early movements within Sufism were led by Husayn ibn Mansur Hallâj (crucified AD 922), 'Ain al-Qudât Hamadâni (crucified AD 1131), and Shahâb al-Din Suhrawardi (crucified AD 1191). They all preached ideas antithetical to the basic tenets of established Islam, and in astonishing conformity with the Cult of Angels. Hallâj, for example, claimed himself to be an avatar of the divinity, by which he proclaimed in his famous formula, *anâ'l haqq*, Arabic for "I am the Haq [the Spirit]," out of the belief in the unity of creation, and that all creatures are ultimately the manifestations of the same original Universal Spirit. He thus also declared Lucifer to have been redeemed and elevated to the highest universal station, as in Yezidism. He was subjected to exquisite tortures before being crucified in Baghdad. At present there is a shrine dedicated to Hallâj in the sacred Yezidi religious center and shrine complex at Lâlish, next to the tomb of Shaykh Adi.

Hamadâni's ideas revolved around the "unity of existence"; that is, like Hallâj, he believed that all creations are manifestations of the original, Universal Spirit. The Spirit is also aloof from events in this world, as the Cult of Angels believes the Spirit to have remained aloof after his original—and final—reincarnation into Lord God, the creator of the material world. His idea of successive reincarnation, and the redemption of Lucifer, added to his other non-Islamic preachings, qualified him for burning on a cross by the Muslim authorities when he was 33.

The same general ideas of Hallâj and Hamadâni are echoed in the work of Suhrawardi. Suhrawardi's Gnostic teachings under the rubric of the School of *Ishrâq*, "illumination," bear so much influence from the Cult of Angels that it is rather an extension of that religion (albeit with strong Hellenistic and Mesopotamian influences) than an Islamic Sufi movement. There exists a hymn by Suhrawardi, entitled *Al-Hurakhsh al-Kabir*, "The Great Sun [Deity]," which is to be made daily to the rising sun, asking for a personal book at the end. Echoes of the daily Cult prayer to the rising sun can

unmistakably be heard in this hymn. “Thou art the strong and victorious Hurakhsh,” writes Suhrawardi, “the vanquisher of the dark...the king of Angels...the proprietor of the incarnate lights of existence by the power of the obeyed God, the luminous matter...the learned scholarly philosopher, the greatest sacred son of the corporeal lights, the successor of the light of lights in the material world...I beg [him]...so that he might beg his God and God of gods...[to give me a boon]” (Mo’in 1962). His idea of the evolution of the worshipper’s soul into that of the Divinity, although not as pronounced as that in the Cult of Angels, finally cost him his life at the age of 38, at the instigation of the Muslim ulema and at the hands of another Kurd, the Ayyubid prince of Aleppo, in AD 1191. Like Hallâj, Hamadâni and Suhrawardi have been elevated to the station of minor avatars of the Universal Spirit in the Cult.

Hallâj was born in Baghdad from parents who had migrated from the Fârs region in the southern Zagros, where tens of Kurdish tribes were present at the time (see **Historical Migrations**). The influence of the Cult of Angels on Hallâj’s beliefs is, however, much easier to establish than his ethnic affiliation. This is not so, however, with Hâmadâni or Suhrawardi. Hamadâni was born and lived in Hamadân in southern Kurdistan. Suhrawardi was from the town of Shahraward (often misread as Suhraward), between Shahrazur (modern Sulaymâniya) and Zanjân, 15 miles east of Bijâr. Suhraward’s population, according to the medieval Islamic geographer Ibn Hawqal, was, like today, predominantly Kurdish.

About 300 years later another follower of the Cult of Angels popularized another controversial and stormy Sufi movement. Muhammad Nurbakhsh (the “bestower of light”) began his preaching in the middle of the 15th century. He was from Lahsâ (modern Ahsâ in oil-bearing eastern Saudi Arabia). Lahsâ had been a hotbed of extremist movements, like those of the Qarmatites in early Islamic times, whose socioeconomic ideologies, as well as their belief in the transmigration of the soul, connected them with the earlier Khurramiyya and Mazdakite movements of the Zagros region (see **Cult of Angels**). His connection with the Cult of Angels was revealed when he was given the mantle of *Hamadâni*. Like Hallâj and Suhrawardi, Nurbakhsh also claimed to be a minor avatar of the Universal Spirit, of the line that included the Prophet Muhammad in the Second Epoch of the universal life (see [Table 6](#)). He proclaimed himself a *Mahdi*, “deliverer,

messiah,” and further claimed his father’s name to have been *Abdullâh* (like that of the Prophet Muhammad). He named his son *Qasim*, so his own title would be *Abul-Qasim* (again, like that of the Prophet). He also claimed supernatural powers consistent with those expected of an avatar in the Cult of Angels, and blasphemy in Islam. For this and other unorthodox utterances, he was attacked by the mainstream Sunni and Shi‘ite ulema, among them, his contemporary Abdul Rahmân Jâmi. He did not, however, meet the dire end of his three predecessors, Hallâj, Hamadân, and Suhrawardi.

Arriving in Kurdistan, Nurbakhsh announced himself also to be the new caliph of all Muslims. The Kurds minted coins in his name (AD 1443). He was arrested by the Timurid king Shâhrukh and imprisoned in Herât, but was released in AD 1444. Nurbakhsh died of natural causes, perhaps only because his movement occurred at the height of the Cult of Angels’ offensive on Shi‘ite Islam in the 15th century, and existence of powerful Alevi dynasties in the area.

Nurbakhsh’s son and successor, Qâsim, was favored by the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Ismâ‘il I, and he and the Nurbakhshi movement increasingly came to reflect the religious evolution through which the Safavids were going in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries (see **Early Modern History**). The Nurbakhshi Sufi order has evolved from there into a bona fide Shi‘ite order, with its membership from among the Kurds being primarily Shi‘ite, but with most members being non-Kurds. There are also many Yârsân followers in this order.

The oldest Sunni Sufi order still followed by the Kurds is the Qâdiri, named after its founder, Abdul-Qâdir Gilâni (also Gaylâni, Kaylâni, or Khaylâni) (AD 1077–1166). Many important Kurdish religious families are presently, or are known in the past to have been, members of this order. The Qâdiri order has been in steady retreat since the start of the 19th century, under pressure from another Sufi order, the Naqshbandis.

The Tâlabâni tribe, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party, its leadership, and most people in the southern sectors of Iraqi Kurdistan and in eastern Kurdistan (in Iran) are Qâdiris. The order’s headquarters are in the sacred ancient town of Barzanja near Sulaymânia. Shaykh Mahmud, leader of many Kurdish uprisings against the British Mandate of Iraq, was also the leader of the Qâdiri Sufi house of Barzanji (see **Modern History**).

A more recent arrival into Kurdistan is the Sunni Naqshbandi order, founded by Bahâ al-Din Naqshband of Bukhârâ (AD 1317–1389) and introduced from central Asia, perhaps by the Turkic tribes and/or Turkic *Bakshis*, whence they were arriving in these parts of the Middle East since the 12th century (see **Historical Migrations**).

Today, the people in northern, and to some extent western, Kurdistan follow the Naqshbandi order, while central and eastern Kurdistan are still Qâdiri. The Bârzâni tribe is led by Naqshbandi Sufi masters, who exercise temporal, as much as spiritual, influence in their area. Until late in the last century, however, the Bârzânis and all other tribes and clans in these areas of Kurdistan were followers of the Qâdiri order. This and many other conversions to the Naqshbandi order were the direct result of the energy and fervor of one Mawlânâ Khâlid.

In 1811 Mawlânâ Khâlid (b. 1779), a Kurdish Naqshbandi shaykh (of the Jaf tribe) from Shahrazur (modern Sulaymânia) set out on a furious bout of proselytization by appointing a myriad of deputies across Kurdistan and beyond. These deputies then proceeded, after Khalid's death in 1827, to appoint their own deputies. In a short span of time, north central Kurdistan, along with its influential religious center of Nahri/Nehri, near Rawânduz, was lost by the Qâdiri order for good. The change has been so recent and abrupt that the most important Sufi religious family there still bears the name of Gaylâni or Khaylâni (after Abudl-Qâdir Gilâni). The Iraqi Kurdish Democratic Party and its Bârzâni leadership are thus of Naqshbandi Sufi affiliation.

Under President Özal's government (himself of a Naqshbandi family), the Naqshbandis have staged a comeback in Turkey after many decades of official banning and persecution, following Shaykh Sa'id's uprising of 1925 (see **Modern History**).

Sufi lodges (*khânaqâs*) pepper Kurdistan, and are much more common in fact than mosques or any other places of religious ritual (except, perhaps, for the sacred trees and ponds dedicated to Khidir) (see **Popular Culture**).

Non-Muslim Kurds also follow Sufi orders of their own, or any one of the Cult orders, which are at least nominally known to be Shi'ite Sufi orders (as, for example, are the Nurbakhshi and Ni'matullâhi orders). The Alevis in western and northern Kurdistan are predominantly of the Bektâshi/Baktâshi order. The order traditionally claimed to be a Sunni Muslim order, since

none else was permitted under the Ottomans. But the followers of this order remained almost exclusively Alevi, with adherents among Kurds and non-Kurds all the way to Bulgaria, Albania, and Bosnia. The influence of this order on the life of the Alevi Kurds is profound. One of the most important festivals observed by the Alevi Kurds is that of Hâji Bektâsh, the founder of the Bektâshi Sufi order and one of the most important of the primary avatars of the Spirit in Alevism. While long suppressed, the Turkish government, within whose domain the bulk of the Bektâshis live, now allows, and sometimes officially sponsors, these Alevi feasts. A reason may be the influence of Turkish President Özal. Even though Özal's own family is of Naqshbandi background, they are natives of the largely Kurdish city of Malâtya, where both Naqshbandi and Bektâshi orders are present.

The Bektâshis are more commonly, and indirectly, known in the West through their "Whirling Dervishes," whose white costumes and conical white hats are familiar to most Westerners interested in the Asian religions and practices. The most important center of the Bektâshis is the site of the shrine of the great Sufi master and poet, Mevlânâ (more accurately, Mawlânâ Jalâl al-Din Balkhi, also known as Al-Rumi), in the city of Konya, near the southern fringes of the central Anatolian Kurdish enclave.

The Qâdiri order also practices elaborate dances and plays musical instruments alongside chants, not dissimilarly from the Bektâshi Whirling Dervishes. The Naqshbandis, on the other hand, have traditionally been far more given to meditations and chants to reach the state of ecstasy that is the hallmark of all Sufi orders. The Bektâshis are famous for their dance and music, and use the chants as the supplements to these.

A rather peculiar order, the Rafâ'is, should also be mentioned, as they are in a sense a mystic order. Their strong belief in the ability of the soul to transcend the physical body at the will of any well-trained mind provides for ceremonies that include walking barefoot on hot coal, swallowing swords, and driving sharp objects through one's own flesh, and in all cases, seemingly coming out unharmed.

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JUDAISM

The history of Judaism in Kurdistan is ancient. The Talmud holds that Jewish deportees were settled in Kurdistan 2800 years ago by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 BC). As indicated in the Talmud, the Jews eventually were given permission by the rabbinic authorities to convert local Kurds. They were exceptionally successful in their endeavor. The illustrious Kurdish royal house of Adiabene, with Arbil as its capital, was converted to Judaism in the course of the 1st century BC, along with, it appears, a large number of Kurdish citizens in the kingdom (see Irbil/Arbil in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*). The name of the Kurdish king *Monobazes* (related etymologically

to the name of the ancient Mannaeans), his queen *Helena*, and his son and successor *Izates* (derived from *yazata*, “angel”), are preserved as the first proselytes of this royal house (Ginzberg 1968, VI.412). But this is chronologically untenable as Monobazes’ effective rule began only in AD 18. In fact during the Roman conquest of Judea and Samaria (68–67 BC), it was only Kurdish Adiabene that sent provisions and troops to the rescue of the besieged Galilee (Grayzel 1968, 163)—an inexplicable act if Adiabene was not already Jewish (see **Classical History**). Many modern Jewish historians like Kahle (1959), who believes Adiabene was Jewish by the middle of the 1st century BC, and Neusner (1986), who goes for the middle of the 1st century AD, have tried unsuccessfully to reconcile this chronological discrepancy. All agree that by the beginning of the 2nd century AD, at any rate, Judaism was firmly established in central Kurdistan.

Like many other Jewish communities, Christianity found Adiabene a fertile ground for conversion in the course of 4th and 5th centuries. Despite this, Jews remained a populous group in Kurdistan until the middle of the present century and the creation of the state of Israel. At home and in the synagogues, Kurdish Jews speak a form of ancient Aramaic called *Suriyâni* (i.e., “Assyrian”), and in commerce and the larger society they speak Kurdish. Many aspects of Kurdish and Jewish life and culture have become so intertwined that some of the most popular folk stories accounting for Kurdish ethnic origins connect them with the Jews. Some maintain that the Kurds sprang from one of the lost tribes of Israel, while others assert that the Kurds emerged through an episode involving King Solomon and the genies under his command (see **Folklore & Folk Tales**).

The relative freedom of Kurdish women among the Kurdish Jews led in the 17th century to the ordination of the first woman rabbi, Rabbi Asenath Bârzâni, the daughter of the illustrious Rabbi Samuel Bârzâni (d. ca. 1630), who founded many Judaic schools and seminaries in Kurdistan. For her was coined the term *tanna’ith*, the feminine form for a Talmudic scholar. Eventually, Mâmâ (“Lady”) Asenath became the head of the prestigious Judaic academy at Mosul (Mann 1932).

The tombs of Biblical prophets like Nahum in Alikush, Jonah in Nabi Yunis (ancient Nineveh), Daniel in Kirkuk, Habakkuk in Tuisirkân, and Queen Esther and Mordechai in Hamadân, and several caves reportedly

visited by Elijah are among the most important Jewish shrines in Kurdistan and are venerated by all Jews today.

The Alliance Israélite Universelle opened schools and many other facilities in Kurdistan for education and fostered progress among the Jewish Kurds as early as 1906 (Cuenca 1960). Non-Jewish Kurds also benefitted vastly, since children were accepted into these schools regardless of their religious affiliation. A new class of educated and well-trained citizens was being founded in Kurdistan. Operations of the Alliance continued until soon after the creation of Israel.

Many Kurdish Jews have recently emigrated to Israel. However, they live in their own neighborhoods in Israel and still celebrate Kurdish life and culture, including Kurdish festivals, costumes, and music in some of its most original forms.

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CHRISTIANITY

The early history of Christianity in Kurdistan closely parallels that of the rest of Anatolia and Mesopotamia. By the early 5th century the Kurdish

royal house of Adiabene had converted from Judaism to Christianity. The extensive ecclesiastical archives kept at their capital of Arbela (modern Arbil), are valuable primary sources for the history of central Kurdistan, from the middle of the Parthian era (ca. 1st century AD). Kurdish Christians, like their Jewish predecessors, used Aramaic for their records and archives and as the ecclesiastical language.

The persecution of the Christians in the Persian Sasanian Empire extended to Kurdistan as well. It was only after the conversion of the Empire's Christians to the eastern Nestorian church (from St. Nestorius, d. AD 440) and their break with Rome and Constantinople in the 6th century that they were given a measure of safety. At the time of the advent of Islam in the 7th century, central Kurdistan was predominantly Christian.

Anatolian Kurds, on the other hand, responded in two distinct manners to this new religion. The westernmost Kurds, i.e., those of Pontus and the western regions of Cappadocia and Cilicia in central and northern Anatolia, converted to Christianity before the 7th century. Their conversion, it turned out, was to cost them in the long run their ethnic identity. They were wholly Hellenized before the arrival of the Turkic nomads in Anatolia in the 12th century. The Kurds of eastern Anatolia, including eastern Cilicia and Cappadocia, and all those east of the Euphrates resisted conversion, and were punished for it by the Byzantines.

When in the 8th and 9th centuries the Byzantines deported and exiled the non-Christian populations from their Anatolian domain, Kurds suffered the most. The Cappadocian and Cilician Kurds were deported in toto (see **Deportations & Forced Resettlements**).

Christianity's effect on southern Kurdistan appears to have been marginal, but clear. The influence of Christian tenets on Yârsânism, which goes beyond the influences that would have been exerted via Islam, point to a direct exchange between the two religions.

With the waning and isolation of Christianity in Kurdistan and the Middle East following the expansion of Islam, the dwindling Christian Kurdish community began to renounce its Kurdish ethnic identity and forged a new one with its neighboring Semitic Christians. The Suriyâni (Nestorian) Christians of Mesopotamia and Kurdistan, who have recently adopted the ethnic name *Assyrian*, are a Neo-Aramaic-speaking amalgam of Kurds and Semitic peoples who have retained the old religion and language

of the Nestorian Church, and the court language of the old Kingdom of Adiabene. A large number of these Suriyâni Christians lived, until the onslaught of World War I, deep in mountainous northern Kurdistan, away from any ethnic or genetic influence of the Semitic Christians of lowland Mesopotamia. Their fair complexion, in marked contrast to that of their Semitic “brethren” in the Mosul region, also bears witness to their Kurdish origin. Yet they speak Neo-Aramaic and insist on a separate ethnic identity. In the matter of language, the Christians in Kurdistan share the use of Neo-Aramaic with the Kurdish Jews.

Not all Christian Kurds found it necessary to exchange their Kurdish identity for their faith. The medieval Muslim historian and commentator Mas‘udi reports Kurds who were Christians in the 10th century. In 1272 Marco Polo wrote, “In the mountainous parts [of Mosul] there is a race of people named Kurds, some of whom are Christians of the Nestorian and Jacobite sects, and others Muhammadan” (*Travels*, I.vi). These are in fact Christian Kurds, as Polo earlier in his work distinguishes the non-Kurdish Christian population of the region.

There are records of missionary conversion of the Kurds to Christianity as early as the 15th century, a notable example being Father Subhalemaran (Nikitine 1956, 231). Many other missionaries have been sent from Europe and later America into Kurdistan since that time, with some of them producing the earliest studies of Kurdish language and culture, including dictionaries (see **Early Modern History**). Religious changes have almost always entailed language change (see **Classical History** and **Historical Migrations**). Most Kurds who converted to Christianity eventually switched to Armenian and Neo-Aramaic, and were thus counted among these ethnic groups. A good example of this process was observed at the end of the World War I.

At the time of the fall of the Ottoman Empire a considerable number of Christians who spoke only Kurdish left the area of western and northern Kurdistan for the French Mandate of Syria. There, having been told they “must be Armenian” if they were Christian, they were counted and eventually assimilated into the immigrant Armenian community of Syria and Lebanon.

Some non-Christian Kurds of Anatolia and even central Kurdistan still bless their bread dough by pressing the sign of the cross on it while letting it

rise. They also make pilgrimage to the old abandoned or functioning churches of the Armenian and Assyrian Christians. This may well be a cultural tradition left with the Kurds through long association with Christian neighbors, or very possibly it stems from the time that many Kurds themselves were Christians.

Today there remain an uncertain number of Kurdish Christians, particularly in the districts of Hakkâri in north-central Kurdistan, Tur Abdin in western Kurdistan, and among the Milân and Barâz tribal confederacies in western Kurdistan in Turkey and Syria. In 1908 Sykes reports at least 500 Kurdish Christian families of the Piniânishli tribe in the Hakkâri district, whose leaders insisted they were an ancient community converted before the advent of Islam. Of the Hawerka tribe of Tur Abdin 900 families are listed as Christian, along with 700 more families from various other tribes in this region. Sykes is, however, silent on the number of Milân Christians. Despite this, the question remains whether these and others are the modern descendants of the larger and more ancient Kurdish Christian community, or whether they are relatively recent converts by Christian Armenians, Assyrians, and Western Christian missionaries. Many centers for these recent proselytes were set up during the 19th and early 20th centuries in and around Bitlis, Urfâ, Mosul, Urmiâ and Salmâs, to name a few. Likely, the Kurdish Christian population is an even mix of the ancient population and modern converts.

An educated guess for the total number of Christian Kurds (excluding the Assyrians, whose claim to a separate ethnic identity must be honored) would place them in the range of tens of thousands, most of them living in Turkey.

There is a renewed interest among the active Christian organizations in Europe, but particularly in the United States, to carry missionary work to Kurdistan. In fact, one of the first languages of the East into which the post-Renaissance Europeans translated the Gospel was Kurdish. New editions and new translations of the New Testament into North Kurmânji (Bâhdinâni) are being attempted now. These translations and endeavors are targeted towards the Kurds in Turkey, as has been the case since the time of Father Subhalemaran. The reason has been the faulty assumption of these missionary organizations that the Kurds of northern and western Kurdistan in Anatolia, having been under Byzantine rule prior to Muslim occupation,

were mostly or all Christians, but that the other Kurds were not. The missionaries probably would find more fertile ground in central and part of southern Kurdistan, on the territories of the former Christian Kurdish kingdoms of Adiabene and Karkhu b't Salukh (Kirkuk), but not in northern and western Kurdistan, whose non-Christian inclinations made the Byzantines deport the populace in earlier times.

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BABISM & BAHA'ISM

Bâbism was formed in Persia in 1844 by Mirzâ Ali Muhammad (1819–1850), the *Bâb*, or "the portal" (to the Deity). *Bâb*, or *Bâbâ*, standing for "avatar," is of course the title by which the Cult of Angels refers to the major reincarnations of the *Haq*, or the Universal Spirit. A native of Shirâz in Persia, Bâb became a follower of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsâ'i, who had settled in Kirmân in southeast Persia from Ahsâ. Ahsâ (the medieval Lahsâ, the eastern coastal regions of modern Saudi Arabia) was a bastion of the socioreligious movement of Qarmatites, which was strongly influenced by the Cult of Angels, particularly the Mazdakite movement. (From Ahsâ also

came in the 15th century the mystic Muhammad Nurbakhsh, whose connection with the Cult of Angels has already been set forth in the section on **Sufi Mystic Orders**.)

Shaykh Ahmad, and hence the Cult of Angels, had a profound influence on Mirzâ Ali Muhammad Bâb. In fact, Shaykh Ahmad Ahsâ'i was in Kirmânshâh in southern Kurdistan, the ancient heartland of the Cult, when he announced the reincarnation of the Spirit in Bâb as his new avatar. This was on the occasion of the death of his own son Ali, when Shâykh Ahmad told his disciples: "Grieve not, O my friends, for I have offered up my son, my own Ali, as a sacrifice for the Ali whose advent we all await. To this end have I reared and prepared him" (Nabil-i A'zam 1932). Bâb was born in the same year, supposedly carrying the soul of the Shaykh's son as well as his name. Bâb was the bearer of the name and soul of the Shi'ite imam and the primary avatar of the Second Epoch, Ali. The later inclusion of *Muhammad* in his first name also brought Bâb to the exact station of the primary avatar in Alevism, *Alimuhammad* (see **Alevism**).

The Bâbis, particularly the Kurdish Bâbis, believed in the transmigration of the soul, as do followers of the Cult of Angels. They did not mourn the dead, as they believed the soul of a dead Bâbi, after spending a few days in a transitional stage, enters the body of another Bâbi, usually a newborn. The transmigrations were believed to have started long ago, particularly the souls of the religious leaders, which were supposed to have resided in the bodies of the Shi'ite saints and martyrs of earlier times. The Bâbis too were accused of engaging in communal sex, in the "candle blown out" ceremony (see **Cult of Angels**) and were persecuted in Persia with such severity that by comparison the savage repressions of the Yezidis by the Ottoman Empire seem relatively benign.

The involvement of the ethnic Kurds in Bâbism was relatively strong. One of the earliest major Bâbi communities was Kurdish, numbering about 5000 and inhabiting the area between Bâsh Qala and Qotur in Hakkâri in north-central Kurdistan on the Perso-Ottoman border. However, in July 1850, when the Persian Qajar king Nâsir al-Din ordered the execution of the Bâb in Tabriz, it was the Shiqâqi Kurdish and Armenian troops who carried out the order.

Bâbism soon evolved into the universalist Bahâ'ism under the direction of Mirzâ Husayn Ali, *Bahâ'u'llâh* ("the Glory of God"). For two years before

his proclamation of the new religion and his mission in April 1863, Bahâ'u'llâh lived in the Kurdish city of Sulaymânia (less than 30 miles from Barzanja, the legendary birthplace of the Cult of Angels), earning his livelihood by providing Muslim religious services to the local people under the pseudonym *Dervish Muhammad*. Many of the coins he gave to people as festival presents are still cherished for their healing power. In one of his books, *Iqân*, Bahâ'u'llâh paints a vivid and interesting picture of his retreat in the “wilderness” of Kurdistan.

A Kurdish Bahâ'i, Muhammad Zaki al-Kurdi, established the first Kurdish publishing house in 1920 in Cairo. He took over the publication of the first Kurdish newspaper/journal, *Kurdistan* (published first in Istanbul in 1898 without his involvement) after it moved to Cairo after the start of World War I. Some of the most important works of Bahâ'i literature, such as J.E. Esslemont's *Bahâ'ullâh and the New Era*, have been translated into the dialects of Sorâni (by Husein Jawdat) and Gurâni (anonymous).

Bahâ'ism has done much to distance itself from the militancy of Bâbism. In the form of a new world religion, it has also tried to shed itself of the Shi'ite Islamic and Cult of Angels (particularly, Yârsânist) influence so apparent in Bâbism. Minorsky preserved and translated in 1920 just one Bahâ'i polemical tract directed against the Yârsâns. Several paramount aspects of the Cult, however, remain apparent in modern Bahâ'ism: 1) universalism, that is the belief that other religions are an extension of a same original idea of faith, and that all are equally respectable; 2) the belief that all prophets and holy figures of other religions are manifestations of the same supreme Deity or Spirit, from Buddha and Zoroaster, to Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad; 3) the belief that the Word and, supposedly the soul, is conveyed to these prophets through an intermediary archangel(s); 4) the practice of a mandatory ritual communal gathering at *Mahfels*, similar to the ceremony of Jam in the Cult, but every 19th day; 5) social and class liberalism, and a high status of women, including their right to serve on high religious councils. The de facto female avatar of the Bâbi cycle of primary incarnations, Tâhira Qurratu'l Ayn, removed her veil in public in 1849 to “signal the equality of women with men as a basic principle of the new Bâbi religion” (see **Status of Women & Family Life**).

With its attention directed to the world level, little Bahâ'i proselytization has been conducted in Kurdistan—a naturally fertile ground for this new

religion that carries such fundamental affinities with Kurdish religious and social values and tradition. There are only a few thousand Kurdish Bahâ'is, spread over southern and central Kurdistan today. Of the number of Bâbis, if there are any left, even an educated guess is hazardous.

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