diplomatische akademie wien
Vienna School of International Studies
École des Hautes Études Internationales de Vienne

universität wien

MASTER THESIS

Titel der Master Thesis / Title of the Master's Thesis

„Religious Minorities in the Middle East: The Case of Iraqi Kurdistan“

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Advanced International Studies (M.A.I.S.)

Wien 2019 / Vienna 2019

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt Postgraduate programme code as it appears on the student record sheet:	A 992 940
Universitätslehrgang lt. Studienblatt Postgraduate programme as it appears on the student record sheet:	Internationale Studien / International Studies
Betreut von / Supervisor:	Professor Thomas Row

Abstract

This thesis examines the history, contemporary political conditions, and theological claims of religious minorities in the Middle East. It focuses on three minorities – Zoroastrians, Yezidis and Assyrian Christians – and on the specific case of Iraqi Kurdistan under the administration of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

The thesis starts by outlining the advantages of the imperial millet system for securing coexistence of religious groups under Ottoman rule. The replacement of that rule in the early 20th century by putative nation states was problematic for reasons going well beyond the supposed cartographic malpractice of Sykes-Picot. Among those problems: many tribal divisions track with religions, and religious identity is arguably more fundamental than any other identity of political consequence. Moreover, the minority religions that have survived in the Middle East are those that have cultivated themselves to be fundamental to their adherents' identity, and therefore closed off to outsiders. This survival strategy worked best under an imperial government that was willing to deal with minority groups as quasi states.

The repressions of the Saddam Hussein era were largely secular in intent; religious minorities as such were not generally targeted. However, the US invasion of 2003 unleashed a contest for supremacy that has been especially perilous for Christians and Yezidis. Iraqi Kurdistan, enjoying the partial protection of US military power since the first Gulf War, has been capable of providing a comparative safe haven to its minorities, though its Peshmerga could only help beat back, not prevent, the genocidal assault of ISIS.

The thesis proceeds to explore the history and theological importance of both Zoroastrianism, undergoing an apparent revival in the KRG, and Yezidism, and shows how both religions are constituents of the broader Kurdish identity. These connections constitute one reason that the KRG has a justified reputation for tolerance, but the tragic cases of Yezidi children born of ISIS rape shows the limits of secular-liberal tolerance, especially when confronting a minority religion that has long practiced rigid hermitage – what Emmanuel Sivan calls 'enclave culture', as a strategy for survival. In philosophical terms, the problem stems from the absolute ontological claims of religious faith, a source of conflict that can only be managed, not resolved.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Master-Thesis untersucht die Geschichte, die heutigen politischen Verhältnisse und die theologischen Ansprüche religiöser Minderheiten im Nahen Osten. Sie konzentriert sich auf drei dieser Minderheiten – Zoroastrier, Jesiden und Assyrische Christen – und auf den speziellen Fall des irakischen Kurdistans unter der Regionalregierung Kurdistans-Irak (KRG).

Die Master-Thesis skizziert zunächst die Vorteile des osmanischen Millet-Systems für die Koexistenz von Glaubensgemeinschaften unter osmanischer Herrschaft. Die Ablösung des Osmanischen Reichs zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts durch vermeintliche Nationalstaaten, war problematisch aus Gründen, die weit über die kartographischen Sünden von Sykes-Picot hinausgingen. Dazu zählen folgende Probleme: Viele Stammesunterschiede gehen mit Religionen einher und religiöse Identität ist wohl grundlegender als jegliche andere Identität von politischer Konsequenz. Darüber hinaus sind die im Nahen Osten überlebenden Minderheitsreligionen jene, für die Religion ein fundamentaler Bestandteil ihrer Identität ist und die daher für Außenstehende verschlossen sind. Diese Überlebensstrategie funktionierte bestens im osmanischen Reich, das bereit war mit Minderheiten als quasi-staatlichen Gruppierungen umzugehen.
Die Repressalien der Ära Saddam Husseins waren weitgehend sekulär ausgerichtet; religiöse Minderheiten wurden nicht geziehlt angegriffen. Die Invasion der USA von 2003 löste jedoch einen Kampf um die Vorherrschaft aus, der vor allem für Christen und Jesiden gefährlich war. Das irakische Kurdistan, das seit dem ersten Golfkrieg den teilweisen Schutz der US-Militärmacht genoss, war in der Lage, seinen Minderheiten einen vergleichsweise sicheren Hafen zu bieten. Trotzdem konnten seine Peschmergas den genozidalen Angriff von ISIS nicht verhindern, sondern nur zurückschlagen.

Die Master-Thesis untersucht weiter die Geschichte und theologische Bedeutung des Zoroastrismus, der offenbar unter der KRG eine Renaissance erlebt, sowie des Jesidentums, und zeigt auf, wie beide Religionen Teile einer umfassenden kurdischen Identität sind. Darin liegt ein Grund, dass die KRC einen berechtigten Ruf für Toleranz hat, auch wenn die tragischen Fälle von Jesiden Kindern, die auf Grund von Vergewaltigungen durch ISIS geboren wurden, die Grenzen von sekulär-liberaler Toleranz zeigt. Das ist besonders dann der Fall, wenn eine Glaubensgemeinschaft dieser Herausforderung gegenüber steht, deren Überlebensstrategie lange darin bestand hat, sich von der Umwelt abzukapseln – von Emmanual Sivan „enclave culture“ genannt. Philosophisch gesehen ergibt sich das Problem durch den ontologischen Anspruch religiösen Glaubens, eine Konfliktquelle, die nur gemeistert, nicht gelöst werden kann.

Contents

‘At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.’ - John Paul II

1. Introduction

The religious minorities of the Middle East have learned to be conservative. They have a natural preference for a stable status quo. Historically, the region's Jews, Christians, and Sabians have done best under sprawling empires such as the Abbasids, Fatimids, and Ottomans, who had the interest, and sometimes the capability, to keep their multiethnic empires from flying into violence, and beyond that were neither interested in nor necessarily capable of preventing the dhimmis from carrying on their traditions as they say fit.

There were, of course, times of war and disorder, including pogroms against minorities and repression by local warlords. However, the more peaceful state of affairs has prevailed often enough to spare substantial populations of minority religions. This fact forms the first principle of my thesis. Dig beneath the surface of the Middle East, and you find a kaleidoscope of splinter sects, semi-Christian or Semi-Muslim heretics, Gnostics, pagans, all variety of syncretists, and what remains of the also-rans of religious history. The survival of these pre-Islamic religions and practices stands in disarming contrast to the situation in Europe, where we take it for granted that pre-Christian pagan faiths are long dead, their traditions forgotten. In Europe, modern neo-pagans have very little to go on in reconstructing the religion of their ancestors – usually little more than a rough pantheon, a handful of local traditions said to be of pre-Christian origin, and maybe one or two contemporary accounts of dubious reliability. To the religious historian the Middle East is by comparison an embarrassment of riches, where the exotic cults and forgotten prophets one reads about in the history books survive – not quite fossilised in their ancient form, to be sure, but evolved as living traditions. The vulgar perception of the Middle East as a monolithic Islamic Other is wrong.

This historical pluralism is also rather interesting when set against the refrain that Islam is an especially extreme and intolerant religion. We are told that, unlike Christianity, it recognises no distinction between secular and religious power – between Mosque and State – and thus is incompatible with model of coexistence and religious freedom taught by liberal modernity. It is incompatible with 'Western values'. This assessment is not entirely wrong. Indeed, as Shadi Hamid explains in his book *Islamic Exceptionalism*, it is myopic and ultimately patronising to suppose that Muslims are just a little backwards, that with time the

Islamic world will inevitably liberalise and secularise just like the West. To do so is not only presumptuous, since it raises the particular cultural development of the West to an iron law of history, but it also refuses to take Islam seriously *as a religion*, to recognise that it is a comprehensive worldview of its own, that it makes substantive claims about metaphysical truth, about the nature of moral right and wrong, and about the proper ends of political society. The Muslim world's fraught encounter with the West in the 20th century derives from nothing less than the intrinsic tensions between the tenets of Islam and liberalism.[1]

There are, in any event, many ways to explain the exceptional persistence of religious pluralism in the Middle East. One reason may simply be that, whereas Christianity spread largely at the expense of various pagan beliefs, Islam was born into a world where Christian monotheism was already well established, which with its clearly defined doctrines and unitary administration could not be so easily dislodged or absorbed as the higgledy-piggledy world of paganism. Indeed, it is reasonable to say that, in general, the pre-Islamic religions of Middle East and north Africa – both Abrahamic and 'pagan' – were more mature and entrenched than the pre-Christian religious practices of Europe[2] especially once we move beyond the Roman world to the many heathenries of the barbarian north.

Furthermore, not only were the religions that Islam confronted more robust, the doctrines of Islam itself entail greater respect to its Abrahamic relatives. Throughout history Islamic polities have had a standing policy of granting rights and religious toleration to various groups deemed 'People of the Book'. Although Islam of course holds that Christianity and Judaism represent inferior and distorted accounts of the truth – it does not imply religious relativism – it does recognise them as a legitimate family relation and deserving of special protection beneath an Islamic umbrella. As the Quran says 'The believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the last day and do good –will have their reward with the lord. No fear for them nor will they grieve.'[3] The last of these – the Sabians – deserve a brief mention, for although they are placed along side other Peoples of the Book as a religious group that is to be tolerated by Muslims, it has always been somewhat unclear who exactly these Quranic 'Sabians' are to whom God has granted this honour. Western literature tends to associate them with the

[1] Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 9-28.
[2] Of course, before the rise of Islam, Christianity was in no sense a particularly *European* religion, but for our purposes we can treat Europe as roughly synonymous with Christendom, since it was the only substantial region of Christian political dominance throughout the middle ages.
[3] *The Quran* (2:62), tr. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

'gnostic' Mandaeans of southern Iraq,[4] but in fact several religions sects have claimed this identity over the centuries in order to secure toleration from Muslim rulers.[5]

All this is not to say that Islam has a 'liberal' attitude towards these groups. Even in its ideal form, the *dhimmi* system is absolutely discriminatory to non-Muslims. One could readily cast it as an abhorrent system of oppression and apartheid. But however unjust it might have been, it was undeniably effective. The situation of non-Muslims only became truly untenable with the collapse of this model in the 20th century and the political modernisation of the Middle East. Islam has a record of tolerance precisely because it has embraced an effective and decidedly *illiberal* model of coexistence.

At least that was the case until recently. The second principle is the fact that this Western perception is far closer to truth than it was a couple decades ago. Religious minorities are now threatened. Middle Eastern Christians are the most commonly cited victims of this trend – and rightly so since counted together they constitute easily the largest threatened religious minority in the region. So, for example – bearing in mind that reliable data is in very short supply - the number in Iraq has plummeted in recent years, probably by more than half.[6] Given Iraq's strong population growth, this means that the country has gone from about 8% Christian in the 1980s to 1-2% today. This trend is emblematic; peoples who have survived for millennia face imminent extinction in their native lands.

In the midst of this catastrophe, my third and final principle offers some grounds for hope. The Kurdistan region of Iraq – a region particularly rich in such groups – is under the KRG advertising itself as a tolerant haven where such minorities may survive. How sincere or, for that matter, capable Kurdistan's leaders are with regards to fulfilling that promise, and how that promise combines and conflicts with the Kurds' own national and ethnic aspirations, is something this thesis will explore.

This thesis on religious minorities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq focuses on three: Yezidis, Zoroastrians, and Assyrian Christians. The basic question I will be asking is this: why does is matter whether these groups survive as religions? This concern is not only

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[4] Paul Carus, "The Sabians," in *The Monist*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Oxford University Press: April, 1915), 294-297, accessed at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27900537.pdf?ab_segments=0%2Fdefault-2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=search%3A73cdac937621560b7b28c02442e4eaa3.

[5] Gerard Russell, *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 10.

[6] BBC News, "Christian Areas Hit by Baghdad Bombs," 25 December 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25514687.

humanitarian – the physical survival of individuals – but is also theological and philosophical. Beyond extermination, assimilation and the end of traditions are also threats, as is emigration that breaks integral ties between communities and their homeland. In other words, this thesis will argue that the survival of these religious minorities on their home soil is a positive good in itself, for reasons that conventional liberal discourse may be inadequate to explain. In order to properly explore this question and its context, it is necessary to cover a fairly wide range of themes, from the history and theology of the three religions, to their modern political relations with the KRG, to the moral and philosophical principles at stake in their continued survival.

2. The Imperial System: Blood or Soil?

The history of the Middle East is a succession of one empire after another, which is reflected in the messy distribution of its ethnicities. Ironically, the present religious and ethnic violence of the region can be blamed in part on the religious tolerance of various Islamic empires. The Christianisation of Europe unfolded primarily at the expense of various forms of pre-Christian paganism, with the ultimate aim of wiping these beliefs out altogether. Islamic Empires could not afford to be so absolutist, since their lands were conquered Roman and Persian territories with established religious traditions. The Jizya tax on Peoples of the Book (a category that was generously extended to include Zoroastrians) certainly encouraged conversion, although it took centuries for much of the Middle East to become majority-Muslim, but by the same token it gave rulers a structural incentive not to push too hard against non-Muslims so as not to shrink their tax base. Segregation rather than persecution became the modus operandi.[7]

The minority faiths that have survived bear the marks of this history in their practice. They share the characteristic of having embraced this separated mode of existence as a survival strategy. In part this this was actively encouraged by their Muslim overlords for their own administrative convenience. This is because the Islamic mode of government treated the *dhimmis* – non-Muslim protected peoples – as separate legal entities from the rest of society, subject to their own laws and exempted from many Islamic laws. But self-segregation was also necessary to resist conversion and assimilation. For instance, intermarriage remains a taboo. Islam traditionally allows Muslim man to marry a non-Muslim women, but not the other way around, and the children take their father's faith. Parents have learned to fearfully shield their daughters against Muslim suiters and attendant apostasy. Sometimes, the need to defend family honour and the integrity of one's religious community provokes evil acts of retribution. In 2007 a 17-year-old Yezidi girl called Du'a Khalid Aswad was stoned to death by her own people for having a Sunni Muslim boyfriend. Amidst rumours that she had converted to Islam for him, her murder prompted a reprisal in which terrorists hijacked a bus

[7] Burak Kadercan, "Territorial design and grand strategy in the Ottoman Empire," in *Territory, Politics, Governance*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2017), 158-176.

and shot its 23 Yezidi passengers.[8] Gerard Russell relates a similar honour killing, with a twist.[9] In such circumstances it is important to maintain thick, inward-looking communities, that form their own social and moral universes, with narrow horizons.

Of course, the nature and extent of this cloistering varies between different religions. Among the Yezidis, all conversion and intermarriage is out of the question. In Zoroastrianism the matter is controversial,[10] and as we shall see there may be something of a Zoroastrian revival underway as the religion accepts some of its first converts since the Arab conquest of Persia.[11] But in Practice Zoroastrians have been almost as shut off as the Yezidis these last fourteen centuries. Christianity, since it is of course a universalist religion in the same manner as Islam, cannot close itself off in the same way as the other two. But it is instructive to see how much the various Christian denominations of the Middle East differ in this respect from Western Christianity. Proselytising is illegal for Christians in many Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq (although not Kurdistan), and is ill-advisable pretty much anywhere in the region. Instead, Middle Eastern Christians distinguish themselves by an intense devotional life with much stricter rules that Western Christians are used to. For example, the Copts are forbidden all fish, meat, *and* animal products during lent, and on Good Friday must pray all day and fast until sunset.[12]

To understand the ethno-religious landscape of the Middle East, we also have to understand that the distribution of religions, sects, languages, and ethnicity is a product not of nation states, but of extremely local social organisation. Communities of one group or another coalesced into villages according to local needs, without any reason to care what a mess this would make on a map. Such an arrangement, in which villages and not borders marked off one group from another, worked well enough under an overarching imperial government. Local autonomy was often best served by having a very wide-reaching and consequently hands-off supreme government, whereas a smaller nation state is more given to intervene on behalf of the citizens it represents, and more hostile to potential fifth columns. Notably, the worst atrocities committed by the Ottoman Empire occurred shortly before its demise, when it was increasingly influenced by Turkish nationalism, a dangerous impulse for

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[8] Amnesty International, "Iraq: Amnesty International appalled by stoning to death of Yezidi girl and subsequent killings," Public Statement, 27 April 2017, accessed at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/027/2007/en/.
[9] Russell, 255.
[10] Roni K. Khan, 'Universalism and all that' http://parsizoroastrianism.com/Tenets/roni33a.html
[11] Russell, 129.
[12] Russell, 216.

such a polyglot empire.

It is as though this borderless patchwork had been kept in relative stasis, but once the basis for that equilibrium disappeared, all that stored up potential energy was released as a maelstrom of violence.

Religious minorities were reasonably well protected under the imperial model of dealing with tribes rather than nations. The distinction is important: a nation is best realised with national borders and national government, and so is defined not only by blood but by soil and citizenship. By contrast, a tribe is a matter of blood and culture, and to a member of a tribe there is no formal distinction between being at home and being an expatriate.

Under the Ottoman empire the tribal mode of organisation was formalised in the millet system. The non-Muslim subjects of the empire were divided according to their confession into these various millets, under which they were subject to their own jurisprudence instead of Islamic laws applied to Muslims. So, for instance, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople was made to be the highest religious and political authority among Eastern Orthodox Christians within the Empire, and the Emperor dealt with him as the representative of his 'tribe', so to speak. Crucially, Ottoman Eastern Orthodox Christian was under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch no matter where in the empire he happened to live. This system tended to conflate religious and tribal identity, such that all Armenians were assumed to members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, while Greeks were lumped together with Slavs in the Eastern Orthodox *Rum Millet*, since they were all 'Romans'. In any case all of this was organised and reorganised in a somewhat ad-hoc manner, and one gets the sense that the Ottomans sometimes had some difficulty getting the various branching confessions and their partially overlapping ethnicities straight.

In some ways this was similar to the common modern arrangement of having semi-autonomous regional governments in order to represent ethnic and religious minorities. But such modern governments follow the nation-state model, which means that the jurisdiction of such a government is not defined ethnically but geographically: A Kurd living in Baghdad is not under the jurisdiction of the KRG. As such this model is only workable if distribution of ethnicities can correspond neatly to lines in the sand. This will become relevant when we examine the demands for self-government that various beleaguered Middle Eastern minorities have made which, tellingly, rely on the nation-state/regional government model rather than some sort of neo-tribal arrangement.

In a multi-ethnic country, among the potential advantages of the tribal model over the nation-citizen state model is one suggested by Shadi Hamid: There is far less need to fear

demographic changes in one's country, since even if the Others increase in number, one's own tribe will be able to live more or less autonomously. Equality before the law and equal rights to participate in politics may sound good and even obvious to modern ears, but to a vulnerable minority it may well be preferable to enjoy a well-protected, although subservient, separate status in the broader imperium, than enjoy the right to participate 'equally' in the political arena, where the minority will by definition lose and be subjected to the majoritarian rule of the Other. This model of 'freedom' has a way of dissolving cultural distinctions. It works best either in a society which possess a sufficient ideological consensus and where almost everyone belongs to the same culture, religion, nationality etc., and therefore endogenous competition between irreconcilable groups cannot arise, or in a society that is extremely individualistic so that citizens do not conceive of themselves in such identitarian terms in the first place.[13]

Carl Schmitt wrote in the second edition of *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy:*

> 'Every actual democracy rests on the principle that not only are equals equal, but unequals were not be treated equally. Democracy requires, therefore, first homogeneity and second – if the need arises – the elimination or eradication of heterogeneity'[14]

Schmitt is, of course, a problematic source. Here he cites the expulsion of Greeks from Turkey after the First World War as a key example for his argument that the newly created Turkish republic could not exist as a secular nation state with a large minority of Greek Christians. This expulsion was a stage setter for repeated horrors of ethnic cleansing in the 20th century.

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[13] Hamid, 35-36. He argues, 'States need asabiyah, to use the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun's term, to bind together. Asabiyah, roughly translated as social solidarity or group consciousness, provides cohesion and shared purpose'. (p.30.) Elsewhere in *Islamic Exceptionalism*, he writes, 'As Arend Lijphart, the leading scholar of consensual democracy, wrote in a classic 1969 article, competing subcultures in countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland were minority groups that had little, if any hope, of becoming majorities. Rather than imposing their will on the nation, they were more interested in autonomy and promoting their own communal interests. It helped that Catholics could, for the most part, avoid interacting with Socialists. According to Lijphart, "subcultures with widely divergent outlooks and interests may coexist without necessarily being in conflict. Conflict arises only when they are in contact with each other"…Sometimes, reducing contact between opposing sides and allowing for autonomous communities are ways of accepting that some differences cannot be bridged.' (p. 35.)

[14] Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, tr. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), at: http://www.untag-smd.ac.id/files/Perpustakaan_Digital_1/DEMOCRACY%20The%20Crisis%20of%20Paliamentary%20Democracy.pdf .

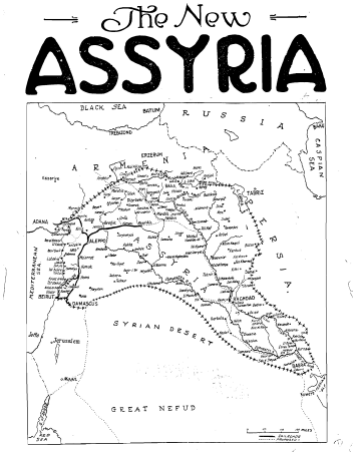
3. Nationalism: Sykes-Picot and Its Legacy

The Sykes-Picot Agreement has long been condemned as scapegoat for the subsequent history of the Middle East. It is something like conventional wisdom that British and the French carved up the Ottoman Empire for the sake of colonial profit, with a studious eye on the geography of crude oil recourses but completely blind to the historical and cultural divisions of the natives. As a result, Shia, Sunni, and Christian were forced to share the same country while cut off from their brothers by an incomprehensible border. It is no wonder, in this conventional wisdom, that Iraqis are lacking in national solidarity. This argument has given rise to a cutesy genre of map-based journalism in which the borders of the Middle East are helpfully redrawn according on an elementary knowledge of ethnic geography, thereby reversing the mistake of Sykes-Picot and ending the bloodshed.

The problem with this historical analysis, is that there was simply no way draw borders that produced satisfactorily uniform ethno-nation states. Romantic nationalism proved a naïve ideal even in Europe, since the creation of homogenous nation-states necessitated bouts of ethnic cleansing. When multiple distinct peoples are jumbled together in the same region, 'national self-determination' is a very dangerous promise to make. When it became clear that the Allied powers intended to dismantle most of the Ottoman Empire and reorganise the middle east, two things will have become clear to Greeks, Assyrians, Kurds, and Armenians. First, the millet system was going to be replaced by replaced by a state-based system in accordance with what Europeans were used to. And second, now was the time to begin bidding for one's share of the pie, for the negotiations were likely to determine the outcome of long-nursed nationalist dreams. Naturally, the interested parties arrived at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 with ludicrously ambition proposals for the creation of 'Greater X'.

For example an extremely ambitious map was published in *The New Assyria* newspaper, on 15th October, 1916[15]:

[15] From *The New Assyria* newspaper, October 15, 1916, republished in *The Afternoon Map, a Cartography Blog*, 8 July 2013, at: http://www.midafternoonmap.com/2013/07/the-new-assyria.html.



What we see here are imaginings of possible Assyrian and (in similar maps of the time) Armenian *empires* that are passing as proposals for *nation-states.* If these states were to actually exist, then (even in 1919) Armenians and Assyrians would be minorities in their own countries.

Citizen states do not mix well with minority rule. If such a state were a democracy the people would not vote for the state's raison d'etre, and if it were not a democracy it must become oppressively authoritarian – far more so than as an empire - in order to preserve its ethno-nationalist character.

The mistake Armenian and Assyrian nationalists were making, was that they sought to recreate their fallen *empires* at a time when *nation states* were prescribed. This same temptation to imagine a nation state with the borders of an empire has afflicted Megale Idea Greeks who dream of recreating Byzantium, Jews who hoped that Israel would match the kingdom of Solomon, and to a degree Kurds who imagine Greater Kurdistan stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean to the Black Sea to the Caspian. Because the fact of the matter is that there *never was* a huge Assyrian, Armenian, Greek etc. empire that could have survived as a nation state – a least not without oppression or ethnic cleaning or both to align its demographics with its raison d'etre.

When national self-determination is tied to establishing the legitimacy of a nation-state requires not only the existence of a distinct ethnic group, but that they inhabit a sufficiently contiguous sweep of land across which they constitute a clear majority. And since the expression of culture and heritage finds itself tied directly to the power of the

sovereign state, it matters quite a lot in exactly *where* one's fellow patriots happen to live: just as states have always striven to control valuable natural recourses, geographic choke-points, and lucrative trade centres, so also cultures compete for hegemony over geopolitically important territory. Optimistic proposals for a Greater Kurdistan may lead one to believe that the Kurds occupy a small but valuable sliver of land in the north-east corner of the Mediterranean, while the Turkish invasion and aggressive de-Kurdification measures in Syria's Afrin region seems tailored to deny the mountainous Kurds access to the sea. As I have mentioned, simple demographic facts can become incredibly controversial where they pertain directly to the nature of the state. In Lebanon fears of delegitimising the power-sharing status-quo have prevented a census to establish the current religious breakdown, and yet without such an agreement democracy in such a divided state is made a sham; witness the Iraqi joke 'we don't have elections, we have censuses'.

Unsurprisingly, demographic knowledge around 1919 was more than fuzzy enough to allow many slights of hand as different groups tried to demonstrate that facts on the ground confirmed their right to their historic homeland. There is no shortage of demographic maps of the Middle East and the Balkans from that period to give one a sense of the lay of things, but many of them employ every trick in the book to make this or that people appear more dominant than it is, such as dividing one tribe into as many sub-groups as possible while counting several disparate ethnicities as a single people (remember that the Yezidis are really just a particular type a Kurd), or colouring the map such that a given population appears limited to a few specs of land, but where those specs actually represent all the major towns and cities and thus constitute and overall majority.[16]

[16] As Nicholas Danforth notes, '[a]mong other things that stand out is the categories into which the mapmakers have chosen to divide people. Christians were divided up into as many confessional groups as possible, in contrast to the new national identity emerging among some of these populations themselves. Yet while the map identifies Arabs as a distinct ethnic group, the dominant population appears as "Elements musulmans (hors l'element arabe)" or Muslim Elements (except for Arabs). This cleverly allows the map to combine Kurds and Turks into a single majority without quite having to claim the Kurds were Turks. There is also, seen most clearly in the maps below, an attempt to minimise the amount of territory shown as non-Turkish. Using a trick well-established among makers of these sorts of maps, the cartographer has shown predominantly Greek cities and towns as blue but colored the sparsely inhabited territory between towns pink by default. Greek communities were, more frequently urban-dwelling, but not to anywhere near the extent shown by this map, which seems to suggest that the soil itself was Turkish/Muslim. This is even more striking in the maps of Eastern Anatolia, where territory was assumed to be Muslim unless in the absence of a clear Christian population.' Nicholas Danforth, 'Ethnographic Maps as Propaganda', *The Afternoon Map, a Cartography Blog*, 1 October 2013, at: http://www.midafternoonmap.com/2013/10/ethnographic-maps-as-propaganda.html.

The Ottoman Empire could not realistically have been carved up into functional nation-states; it is historical fantasy to think that merely drawing the 'correct' borders in 1919 could have averted a century of violence. Of course, this is not that there are not better and worse ways to divide up and organise ethnically mixed territories, nor to ignore the fact that – even if good intentions could only have done so much – the colonial powers clearly did *not* have good intentions when deciding how to share the spoils of victory: they might at least have *tried* to draw borders with peace rather than oil in mind. Moreover, one can certainly draw a meaningful distinction between a deeply artificial 'nation' such as Iraq, and places like Egypt or Iran which, for all their ethno-religious tensions and political instability, do have a long-established sense of themselves as a geographic-cultural-political entity.

It is commonly assumed in a certain type of discourse on nationalism, that nations and national identity are fundamentally recent inventions, relying on historical revisionism and invented traditions to project modern states backwards into the past. This modernist theory of nationalism is readily supported by the historical record, where we often find both cynical politicians and hopeless romantics trying to foist a national identity on a puzzled populace. When Garibaldi landed in Sicily he found plenty of peasant brigands eager to join him in dispossessing their Lords, but they didn't know or care why they were being exalted to do so in the name of some woman name 'Italia'.[17] With this Hobsbawmian-Andersonian interpretation taken for granted, one might wonder why the creation of the state of Iraq in 1921 should have presented such a problem. Why couldn't Iraqis simply learn to imagine themselves as a community of Iraqis, just as the French imagined a community of French? To put it another way, why is it that even after the middle east's borders became national, its identities remained tribal? Part of the answer follows from my remarks on Iran and Egypt; even if one takes a strongly constructivist view of these matters, it cannot obviate the fact that some nations and national identities and more flagrant inventions than others. A country created out of a century-long cultural *Risorgimento* is not in the same position as a country created by colonial fiat.

It is also notably that *most* of the tribal divisions in the Middle East track with religion, and religious identity is arguably more fundamental than any other identity of political consequence. Moreover, the minority religions that have survived in the middle east are those

[17] The story may be apocryphal, or even a contemporary joke. See, for example, Donna R. Gabaccio, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Abington, U.K.: Routledge, 2003), 1.

that have cultivated themselves to *be* fundamental to their adherents' identity, and remain closed off to outsiders. As I have shown, this survival strategy works when there is a larger imperial government keeping the peace, as it suits such a government to deal with minority groups as states within a state. Within the centralised and unitary government that characterises modern states, there will even in the best of circumstances be considerable political and social friction between groups with hard edges.

4. Modern Iraq

The oppression and brutality that characterised the Saddam Hussein regime was certainly not the best of circumstances, but nor was it arbitrary cruelty, nor simply a manifestation of tribal antipathies (whether ethnic, religious, or otherwise). Rather, it was the attempt of a tyrant to forcibly remake Iraq into a nationalist state. So while his Baathist government did favour Sunni interests over the Shia majority, this was by no means a matter of Sunni religious supremacism: this was secular sectarianism. Despite being Sunni Muslims, the Kurds were targeted for possessing a strong independent identity that stood in the way of an Iraq united by Arab nationalism.

Meanwhile the Mandaean community was both damaged and patronised by Saddam Hussein. Mandaeans are a hard-to-classify religious group: loosely Christian and often labelled gnostic. At the same time, he saw them as descendants of the original Babylonians, whose legacy he sought to claim for his own regime. The visible remains of this ideological project can be seen in the result of his archaeological 'restoration' of the city of Babylon. Copies of the ancient city's famous landmarks were built on top the ruins, where visitors were now greeted at the entrance by a portrait of Saddam alongside Nebuchadnezzar, and many of the bricks of the rebuilt walls and palaces were inscribed with messages like 'Saddam Hussein, the protector of Iraq, rebuilt civilisation and rebuilt Babylon', and 'This was built by Saddam Hussein, son of Nebuchadnezzar, to glorify Iraq'.[18]

Perhaps fancying himself the king of Babylon, Saddam employed a Mandaean poet at his court and consulted their high priests to cast apotropaic spells against malicious magic. His patronage of this ancient people is best seen as part of the megalomaniacal historical roleplaying that characterised his notion of Iraqi nationhood. And however dubious this bit of historical mythologising, Mandaeans today might be forgiven for looking back fondly in his rule, since the fall of Saddam has led to fears of 'forced conversions, bombings, killings, and kidnappings for ransom', such that there is hardly any longer a viable Mandaean community in Iraq.[19] To be sure, if the Mandaeans were Saddam's pets then he was an unreliable keeper.

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[18] ABC News, 'Saddam removed from ancient Babylon "brick by brick"', 21 April 2003, at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-04-21/saddam-removed-from-ancient-babylon-brick-by-brick/1840416.

[19] William Dalrymple, 'Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms review – Illuminating the plight of the Middle East's minorities', *The Guardian*, 31 December 2014, at:

Baathist ideology did not always discriminate on the basis of race or creed: its targets were more often chosen out of entirely secular political considerations. When the party came to power in 1963, its first victims included the Mandaean scientist Abdul-Jabbar Abdullah - a meteorologist who had studied at MIT and even worked with Albert Einstein – because he was a communist, a common thing among the embattled minorities of the middle east who were attracted to its message of solidarity as a powerful ideological shield against sectarian violence.[20]

Other misfortune befell them in a less targeted manner. By draining the southern Iraqi marshes as part of a land-reclamation project, Saddam ruined the hard-to-reach habitat that had protect the Mandaeans through the centuries and shaped their way of life. Their lot mirrored that of the ruins of Babylon: they were clumsily glorified as Saddam's mascots while their true historical foundations were neglected or worse. The Mandaeans are a minor group, but their status under his rule is emblematic of Assyrians and Yezidis also: not loved but in relative terms tolerated in a Republic of Fear where Baathist identity, and thus also Baathist repression, was secular. His real priority was to keep the lid of minority Sunni rule on top of the restless Shia majority, but he had no compunction about going after Sunni Kurds or non-Muslims when he feared they might number among his political opponents.

Yezidis also suffered for the interests of Baathist rule. In 1974 the Yezidis of Sinjar were subjected to another Baathist 'redevelopment' projects, wherein several Yezidi villages were destroyed and their inhabitants forcibly relocated to state-build amalgam towns, sterile settlements lacking all historic cultural meaning and which still had the appearance of temporary housing when Acikyildiz visited the area in 2004.[21] Under Saddam Hussein the Yezidis were the target of the same repressions visited upon the Kurds, including further forced relocations to government housing projects, where, parted from their farms and livelihoods they would be dependent of government food handouts and not be potential rebels.[22]

After regime change in 2003, petty score settling energised religious violence between all sides. The main conflict was Sunni verses Shia but religious absolutism also closed the space for smaller religious minorities in the 15 years after the US invasion. Gerard

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https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/31/heirs-to-forgotten-kingdoms-gerald-russell-william-dalrymple.

[20] Russell, 38.

[21] Acikyildiz 20-21.

[22] Russell, 49; Acikyildiz, 60.

Russell rightly situates the plight of the Mandaeans as only the latest instantiation of ethnic cleansing that has characterised the regions of the former Ottoman empire since its demise, yet it is only in the last decades that they have all but been squeezed out of existence in their native land.

The other dynamic was the assertion of Kurdish separatism. There was in fact a serious prospect of creating a Kurdish state after World War One, which would have encompassed a large triangle in south-eastern turkey and bordered Greater Armenia to the north. It would not have included the area around Lake Van, which is historic Armenians territory although almost entirely Kurdish ever since the Armenian Genocide, nor extend to modern Iraqi Kurdistan, but it still represented the nearest approach to creating a Greater (or Great enough) Kurdistan in modern history. But hope was mooted Mustafa Kemal led Turkish War of Independence left the Armenians with their current rump state, and left the 0s with nothing.

The Kurds have launched periodic revolts against rule from Baghdad ever since the British Mandate, which is unsurprising given their historical de facto autonomy. Under Saffavid and Ottoman rule, the border regions either side of the Zagros Mountains were usually controlled by self-governing Kurdish Principalities. Likewise successive regimes in Baghdad found the centralising apparatus of post-colonial government insufficient to bring them to heel, and even the more competent government of Ankara found itself utterly incapable of supressing the Kurmanji language and dissolving Kurdish identity.

In the period after World War II, Iraq's Kurds developed an important, though complicated, relationship with American patronage. The Nixon administration covertly aided a Kurdish uprising at the behest of the Iranian Shah. Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani took up the offer with enthusiasm, saying that if he succeeded he was for Kurdistan to "become the 51st state." However, the American backing of the Kurds was altogether more cynical, utilising the Kurds as a card for the Shah to play in his border dispute with Iraq. As such, the Kurdish movement was stoked long after a settlement was in the works; Secretary of State Henry Kissinger saw fit not to inform Washington's Kurdish clients that an agreement between the two sides was already in the works, and American's support would last only as long as it was useful to maintain Iran's bargaining position. As soon as the Shah finalised his agreement with Iraq, on March 5, 1975, Iran ended its support and the insurgents were wiped

out. The United States denied its involvement; Barzani felt betrayed, although he agreed not to speak publicly against the Americans.[23]

Twelve years later, however, circumstances made American support more valuable. The war did not end with the removal of Saddam Hussein or the creation of an independent Kurdistan, as once again a Kurdish uprising failed after hoped-for American support failed to materialise. However, the resulting humanitarian crisis put enough pressure on the United States to establish a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, providing the Kurds with aid and defence within coalition safe zones. This support enabled the development of a military viable Kurdish autonomous region.

Kurdish Nationalism, Religious Minorities and the KRG

In the chaotic years that followed the disastrous American-led conquest of Iraq in 2003, the Kurdistan Autonomous Region was one of the only parts of the country outside the US Green Zone that remained relatively peaceable. This stability has been particularly valuable to non-Muslim minorities, notably Yezidis and Christians, who are always the first up against the wall when things get violent. To be clear, even within the 'safe haven' of Iraqi Kurdistan, their position is hardly exalted: Assyrian Christians talk of housing discrimination and even forced relocation from sensitive areas[24], lest any parts of 'Kurdistan' start to imagine themselves as 'Assyria'. Without being naïve about the deeply troubled history of Kurdish-Christian relations, we can safely say for the time being that discrimination and political repression in the name of Kurdistan is preferable to extermination in the name of Islam. So when ISIS went on its rampage in 2014, some 200,000 Christian refugees fled to safety in Kurdistan, where their inflow produced the sort of rising ethnic tension one expects in such circumstances.[25]

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[23] Daniel Schorr, '1975: Background to Betrayal', *The Washington Post*, 7 April 1991, at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1991/04/07/1975-background-to-betrayal/aa973065-ea5e-4270-8cf9-02361307073c/?utm_term=.b7e6dfa03341.

[24] Martin W. Lewis, 'The Complex Relations Between Kurds and Christians in Northern Iraq', 5 November 2010, at: http://www.geocurrents.info/geopolitics/the-complex-relations-between-kurds-and-christians-in-northern-iraq.

[25] Florian Neuhof, 'Abandoned and betrayed, Iraqi Christians rise up to reclaim their land', *The National*, 12 July 2015, at: https://www.thenational.ae/world/abandoned-and-betrayed-iraqi-christians-rise-up-to-reclaim-their-land-1.17473.

Kurdish ground forces were also crucial to the American-led campaign to destroy the Islamic State in Iraq. When the Iraqi army, which the US had spent a decade training, dropped their American weapons and fled, abandoning Mosul to ISIS in early June 2014, the poorly-equipped Peshmerga stood and fought. Not only did they successfully defend the core of Iraqi Kurdistan from being overrun, but they also moved into some of the disputed territories of northern Iraq beyond the officially recognised autonomous region, such as the politically and emotionally important city of Kirkuk. Baghdad acquiesced to these territorial gains in the recognition that it was better for the Kurds to control Kirkuk than ISIS.

In the coming months, ISIS continued its genocidal assault against religious heretics, particularly the Yezidis. This galvanised the idea of a Kurdish movement fighting not only for its own independence, but to establish their land as an island of tolerance against the seemingly inexorable destruction of religious minorities in the middle east by Islamic extremism. Their greatest success in this regard was in the Yezidi-inhabited region of the Sinjar. That August, Kurdish forces, including both the Iraqi Peshmerga and their PKK/YPG affiliated rivals from Turkey and Syria, were vital to holding back ISIS long enough for most of the Yezidis trapped on the besieged mountain to escape. Then in December, the Peshmerga launched a counter-offensive that broke the siege for good and gained the Kurds partial control of the Sinjar mountains. Finally, Kurdistan they conquered the city of Sinjar itself by November of the following year.

These were good years for Iraqi Kurdistan. The KRG was now in control of the territories it most desired: Kirkuk, the Jerusalem of the Kurds, and Sinjar, the homeland of the Yezidi Kurds. And who could dispute that Kirkuk, having been abandoned to its fate by Baghdad only to be taken and held by the Peshmerga against the onslaught of Islamic State extremists, was now theirs by right of conquest? And who could deny that, having protected that the Yezidis from genocide and liberated the Yezidi heartland from their would-be murderers, the Kurds had earned the moral right to remains as the lords and protectors of Sinjar?

Is it in fact true that the Kurds are and by extension an independent Kurdistan would be a model of religious tolerance in the middle east? Yes, if we clarify that we mean particularly *religious* tolerance. Remember that the Kurds (unusually for the region which is sheared by religious and ethnoreligious divides) possess a purely *ethnic* identity. Thus, even if our hypothetical Kurdistan might escape the worst of ontological divides, it might be full of the distinct conflicts and tensions that characterise ethno-nationalism.

One is often struck by the by the curious affinity between Kurdish and Israeli nationalism. Indeed, when I joined a study group visiting Erbil in March 2017, several of the Kurdish officials we spoke to explicitly compared their nation to Israel. Kurdish 'Zionism' is based broadly the same kind of thinking that led to the creation of Israel: a people without a state have right to national self-determination, because they will never be safe so long as they reside in the nations of others. (Another similarity is the fact that Israel's founding fathers also mixed their nationalism with socialism). And an independent Kurdistan will surely entail at least as much violence and hypocrisy as Israel, due to the inherent contradictions of even the most well intentioned 'liberal' nationalism.[26]

For example, while the Kurds may be more willing to tolerate the Yezidis for their religious beliefs, they may be less willing to accept their existence as a fully separate *ethnicity.* Indeed the Yezidis present a particularly interesting case in Kurdistan, since they speak Kurdish (and even use it in their worship, unlike Muslim Kurds who use Arabic), and therefore are sometimes considered a subtype of Kurds themselves. Indeed, to their woe, Saddam Hussain targeted them as part of his persecution of the Kurds (when he favoured the pseudobabylonian Mandaeans). This raises the usual tensions between a nationalist ethnic movement and a minority within said ethnicity which the movement claims to represent but may really wish to assimilate. And sure enough the Kurdish government and its associates have apparently been guilty of a number of controversially documented, semi-organised, oppressive actions towards at minorities.

The relationship between Kurdish nationalism and Yezidism is stuck in something of a Catch-22. The fact that they are viewed as ethnically Kurdish and even as followers of the Ur-religion of the Kurds (as the Yezidis themselves often claim)[27] affords them respect of Kurdish Muslims. Yet as long the Yezidis are considered merely a subgroup of Kurds they will face the pressure to assimilate.

A similar situation applies with Zoroastrianism, in that it is the primordial Iranian faith and thus, from a certain point of view, the religion of authentic Kurdishness. The difference however is that Zoroastrianism does not have the same continuous presence in

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[26] Daniel Larison, 'Kurdistan and Secession', *The American Conservative*, 27 December 2004, http://www.theamericanconservative.com/larison/kurdistan-and-secession/ .

[27] 'Many Yezidis believe that Yezidism is the most ancient Middle Eastern religion, one whose origins are lost in antiquity. They believe that the entire Kurdish population was once yezidi, until repression and massacres forced them to convert to Islam, so that only a small number resisted and remained faithful to their original religion'. Birgul Acikyildiz, *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 35-36.

Iraqi Kurdistan from time immemorial to the present day. Thus, the supposed revival of Zoroastrianism in Kurdistan is not interacting with an indigenous population. Both Yezidis and mainstream Zoroastrians as they exist today have a very unwelcoming attitude towards self-proclaimed converts – therefore consider that Kurdish Zoroastrianism, were it indeed to get off the ground, would like quite different from the continuously existing religion of India, Iran, and the Zoroastrian diaspora.

5. Zoroastrians

Is Islam an inherently Arab religion? Iranian politics and culture has an anti-Arab element, shared by Kurds for similar historical and cultural reasons, yet Islam is essential to Iranian identity. Iran solves this problem with Zoroastrian-infused Shiism. The same paradox applies to the Kurds, but most Kurds are Sunni, and therefore the contradiction is not softened. In any event, the Kurds' consciousness of connection to not only pre-Islamic but indeed pre-Abrahamic religious traditions helps explain their relatively tolerant attitudes towards non-Islamic religious minorities. To understand the depth and durability of that tolerance, we need to explore the history of and theology of those traditions, and it makes sense to start with the most "Iranian" (of which Kurds are a subtribe). That is to say, Zoroastrianism, the religious spring of the Persian empire and nation.

It is the nature of peoples and religions and ideologies to make a black legend of the world that preceded them. Before the coming of the Prophet, the Arabs were, by their own account, the most barbarous and destitute people on earth. Islam and only Islam delivered them from the *Jahiliya* – the time of ignorance. The Renaissance was preceded by the Dark Ages; Protestantism and later liberalism put an end to of Papist tyranny, Inquisitions, superstition, and slaughter; so naturally, the worship of the One True God, serene and transcendent, was preceded by idolatrous cults of countless lesser gods – 'gods made by human hands, gods of wood and stone, gods that cannot see, hear, eat or smell'[28]. These were gods as vain selfish as the worst tyrant, demanding blood sacrifices and encouraging sin.

Unsurprisingly, historians have found plenty of work in deconstructing these straight-forward binaries. Pre-Christian paganism had room for ample speculation about the oneness of the supreme God, not unlike the quasi-monotheistic aspects of some Hindu philosophy, and while Christian authorities have always insisted that God alone deserves to be worshipped, the theological particularities which distinguish the veneration of the saints from the false worship of lesser gods – the distinction between *dulia* and *latria* – have doubtless escaped the vast majority of faithful throughout history.

[28] Deuteronomy, 4:28 'And there ye shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.' At: https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+4%3A28&version=KJV

Furthermore, the supposed monotheism which set the ancient Hebrews apart in a world of idol-worshiping polytheists gets murkier the closer you look. Throughout history humanity's religious impulse has oscillated between our desire to see the divine world as every bit as textured and varied as our own, and the need to encapsulate all creation under a single Truth - to squeeze 'the universe into a ball'[29]. Pre-Christian Judaism was perhaps towards the unitary end of this spectrum, but not uniquely out of step with the general religious landscape of the ancient Near East, where it was common to exalt a single god above all others, whether as ruler of the universal pantheon or as the particular representative of your own nation against the gods of your rivals.[30] Much of the scorn which Yahweh heaps upon 'false' gods in scripture could – if you were in a heterodox mood –be interpreted as the usual 'my god is stronger than your god' cultic chauvinism of the other idolaters; 'You will have no other gods before me' is not quite the same thing as 'there is no God but God'. The former can only be a monotheistic statement once the principle of monotheism is already established in the culture.[31]

In an effort to impose some kind of order these fluid and often ambiguous religious gradients, scholars often make use of a pair of terms – henotheism and monolatry – to indicate intermediate positions between monotheism and polytheism. To say that this terminology can be indistinct is an understatement; for one, any attempt to distinguish between the two terms usually involves saying something like 'henotheism is the belief in a single god while not denying the existence of others, whereas monolatry is the belief in many but worship of only one', and leaving it to the reader to decide how this qualifies as differentiation. In any case there are certainly more than two ways in which a religion can be neither clearly monotheist nor clearly polytheism. Just to suggest a few: one can believe in multiple deities that are all the servants of God, believe in multiple deities that are all *aspects* of God, believe in a single god but allow that others may also exist, believe in a single God but allow that other people might know Him by a different name, believe that the universe *is* God but sub-aspects of the Pantheos may be worshipped independently, believe in the existence of many gods but only one who is good and worthy of worship, etc. I think it is more helpful simply to go by the Greek and observe that henotheism means 'one god' whereas monolatry means 'single worship': the former concerns religious belief, the latter

[29] As T.S. Elliot put it in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.
[30] Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God: The Origins of Our Beliefs* (London: Hachette, 2009), 138-140.
[31] To make a Wittgensteinian point.

concerns religious practice, but they do not indicate different *types* of religion.

Sometimes they are viewed not so much as theologies in themselves but as developmental stages on the path from 'primitive' polytheism to something more philosophically sophisticated, as a 'a way-station on the road to full-fledged monotheism' as Robert Wright describes the apparent monolatry of the prophet Hosea.[32] But on the other hand some look on these concepts as suggesting a promising alternative to the jealous God of Abraham. The man who coined 'henotheism' was the 19th century German philologist and Orientalist Max Muller, whose studies of Hinduism and 'pagan' religion in general led him to look very favourably on traditions which escaped the exclusivity and dogmatism of the West. He is one of the most historically significant European exponents of 'the wisdom of the east',[33] and it is ironic that his ecumenical view of 'Aryanism' – he was not the first Western scholar to write about the Aryan peoples but he was one of the most influential in developing the concept – went on to become not only a locus of European racism, but a hard fault line of Zoroastrianism and Indo-Persian nationalism against Islam and Arab nationalism.

Max Mueller also coined the term Kathenotheism to describe what we might refer to as serial monotheism, that is worshipping a single deity as the exclusive or supreme god of the universe, but then going on to exalt another in the same manner. This was meant to explain how the Vedas may address each god as supreme in turn, rather like a sycophant might address every king he meets as the king of all nations. This phenomenon even further complicates attempting to categorise religions by type, since any apparent monotheistic sentiment in a historical source – such as when the Sumerian god Enlil is referred to as 'the great and powerful ruler who dominates heaven and earth, who knows all and understands all' – may simply reflect this tendency to flatter whichever god one happens to be addressing.[34] It cannot be stressed enough that statements which make ontological claims about the gods or God simply *are not* self-interpreting. Hence the Old Testament contains numerous instances of both seemingly explicit monotheism *and* affirmation of the existence of other gods, often in the same book.[35] In all these cases a skilled exegetist can read the problematic passage to be, in proper context, plausibly consistent with the one interpretation

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[32] Wright, 132.
[33] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 252.
[34] Wright, 87.
[35] Michael Heiser, 'Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible' (2008), Faculty Publications and Presentations, Paper 277, at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lts_fac_pubs/277.

or the other.

The reader may get the impression that the Abrahamic religions, all of which pride themselves on their fierce monotheism, have in fact been deceiving their adherents. The story about how God revealed himself is in fact a revisionist gloss on a polytheistic historical reality. No matter where you look, every belief and practice can be given a polytheistic interpretation, and invariably seems to have some pagan precedent. But by the same token, any polytheistic cosmology can readily be viewed through a monotheistic lens. So from one point of view angels, saints, and demons are just gods by another name, while from another Poseidon and Apollo are either merely subdivisions of God (here is God's subsidiary for controlling the weather, there is God's manifestation as wisdom), or hypostates of God (as in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), or lesser beings that do not threaten His sovereignty (the 'gods' are just angels, saints, and demons by another name).

Ultimately, we are dealing with the fundamental distinction between god and God. Whether a religion pertains to one or the other cannot be identified simply by examining its practice, because the exact same practice – say, kneeling before an image and praying 'grant me strength, o blessed one' – can have a completely different theological meaning depending on one's assumptions (such as whether one recognises a distinction between worship and veneration). Nor can we reliably distinguish monotheism and polytheism at the level of terminology. 'god' and God' are fine shorthands, but words vary and translations are always imperfect and often misleading.

As Asatrian and Arakelova explain, monotheism proper should be understood as a philosophically absolute theology. We should therefore decouple the concept from the mere appearance of divine plurality or 'poly-variation' as they call it, whether it be in the form of multiple deities conceived of as different attributes of the One God, or even a pantheon organised around a one principle (but not absolute) deity. Either form may simply be the manner in which a monotheistic theology expresses itself: 'The poly-variation, or rather, the dismembered representation of the Divine Entity, of God, is none other than the personification of the functional division of the Divine, which has nothing to do with polytheism in its pure form, whose essential nature does not change even in the presence of a manifestly principal divinity in the system of gods. This principal divinity, while endowed with a greater power (greater attributes, functions, and so on) compared to others, is,

however, not the Absolute, which is the main characteristic of the One God.'[36]

In other words, enumerating deities doesn't get us very far. One asks, 'Do they worship one God or many gods?' and another answers, 'What is God? What are gods? How do you count them?' The correct question to ask is, 'Is their belief and practice directed towards the Absolute?' and how does one identify *that*? The Absolute seems to exist entirely in conceptual space. Now recall the prevailing scholarly view is that the Hebrews of the time of Solomon almost certainly practiced the sort of 'pagan' religion typical of the ancient near east – possibly henotheistic or monolatrous but certainly not monotheistic. 'Was their belief and practice directed towards the Absolute?'

Well, it is as you like it. From the outside looking in, one is inclined to say that only the individual truly knows what God or the gods mean to him. Perhaps some people in ancient times were monotheists, while others were polytheists, even if they said and did the exact same things, because they understood their words and actions differently (and so it is today…). But now we have simply moved the Absolute from ineffable conceptual space to ineffable mental space, eternally locked within every man's skull-sized kingdom. This invokes radical individualism and radical dualism and paints and picture that is utterly removed from the living, breathing thing we call religion.

If you believe that the One God really did reveal himself to the Jews, then it hardly matters what *they* thought about it. *You* know the truth. That many have had mistaken ideas about God does no injury to Him.

Here is a labour-saving formula: the arc of religious history bends from cultic superstition to philosophically precise monotheism; as the axial embodiment of this trend, the Jews of the Old Testament exhibit a confusing mix both tendencies as they gradually become monotheist in the course of the first millennium BC. This formula appeals to historians who know that the ancients were polytheists while modern religions are monotheist, and that somehow we got from one to the other. It appeals to religious believers who know that God is Truth, that man's destiny is to return to Him, and that many have fallen into error along this path. It appeals to atheists who know that God is a lie, and that philosophically sophisticated monotheism was a way-station on the road to secular modernity. It does not appeal to polytheists. It is probably true on some level.

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[36] Garnik Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova, 'Malak-Tawus: The Peacock Angel of the Yezidis', *Iran and the Caucasus* vol. 7, no. 1 (January 2003), 1-36.

The promise of still more explanatory labour-saving may be why scholars are so fond of suggesting that it was the Jews' encounter with Zoroastrianism as a result of Cyrus releasing them from the Babylonian exile that gave Judaism its most significant jolt in the direction of explicit monotheism. Cyrus proclaims in the Bible that God Himself has tasked him with restoring the Jews to their homeland and building the Lord a new temple in Jerusalem.[37] So, not only are there thematic parallels between Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic religions, but scripture includes the Persians as protagonists of God's revelation. And from a Christian perspective, if you want to view Zoroastrianism as a step on the road to Christ, that is as a partial truth to be baptised in the new age after the incarnation, there is some obvious symbolic significance to the fact that it was three Zoroastrian priest – three magi, from which we derive the word 'magic' – who heralded the birth of Christ and came to Jerusalem to pay homage to the king of the Jews.[38]

Zoroastrianism is said to be the world's oldest monotheistic religion.[39] Thus the gift of Cyrus cleanly separates Second Temple Judaism from the misty history of the Jews before the Babylonian exile, before their religion was infused with the monotheist, and eschatological character of its Persian patron. So perhaps the angels and demons of Judaism and Christianity derive from the *Yazata* and *daeva* of Zoroastrianism, while the notion of the messiah (a title which the book of Isaiah actually bestows on Cyrus)[40] finds its counterpart in the Zoroastrian *Saoshyant*.[41]

But this really is just an extremely fashionable bit academic speculation, for it relies on the assumption that Zoroastrianism in the 6th century BC was more universalist and/or monotheistic than Judaism, and *that* relies on having a reasonably understanding of early Zoroastrianism. Unfortunately, the nature of primordial Zoroastrianism and its development

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[37] 'The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.' (Ezra 1:2) https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezra+1&version=KJV;KJ21

[38] 'Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.' (Matthew 2:1-2) https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+2&version=KJV;KJ21; Simon Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), Chapter 6, 'The Persians'.

[39] Russell, 94-95.

[40] 'Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut' (Isaiah 45:1) https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+45&version=KJV

[41] Kaveh Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2007), 47.

is even murkier than the history of primordial Judaism. In fact, the religion of Zoroaster and Ahura Mazda and only unambiguously enters historical time together with Cyrus. In other words, the moment when Judaism was supposedly influenced by this more ancient religion is the first time we hear about that religion at all!

Zoroastrianism before this time is difficult to trace with any confidence. The ancient Persians left no legacy of written history, literature or philosophy. Our knowledge of Zoroaster is overwhelmingly mythological, and much of it can be traced back no further than the Islamic era. For example one of the richest sources for Zoroastrian history is the *Shahnameh* by the 10th century Persian poet Ferdowsi, which remains the national epic of Iran to this day. We have no idea when Zoroaster lived, or if he lived at all,[42] and there is little hope of ever reaching a lasting historical consensus on the matter.[43] As Prods Oktor Skjærvø concludes: 'There is nothing known about him that can be construed as strictly historical evidence by any modern standard of historiography'.[44]

In Zoroastrian tradition he lived more that 8000 years ago,[45] but if somehow true this would not only make Zoroastrianism by far the oldest still-existing religion, but push its

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[42] This passage of Wittgenstein helps us appreciate the care one should take in determining what it even means to say we know this or that Zoroaster and the genesis of Zoroastrianism:
'Consider this example: if one says "Moses did not exist", this may mean various things. It may mean: the Israelites did not have a single leader when they came out of Egypt – or: their leader was not called Moses – or: there wasn't anyone who accomplished all that the Bible relates of Moses – or: … – According to Russell, we may say: the name "Moses" can be defined by means of various descriptions. For example, as "the man who led the Israelites through the wilderness", "the man who lived at that time and place and was then called 'Moses'", "the man who as a child was taken out of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter", and so on. And according as we accept one definition or another, the sentence "Moses did exist" acquires a different sense, and so does every other sentence about Moses. – And if we are told "N did not exist", we do ask: "What do you mean? Do you want to say … or … and so on?"

But if I make a statement about Moses, am I always ready to substitute some *one* of these descriptions for "Moses"? I shall perhaps say: By "Moses" I mean the man who did what the Bible relates of Moses, or at any rate much of it. But how much? Have I decided how much must turn out to be false for me to give up my proposition as false? So is my use of the name "Moses" fixed and determined for all possible cases? – Isn't it like this, that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from under me, and vice versa?" Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* G.E.M Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trs. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 79.

[43] M.L. West, *Hellenica: Selected Papers on Greek Literature and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89.

[44] Prods Oktor Skjærvø, 'The Gathas as Myth and Ritual' in Michael Stausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 61.

[45] 'Ample evidence exists, with much detail available especially in the voluminous Sanskrit literature, to trace the saga of the Indo-Iranian people who ultimately parted ways about 8,000 years ago in a Great Schism that split them into the Avestan and Vedic branches - due to irreconcilable religious

origin back to thousands of years before the first the dawn of Egyptian civilisation, before the first Sumerian cities, and before the development of writing. It would also imply that the *Avesta*, composed in an old Iranian language, somehow originates long before Aryan peoples had moved into Greater Iran, at a time when even their primordial Indo-European forebears barely existed except as an abstraction of philologists. The 8000-year claim appears to derive from a number of classical historians, including Xanthus the Lydian, who placed the time of the Prophet as 6000 years before their own. [46]

Xanthus was a contemporary of Herodotus, whose *Histories*, composed in the century after Cyrus, include the following account of the Persian Empire:

> As regards customs, I have identified a number that are distinctive to the Persians. The setting up of alters is something very alien to them, so much so, in fact, that they regard the entire practice as idiocy, for reasons, I imagine, to do with their gods not being represented in human form, as are the Greek gods. It is a tradition among the Persians that sacrifices to Zeus, whom they identify with the all-embracing dome of the heavens, be made only on the peaks of the very highest mountains.[47]

This is more anthropology than comparative theology, of course. Indeed, it is not clear that the Greeks conceptualised religions different from their own, and Herodotus was in the habit of calling other peoples' gods "Zeus," as though it was all a matter of translation. In interpreting this passage, we run the risk of introducing our own present knowledge and assumptions – for example, the assumption that 'Zeus' in this passage is the Zoroastrian *Ahura Mazda*.

But this caveat aside, it certainly sounds as though, in allusions to the "idiocy" of alter worship, the non-representation of gods in human form, and the identification of Zeus with "the all-embracing dome of the heavens," Herodotus has encountered what we would consider a more "advanced" monotheism. And there is much more in Zoroastrianism that appears to make it not only the older creed shaping Judaism, but the precursor of all

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differences.' Roni K. Kahn, *Tenents of Zoroastrianism.com* (blog), at: http://tenets.zoroastrianism.com/didnot33.html, http://tenets.parsizoroastrianism.com/inter4.html

[46] Martin L. West, 'The Classical World' (chapter 27) in Stausberg and Vevaina, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, 441.

[47] Herodotus 1. 131, in tr. Tom Holland, *The Histories* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 67.

Abrahamic religions in their emphasis on angels and demons, good and evil, heaven and hell, and apocalyptic eschatology.

What we can say is that Zoroastrianism is the quintessential Iranian religion. And when I say Iranian, I do no not refer to the modern country of Iran but rather the loosely-bounded linguistic and cultural region of Greater Iran, which includes the Kurds. There are dozens of distinct Iranian peoples that inhabited the lands from Turkey to India. The most significant are the Persians, who make up a slim majority in Iran, alongside the Bal1uch people of the south-east, the Lurs of the southern Zagros mountains (who are related to the Kurds), and numerous small Caspian peoples in the north. The Tajik people of central Asia are likely the descendants of the ancient Sogdians, the masters of the silk road who brought Iranian culture to China. In the east, the Pashtuns dominate the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and beyond them, the Indian Parsi are descended of Zoroastrians that fled the advance of Islam.[48]

While all these groups speak some type of Iranian language, much of the historic area of Greater Iran is now inhabited by various Turkic peoples. The expanse beyond the Black Sea and the Caspian was once the domain of many famously fearsome Iranian tribes of antiquity, such as the Scythians that fascinated Herodotus and the Massagetae who supposedly killed Cyrus in his final battle. But in the course of the first millennium the Eurasian Steppe came to be inhabited by Turkic nomads from further east, who then proceeded to fight their way into the heart of the Islamic world. Such was their military skill that the medieval Caliphate became dependent on Turkic mercenaries to fight its battles, much like the late Roman army was a largely Germanic force, and in the same way many newly Islamised Turks established kingdoms of their own. These developments has a particularly profound effect on Greater Iran. *All* significant Persian empires of the late middle ages and Early Modern era were a least partially Turkic in origin. But again much like the Germanic post-Roman kingdoms, most Turks assimilated to the more sophisticated culture of the people they had conquered. In the great empires of the Saffarids, Samanids, and Saffavids, the Turkic sword defended Islamic Law and Persian culture. As a result, most of this land remains ethnically Iranian, and even where it is not, Turkic peoples such as Azeris, Turkmen, Uzbeks, Qashqai, Kazakhs, and Kumyks carry an unmistakably Iranian cultural imprint.

[48] Farrokh, 21-24.

The persistence of Iranian language and culture through the rise of Islam contrasts with the fate of other regions that fell to the Arabs in the 7th century. In Egypt, Syria, and to a lesser extent North Africa, those who converted to Islam under Arab rule ultimately became Arabs themselves. Today the Coptic and Aramaic languages only barely live on, mostly in liturgical form, among Christian communities that resisted conversion to Islam through the centuries. One can imagine an alternate timeline in which these regions adopted Islam yet retained their native language and culture; imagine if Muslim Iraqis still spoke Aramaic and considered themselves ethnic Assyrians. This is exactly the situation of Iranian peoples today.

There are several possible reasons why Iranians resisted Arabisation where other conversos did not, it probably being some combination of the surpassing strength and depth of Iranian civilisation and the difficult and isolated terrain beyond the Zagros. In any case, not only does Iranian culture endure, but it endures together with its Zoroastrian substrate. Perhaps the most conspicuous commonality today between all the peoples of these peoples of Greater Iran, both Iranian and Turkic, is the new year festival of Nowruz, whose origin lies explicitly in Zoroastrianism. It may certainly seem strange that a Zoroastrian festival would wound continue to be widely celebrated in an overwhelmingly and often fiercely Islamic region, but then this fact captures something of the awkward and contradictory relationship that the Iranian peoples have always had with Islam.

For Arab Muslims, ethnic and religious pride are complementary: it was to the Arabs that God delivered his final revelation, and it was the Arabs who conquered a great empire in His name. This was the height of Arab civilisation. Muslim leaders can safely denigrate pre-Islamic Arabia without offending Arab pride. Iranians, however, cannot ignore their pre-Islamic history in making sense of their own identity. Ignorant of the true religion though they might have been, the Achaemenid and Sassanian Empires do not represent the time of ignorance and barbarism: they represent the height of Iranian civilisation. Ancient Persia appears to the Muslim Iranian rather like the Roman Empire appears to the Western Christian: it was the great pagan empire that reigned before God's final revelation. The difference however is that the fall of Rome achieved a soft landing in Christianity. The Empire itself chose to adopt the true faith, and, as a result, the jurisprudence, political theory, and most importantly the philosophy of pagan antiquity was not buried by the new order but rather baptised and incorporated into the lattice of Christendom.

Zoroastrian Persia did not choose to convert: it was subjugated. Watching his empire crumble piece by piece, Yazdegird III could only have perceived the ruin his great and

ancient civilisation. But his people were brought into the light of truth! Yes, and yet even a pious Muslim may encounter somewhat mixed emotions when he reflects that his people were only delivered from their errors through conquest by foreign armies. And in fact, while Islam is every bit as much a universal religion as Christianity *theologically speaking*, in other ways it is rather Arab-centric. In Christianity, God's revelation was delivered to the Jews, it was recorded in Greek, spread through and later embraced by a Latin empire, and after the Empire collapsed Christianity diffused outwards from its many culturally and ethnically diverse successor states. In Islam, as I have mentioned, all the glory goes to the Arabs. Furthermore, the Quran is inseparable from the language it was written in, for its Arabic words are not the (albeit divinely-inspired) written record of the Prophet's teachings, but are rather the exact words of God Himself.

Despite the lofty status of the Arab people as the champions of Islam, the prevailing sentiment towards Arabs amongst modern-day Persians is hardly one of gratitude. Indeed, the Arab minority within the Republic of Iran is the target of frank racism and political suspicion. However, this lack of brotherhood between fellow Muslims is explained by religious as well as ethnic divisions. As the self-declared champions of Shia Islam, Iranian Muslims can safely despise the predominantly Sunni Arabs without the contradiction of biting the hand the fed them the faith. And particularly with the Zoroastrian influence on Twelver Shiism, Iranians are able to resolve some of the contradiction of their Muslim-Iranian identity and avoid feeling like cultural dhimmis of Sunni Arabs.

The Kurds don't have this luxury. In a region floating with various heterodox Islamic sects, in which Alevis, Zazas, Goranis, Yarsanis etc. may forge a coherent identity for themselves from a combination of their ethnicity and their variety of semi-Islam, it might be surprising to find that most Kurds are nothing but orthodox Sunni Muslims, and thus their religious and ethnic identity do not easily reinforce one another as with the others. To be a Muslim first and a Kurd second is to make oneself a cultural dhimmi of Sunni Arabs (or Turks in the case of Turkish Kurdistan). This likely contributes to their taking their Islam more lightly in general, and theoretically ought to make them more tolerant of religious minorities. In practice, there seems to be a particular openness to Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrians however, are not especially open to converts. This despite the fact that in the places where Zoroastrianism is long-established - Iran and India - there populations have

been dwindling for decades, partly because of immigration to other parts of the world, and partly because of their extremely low birth rate.[49]

In recent history of modern KRG, by contrast, there is no demographic data to indicate significant indigenous Zoroastrian communities. And yet, one Zoroastrian spokesperson claimed to have 100,000 converts in Kurdistan.[50] This is not hugely plausible, since that would be equal to the total population of Zoroastrians in the rest of the world. Yet it seems indicative that something is going on. Zoroastrianism is a topic of interest and attraction in Kurdistan, and it is plausible that you find 100,000 Iraqi Kurds who would acknowledge or claim a connection to Zoroastrianism, even if it is only an ancient connection. In other words, the Zoroastrian influence in KRG is broad but shallow, in stark contrast to Zoroastrianism in the rest of the world, where it is, in Emmanuel Sivan's terms, a defensively closed off "enclave" community.[51]

Now this contrast is not exactly unusual for Zoroastrianism, since the religion's influence has been much larger than its numerical strength would suggest throughout its post-Islamic history.

So, there is little prospect our Kurdish neo-Zoroastrians being seamlessly brought into the body of their long-lost brethren. Even if the maximalist claims of Zoroastrian revivalists are true, it is hard to see this leading to a lasting resurgence in the life of this long-endangered religion. (But one can always be optimistic..)

Zoroastrianism, Aryans, and Kurds

We have seen some reasons why identification with Iranian-Zoroastrian history over and above Arab-Muslim influence be particularly acute amongst Kurds. This might be surprising, in another sense, since it is naturally easiest for ethnic Persians themselves, being the

[49] Roni K. Khan, 'Save the Parsi!' http://tenets.parsizoroastrianism.com/save33.html; Manoj R. Nair, 'Can a 100 births stop the decline in the Parsi population, Hindustan Times, 31 July 2017, https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/can-a-100-births-stop-the-decline-in-parsi-population/story-sQ4U4KbGjFH01QLyioaePK.html; Russell 129

[50] Judit Neurink, 'Zoroastrian faith returns to Kurdistan in response to ISIS violence', *Rudaw*, 2 June 2015**,** http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/020620153; Lara Fatah, 'The Curious Rebirth of Zoroastrianism in Iraqi Kurdistan', PS21: Project for the Study of the 21st Century, 26 November 2015, at: https://projects21.org/2015/11/26/the-curious-rebirth-of-zoroastrianism-in-iraqi-kurdistan/; Rudaw, 'Converts must die: Kurdistan's Zoroastrians outraged by Islamic preacher', 5 February 2017, at: http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/050220171.

[51] Emanuel Sivan, 'Culture and History in Comparative Fundamentalism', in Heidrun Friese (ed.), *Identities: Time, Difference and Boundaries* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 241-261.

dominant ethnicity in the modern state of Iran, to consider themselves direct successors to ancient Persia. As peripheral 'Iranians', the Kurds are perhaps less well placed to claim the legacy of Zoroaster, Cyrus, and Shapur as their own. Unlike Armenia, Assyria, and Georgia, there was no Great Kurdish Empire that ambitious nationalists might hope to recreate (there are some dubious candidates such as the emirate of Diyarbakir, or the empire of Saladin, who while he was a Kurd of sorts his realm was overwhelmingly Arab.) But nationalist mythologisers a good at getting creative, and in that vein some point to the very first Iranian state in history: the empire of the Medes. Indeed it is plausible enough to suppose the Kurds have some particular connection, genetic or otherwise, to the Medes, for the simple reason that the latter group also inhabited the western reaches of the Iranian plateau.[52] However any such connection can only be determined in the vaguest terms across thousands of years, and in any case the Median Empire will doubtless remain a historical footnote compared to the majesty of later Iranian empires.

Nonetheless, there is something in modern Kurdish culture that allows a particularly strong affinity, not so much with historical Iranian empires per se, but rather with a broader Aryan identity. This is the culture in which a Zoroastrian revival – or at least fashion – has taken root. There is nothing like the occasional efforts of clerical authorities in neighboring Iran to restrict Noruz celebrations as some-how 'un-Islamic'. So far, the keepers of Kurdish nationalism are at least tolerant of this resurgence of one of the KRG's officially recognised religions.

[52] Farrokh 24

6. Yezidis

In 1870, an ethno-religious sect known as the Yezidis sent a petition to the court of the Ottoman Empire requesting exemption from military service and to instead pay the *bedel-i askeri* tax (the Ottoman version of the *Jizya*), under the same arrangement that covered Christians and Jews as recognised non-Muslim Peoples of the Book. As things stood the Yezidis were legally treated as Muslims. The 14-point petition emphasises their distinctiveness, describing some of the key features of their religious practice. It says that every morning a Yezidi must go where there are no Jews, Christians, or Muslims around and view the sunrise, that he must visit the image of Melek Taus every April, September, and November or be declared un unbeliever, that if he hears a Muslim pray he must kill him and then kill himself, that he may not use the spoon or drinking cup of a non-Yezidi, and various other rules that would make living outside the community impossible.[53]

Clearly, this is the manifesto of a religion that wishes to close itself off from the outside world. Of the religions I am covering, the Yezidis are the purest expression of hermitage as a survival strategy. [54] In contrast to Zoroastrianism where there is at least some disagreement on these matters, conversion to Yezidism is unambiguously impossible, and marrying someone of another faith automatically makes one an unbeliever.[55]

But their impenetrability is not merely a result of castes and customs creating a culture that is closed-off in an interpersonal sense: they have also striven to be intellectually isolated, unseen in the world of ideas. Far from spreading the Word to make disciples of all nations, the secrets of their religion are kept even from their own people. Some of their sacred text are orally transmitted, some, misidentified. Only those who belong to the cast of elder and commit themselves to a life of sanctity may learn what there is to know. Secretiveness about one's own religious doctrines is a trait that Yezidism shares with other heterodox sects in the region such as Druze and Alawites, not to mention ancient pagan mystery cults as I will detail later.

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[53] Acikyildiz, 54-55.
[54] Sivan, 'Culture and History in Comparative Fundamentalism', op. cit.
[55] This applies clearly to the Yezidis of Iraq. Other Yezidi populations in Syria and especially Armenia and more latitudinal in this and other aspects. Acikyildiz 12-15, 65.

As a means of preserving one's people in a hostile world, it is a double-edged sword. On the one hand keeping certain doctrines secret and your own coreligionist theologically disengaged is good way of avoiding explicit competition between irreconcilable ideologies. However, when your enemies cannot directly criticise your beliefs because they don't know *what* you believe (and perhaps neither do you), they are encouraged to speculate and construct the most salacious calumnies from whatever suggestive bits of stray information filter out. If the Yezidis are so secretive about their religion then they *must* be devil worshipers! This same conspiratorial trap ensnares Western scholars who exoticise and orientalise their subjects, and thereby promulgate the very narratives that religious enemies use to condemn them.

This isolationism suggests a particularly troubled history. The Yezidis have by their own count suffered 72 persecution in their history, including particularly brutal ones at the hand of the Ottomans in the nineteenth century.[56] Historically, their knowledge of local hills caves allowed them to elude their less competent persecutors, and often mutually supported the Assyrian Christians of the same region. Christians have however always been recognised as a People of the Book among Muslims and therefore (usually) tolerated well enough, whereas the Yezidis practice and stranger and more obscure religion.

What is a Yezidi?

In the Summer of 2014, the Yezidis were in the news for the most tragic of reasons, when tens of thousands Yezidi refugees fleeing massacre, enslavement, and rape at the hands of the Islamic State, found themselves besieged on mount Sinjar. An event of this magnitude concerning such an otherwise obscure people presented something of a challenge for Western journalists. When reporting on the persecution of Christians in the Middle East it is not necessary to explain to one's readers what is a Christian. Reporters, however, might be forgiven for failing to satisfactorily sum up the nature and origin of the Yezidi religion, because even religious scholars do not have definitive answers.

The first thing to understand about the origins of the Yezidi religion, is that, like Islam and Christianity, it derives from a single founding prophet: the twelfth century mystic and ascetic Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir. The second thing to understand is that Sheikh Adi was not a

[56] Russell, 49-50.

Yezidi at all, but rather Muslim preacher, and there is no unambiguous evidence for the existence of the Yezidi religion as we know it today until centuries later. And the third thing to understand is that Yezidism is far older than the historical figure of Sheikh Adi. It derives from, among other things, ancient indigenous Kurdish religion known to scholars as Yazdânism[57], classical Greek philosophy filtered through traditional near-eastern 'pagan' religious expression wherein Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle become prophets of God, Zoroastrian angelology and demonology (and the revered Melek Taus may derive in part from Angra Mainyu, Zoroastrianism's evil counterpart to Ahura Mazda), Roman-era mystery cults such as Mithraism which themselves drew on all the aforementioned sources and more, Neoplatonism and Neoplatonist-influenced Christianity, Gnosticism (of course), and whatever it was that the Harranians practiced and believed at the time of the Islamic conquest.

If a particular faith appears to combine elements of more than one other religion into a new one, it may justly be called 'syncretic', but the term is slippery. All religions do this to some extent. Islam burst onto the scene as the putative successor to Christianity, but in many ways it is closer to Judaism, with its emphasis on religious law over theology, and insistence upon the oneness of God. The Quran plunders the Judeo-Christian canon in order to make its case, and in it God tell Jews and Christians that he is revealing for the last time the 'right' version of both their faiths. Christianity emerged as a Jewish splinter sect, and the faithful believe that the incarnation meant the supersession of Hebrew religion. Yet much of Christian theology is straight out of Greek philosophy, most notably the opening line to the Gospel of John, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word', and in later centuries the dense Aristotelianism of Aquinas. And as we have seen, Zoroastrian influence may have played an important role in the development of Judaism.

The more one looks for cross-pollination, the more banal it becomes; in fact it should become obvious that this is simply the natural way that religions develop. Secular polemicist often like to trumpet these connections as evidence that so-called 'revelation' isn't all that revelatory – just another turn of the wheel of cultural mimesis. ('Did you know, Ignorant Religionist, that Jesus probably wasn't born in December and Christmas is just an update of the pagan Saturnalia festival'). One may or may not find such arguments compelling in one

[57] As does the Yarsani religion of the Goran Kurds, which must be a close relative for these two religions have much in the way of common ancestry, to the best that scholars can reconstruct the religious genealogy

instance or another, but it's worth pointing out that *in principle* there is no reason that prior precedent has to invalidate new revelation. One may or may not find such arguments compelling as the case may be.[58] To the faithful, what was noble and true in older traditions found its apotheosis in the revelation of the True Faith.

For these reasons, I think it is misleading to lean too heavily on heavily on describing Yezidism as a 'syncretic religion'. It may contain elements of many other traditions, but so do basically all religions; Yezidism does not borrow more than its share. Nor is there any reason to think that it is the product of a conscious attempt to fuse two or more religions. That being said, the fact that many Yezidi rituals and beliefs that can be linked to pre-Abrahamic traditions, does give the impression of an Abrahamic overlay placed on a native 'pagan' background, and we know that this is one of the circumstances under which genuine syncretism – conscious or not – can occur. For instance Haitian Vodou is the result of African slaves' creatively interpreting their proselytisers' Christianity in the language of their native beliefs. God is identified with *Bondye*, the Catholic saints with *Lao* spirits. Something like this syncretic process in certainly plausible in the case of the Yezidis. One could suppose that before Christianity and Islam, our imaginary proto Yezidis were practicing their doubtless rich native religious customs, and thereafter the monotheisms came and left their mark as well, partly due to natural religious osmosis, and partly because these proto Yezidis were under pressure to conform to the prevailing orthodoxy. We only need to avoid leaning too hard on any neat and tidy just-so story, no matter how plausible. In truth, I think that the main reason why it is stuck with the 'syncretic' label, is simply that its history is so murky and disputed that there is very little one *can* say for certain about Yezidism, except that it contains elements of many other religions. All religions are syncretic; Yezidism is little else.[59]

Perhaps one way to describe our dilemma is to say that the origin of the Yezidis cannot be arrived at deductively. We cannot, like 9th century Islamic scholars tried to do, trace the chain of witnesses back in time, assessing the reliability of each source along the way, to arrive at the mouth of the Prophet and so the judge likelihood that He truly said what He is said to have said. Yezidism was not born in the full light of history, not, as is the case with Zoroastrianism, because it originates from a time too early or a place too remote for

[58] One interesting case is that the Quran appears to mention the pagan Hermes Trismegistus, who is the purported author of the 2nd century esoteric text, the *Hermetica*: 'Mention too, in the Scripture, the story of Idris. He was a man of truth, a prophet. We raised him to a high position'. Quran (19:56-67), tr. Abdel Haleem, 193.

[59] Perhaps synctretism is a normative judgement.

history to illuminate (so far as we know), but because the Yezidis' primordial ancestors – let us call them 'imaginary proto-Yezidis' – were apparently beneath notice to the writers and chroniclers of their age. Something resembling an answer can only be reached via abduction, that is, inference to the best explanation. We must gather clues and make creative inferences from what stray bits information litter the historical record to stitch together some plausible story of what really happened. Ideally, the historian should be a detective. But given the esoteric narratives we have to work with in these areas, he will become more like a conspiracy theorist. To that end, I will outline one-by-one the various theories of their origins, in the hope that, even though this cannot give us a sufficiently definitive answer to where they come from, it will allow us to fully understand the question.

Islam

Yezidis passed as Muslims prior to the Ottoman petition and other times in an attempt to escape persecution. A certain Yezidi prayer begins well for this purpose: 'there is no god but God', and since they may pray at regular intervals throughout the day, Yezidis are sometimes mistaken for Muslims; but the prayer continues: 'and the sun is the light of God'.[60] Now, I shall be very clear that by any reasonable inform assessment Yezidism is *not* a branch of Islam or even particularly similar to Islam. Their Trinitarianism and belief in reincarnation are alone enough to place them well outside the *Umma*, to say nothing of the more fundamental matter that they reject Muhammad as the final Prophet and the Quran as the world of God. One might express surprise then, that they often managed to pass themselves off as Muslims nevertheless. But this might come across as less absurd given that there are several other heterodox strains of Islam floating around the region, which the untrained eye might and the absent mind might confuse or conflate. These include the Mystical Alevi tradition, which commands a sizable portion of the population of Turkey, the Alawis of Syria, who have their own form of Trinitarianism, and the Druze, who still get away with claiming to be Muslim today, though their claim is scarcely more credible than the Yezidis'.

For one thing, Arabs tend to connect their name with Yazid ibn Muawiya, the greatest caliph of the Umayyad dynasty, who embarked the first Muslim. If, as has been suggest,[61] the Yezidis took their name in an attempt to escape persecution by claiming descent from a noble

[60] Russell, 47.
[61] Acikyildiz, 36.

family, they might have chosen better, for Muawiya has at best a mixed reputation among Sunnis and is hated by Shiites. More plausibly, partisans of Muawiya and the Umayyads may have survived the Abbasid revolution in the hard-to-reach Kurdish mountains. It is possible that these would-be rebels were attracted to Sheikh Adi, and thus have been the ancestors to the modern Yezidis. Two of the first Arab sources to mention the Yezidis by name support this interpretation. A twelfth century writer called Abd al-Karim al-Samani referred to a group he called the al-Yazidiyya, who lived a secluded life in the mountain and 'believe in Yazid ibn Muawiya and that he was righteous'. A more hostile 14th century account from Abu Firas Abd Allah ibn Shibl says 'These Yezidis were misled by Satan who whispered to them that they must love Yazid, to such an extent that they say we are justified in killing and taking the property of whoever does not love Yazid, and that to pray under the leadership of an imam is a forbidden act; so they ceased to join Friday prayer, but the most deviant one of them was one Hasan ibn Adi'.[62]

As we shall see, there are some particularly notable similarities between what the Yezidis teach about Melek Taus and Sufi belief about the devil. Sheikh Adi was probably directly by currents in Sufi thought, but for that matter it is also possible that the Sufis in turn got their notions from the proto-Yezidis. In general we can suppose that Yezidism and Sufism were swimming in the same cultural and intellectual soup.

These writings prepare the way for assuming that Yezidism is really little more than an Islamic heresy. Of course, Yezidis might *want* to believe that their faith has existed from the beginning of time, but as we have seen their most important prophet was actually an 11th century heterodox Muslim preacher. If any historical figure can be said to have been the founder of the Yezidi religion, it is Sheikh Adi.

Christianity

Moreover, the Yezidis believe that Sheikh Adi man is one of the three manifestations of God, which of course has immediate echoes of the Christian Holy Trinity. It is easy to presume that the Christian narrative that God manifested Himself as a man inspired the same sayings about Sheikh Adi a thousand Years later. Certainly they cannot have gotten the idea from Islam, whose strict monotheism does not allow Muhammad to be anything other than a man,

[62] Acikyildiz, 37.

whereas the divine nature of Sheikh Adi and the divine nature of Jesus are a good fit for each other. Their practice of once-in-a-lifetime baptism likewise echoes Christianity.[63]

As Russell recounts:

> 'Yazidis and Christians lived alongside each other for centuries and made common cause in past centuries against Muslim overlords. People would convert from one religion to another; one Yazidi even came to believe that in a former incarnation he had been a Christian priest. (Recently a Christian man in Germany called up a Yazidi woman claiming to be her father in a former life. The Yazidis were sceptical. Yazidis have no special objection to praying at Christian shrines and they will sometimes wear crucifixes – though as amulets to protect against evil, not as signs of belief').[64]

Together with their apparent belief in the prophets Abraham to Muhammad, one gets the impression that the Yezidis are particularly given to blithely assuming whatever religious beliefs are or were prominent in their homeland, with little regard to how it all fits together. Despite their rigorous ethnic exclusivity, their approach to belief seems to approximate a pagan mentality in which different 'truths' mix like water and irreconcilability is not an issue. I would suggest that their fusion of multiple traditions in the sense of 'I'm going to mix Islam and Christianity into an new and it's going to be better', so much as a habit of *interpretation Yezidi.* Jesus is Yezidi as Zeus is Roman.

The Aryan connection

Zoroastrianism is perhaps the most cited ingredient of the Yezidi syncretic recipe. In fact the name Yezidi itself is posited (among the numerous other theories) to derive from the historically Zoroastrian city of Yazd in Iran. Whether or not they actually hail from Yazd, the people and the place appear to be etymologically connected via various words for superior beings in Iranian languages. *Yazdan* can mean 'God' or 'Archangel' in Middle Persian while its New Persian derivative *Izid/Izad* means 'angel'. Moreover the verb *Yaz* - 'worship, honour, venerate' form the noun *Yazata* which means something like 'holy being' as in 'a being worthy of worship'.[65]

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[63] Russell, 50; Acikyildiz, 99.
[64] Russell, 50.
[65] Acikyildiz, 35.

Many scholars cite similarities between Melek Taus and Angra Maiyu, the evil counterpart to Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrian theology, which would entail that in the matter of being friends of the devil, there are at least two different satans from which the Yezidis are drawing. Iranian tradition posits that, despite its beauty, the peacock is actually the creation of Angra Mainyu, who made it in order to prove that He was capable of creating good things as well. Peacock imagery could certainly have filtered out from the angel-veneration of the Zoroastrian world to the proto-Yezidis, where it was shorn of its dualist association with evil and embraced as the image of the king of the angels.[66]

Taking a step back from these stray yet suggestive correspondences, I would suggest that when we speak of the apparent connections between Yezidism and Zoroastrianism, what we are really grasping towards is seeing the wider family of indigenous Iranian beliefs. Religion being a constituent of ethnicity, we may summarily assume that, just as there was rough continuity language, there was a rough continuity of religious practice within what I call the Aryan Triangle, stretching from the Zagros Mountains to the Central Asian steppe to Indian Punjab. Zoroaster was supposedly from the far east of the Iranian world (that is, leaving out India), so around modern day Afghanistan or possibly Turkestan. It is reasonably to assume that this Khorasani[67] preacher was able to move throughout the Aryan Triangle, and not only speaking a near enough language to the locals, but also assuming the same vocabulary and syntax – literal and metaphorical – when speaking of the supernatural world.[68] The same would then apply to the inhabitants of the Kurdish mountains who became followers of Sheikh Adi, and thus his Sufi Islamic teachings were syncretised with their pre-Islamic Aryan traditions. By the fourteenth century the Shafi'i scholar Ibn Kathir tells us about a people living region of the Yezidis who were once Magians but had recently set aside their old religion in favour of a hybrid with Islam.[69]

To speak in terms of families and subfamilies of ancient Aryan belief systems is, necessarily, to deal in speculative academic constructs. That being the case, we may say that

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[66] Acikyildiz, 74.

[67] Khorasan being a more or less generic term for the eastern reaches of Greater Iran.

[68] Although 'supernatural', with all the connotations this term carries modern people, is not a concept we should place in the minds of ancient Aryans, or any sufficiently distant people for that matter. 'Transcendental' might be more strictly accurate. On the difference, see Tim Crane, *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 4-8.

[69] Acikyildiz, 38-39.

Yezidism is, together with Anatolian Alevism and Goranian Yarsanism, one of the Yazdani religions, and Yazdanism is itself a subfamily of the greater Iranian family of religious traditions, of which Zoroastrianism is the most historically important member. Yet indeed today Zoroastrianism proper commands only around 100,000 adherents, compared to 10 or 15 million Alevis, 2 or 3 million Yarsanis, and perhaps 1 million Yezidis (all these numbers are *very* rough).

Mithraism

During the third and fourth centuries, the religious mood in the Roman Empire was changing.[70] Christians, pagans, neoplatonists, Gnostics, and Manichees sought a more revelatory and ecstatic spirituality, as if to trying to pierce the celestial sphere to let divinity cast its transformational light on the humdrum cosmos. But a fiercer desire for ultimate goodness and ultimate truth also made the reality of evil more apparent and troubling, and so even for a pagan like Plotinus the morally ambiguous world of the classical pantheon gave way to a more 'Manichaean' cosmology of good against evil. As a result people this time people sensed the preternatural world with greater dread than they had in the past, and tended to see spiritual beings as demons who might attack ones body and soul like some infectious pathogen. Deadly fear of demonic possession is quite a contrast to the oracular priestess who delivered her revered prophesies by inviting a god to speak through her mouth. 'To sin was no longer merely to err: it was to allow oneself to be overcome by unseen forces.'[71]

But if spiritual life involved an unseen battle between good and evil, then any religious movement would need to offer its adherents a means to defend themselves in this holy war. With the Crisis of the Third Century the Hellenistic religious institutions of the cities found themselves unable to meet these new spiritual demands as the temples were starved of funds and civic life in general was disrupted. Some turned to Christianity, which offered to erase one's previous sins through baptism, conceptualised as the rescuing of a soul from a malicious world. Others turned to various eastern or eastern-inspired mystery cults, leaving the public religious community of the city for secret communities of initiates. Among these, the Cult of Mithras took spiritual warfare rather literally. A departed Mithraian was

[70] 'The period between about 170 and the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 312 saw fast and anxious activity in religion'. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 50.
[71] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 53.

buried with weapons so that he could fight off demons who might oppose his soul from entering heaven. This was very much a soldier's religion. The ancient cult of Mithras is reasonably well-known in its own right, largely because it is often cited as having been an early rival to Christianity. Thus, people may be prompted to wonder how things been different, wonder why this strange, pagan mystery cult might not have become the dominant faith in the Roman Empire instead.

Well for a start, its preeminence within the Roman army allowed it to spread far and wide but remain everywhere shallow and thin. Religions which appeal to a particular caste are vulnerable to universalist rivals.[72] Furthermore, Late Antiquity was a time of strong anti-militarism among the common folk,[73] a sentiment that Christianity absorbed and exploited; and of course after the Empire had fallen the imperial army was no more but the peasants remained. And besides as the term might suggest, religions of the species *mystery religion* made initiation into their rites intentionally difficult[74]: like the Yezidis, Mithraism forbid non-members from learning its secret teaches, although unlike them Mithraists were at least in the business of proselytism. By contrast Christianity may demand supernatural saintliness of its flock, but initiation is accomplished by baptism alone. And yet this exclusive attitude is not the only feature of Mithraism and that lives on in Yezidism.

Other similarities include the practices of praying three times a day, worshiping (or revering) the sun, wearing girdles, sacrificing bulls, and the use of similar baptismal chapels built around and spring or stream.[75] If the Yezidis are in fact the last remnant of Mithra faithful then they attest that a tightly enclosed community rooted in place survives better than tightly enclosed community that places itself on the open market.

But the Yezidis are in any case not the descendants of the Mithraists, assuming that Mithraism came about in the same manner as most other religious innovations of the Roman Era: Greeks and Romans manufacturing their own cosmopolitan versions of the exotic practices they found in the east. Mithraism was to the religion that inspired it as Californian spiritualism is to Theravadan Buddhism. As to what inspired it, *that* would be better candidate for the religion of the proto-Yezidis.

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[72] Zoroastrianism withered in Persia partly because Islam appealed to the lower orders excluded from the society of the Magi. Similarly, Hindu converts to Islam tended to be of the lower castes.
[73] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 33.
[74] Russell, 56.
[75] Russell, 56-57.

This should teach us the lesson that whenever we try to pin the origin of some tradition, pan for correspondences between one people and another, think we can discern a direct line of descent, we should be careful not to get carried away and imagine that commonality means identity. But as Russell aptly explains, we don't *have* to imagine the Yezidis to be modern-day Mithraists or indeed the descendants of any particular ancient cult in order to understand the significance of such similarities. As he explains, 'our experience of religion is so conditioned by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (the Abrahamic faiths) that we forget that in the Middle East there has been, and remains, a wholly separate family of religions to which, loosely speaking, the Yazidis belong.'[76]

The Semitic connection: Yezidis, Alawites, Druze and the Harranians

Yezidis share with Syrian Druze and Alawites a belief in reincarnation, reverence for the planets and regard for Greek philosophers as prophets. This ties them to a constellation of Middle Eastern religious practices that seem to derive from the Semitic pagan practices of the classical era, indeed going at least as far back as the ancient Assyrians who also worshipped the sun.[77] These will have been the Eastern practices that inspired Roman soldier to develop the cult of Mithras.

The city of Edessa (whose modern name is Urfa or Salniurfa in southeastern Turkey) was home to a local pagan population who regarded the local fish as sacred. The cultural memory of this pagan practice survives in the modern inhabitants of the Turkish city, who still refuse to eat the fish. To the south of Edessa was the city of Harran. It was from there, perhaps, among other sources, that Roman legionaries became entranced with the cult of Mithraism.

When Harran was captured by Muslim armies in 638, it was not clear how the Harranians ought to be treated in their submission, and what the status of their religion ought to be. Whereas some wanted to destroy their moon temple (Yazidis revere the planets), another group of the Arabs apparently had relatives who practiced something similar to their religions, and so the Harranians were allowed to continue to practice their rituals under their new rulers. Two hundred years later, the Harranians appealed to the visiting Caliph to allow

[76] Russell, 53-58.
[77] Russell, 52-53, 61-65.

their practices to continue on the grounds that they were the Sabians, who – as noted earlier – are acknowledged in the Quran as one of the Peoples of the Book.[78]

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So, to recap: if one wishes to discern a direct line of descent, the most plausible story is that Yezidism derives from the religion of the Harraneans and related beliefs in south-east Turkey (which would have been considered western Assyria or northern Syria in ancient times) and the Aramean world more broadly. Such was also the ancient religion that was adapted by Roman soldiers and turned into Mithraism. But as Russell says 'It would be a mistake to think that [the Yezidis] are "the same as" this or that ancient religion just because they have cultural characteristics in common.'[79] After all, even after Edessa became Muslim, the locals continued to revere the fish as part of their new religion.

Holy Books

It is said that the Yezidis possess two sacred texts, the Book of Revelation and the Black Book, yet their authenticity is very much in question. Russell straight up calls them fakes, but this does not seem quite right. In all likelihood, much or all of the material contained within the books is indeed part of their religious tradition, but the books themselves are the curations of outsiders.

Copies of these holy books started to circulate among scholars in the late nineteenth century, generally packaged as part of works intended to explain this mysterious religion, written by and for outsiders looking in. The earliest known copy of these texts comes from an 1874 work by a Syriac Catholic priest who had lived among the Yezidis. He wrote down both holy books in Syriac along with a description of the Yezidis' history and culture.[80]

Various other compilations were created by scholars in subsequent decades, although the chain of transmission is often unclear. It is completely unknown when the Book of Revelation and the Black Book were originally composed or written down.[81] Compare this

[78] Russell, 53-65.
[79] Russell, 58.
[80] Isya Joseph, *Devil Worship: The Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yezidis* (Boston: R. G. Badger, 1919), *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/devilworship00jose.
[81] Acikyildiz, 89.

situation to the scholarly scrutiny that is often directed at the holy books of Christianity and Islam. Biblical scholars have long argued about when exactly the Gospels were written and by whom, and have been taught to search for forgeries, slights of hand, and political considerations behind the supposedly immaculate texts. Similarly, historians of Islam have pointed out that the Quran, believed to be the exact words of God spoken through Muhammad, was not written down until well after the Prophet's death. However, in both cases we know that the scriptural centrepieces of these religions were written, codified, and recognised within *at the very latest* a couple of centuries of the revelations and events they describe. Since Yezidism is really not a textual religion, indeed this people has historically been rather averse to writing in general (also said to be true of the ancient Persians),[82] it is quite likely that their 'books' are really snapshots of their oral tradition, emerging from the broader morass of religious traditions in the region.

In any case, their 'holy books' *per se* are of little relevance to the Yezidis themselves, for their real sacred texts are orally transmitted, and their catechesis is extremely in-person with a wonderfully complex system of student and instructor castes. In all likelihood, they are more-or-less accurate records of parts of the Yezidi oral tradition.

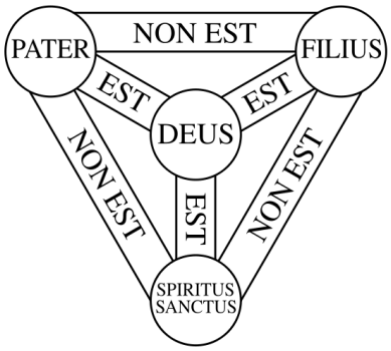
Devil worship

The Yezidis' enemies, notably ISIS, do know one thing about them: they worship the devil. Intriguingly, the basis for this is what most clearly associates Yezidism with Islam: namely the similarities between the Islamic devil and the Peacock Angel Melek Taus, who is the Yezidis' primary figure of worship. (There is also an association between the peacock and the negative source in Zoroastrianism, *Angra Mainyu*.[83]) Melek Taus is not God, however, but one of seven angels that God created according to the Yezidi creation story found in the Black Book,[84] and to whom he delegated his powers. As in Islam, the basic Yezidi story is that, when God created Adam, he ordered all angels and jinn to bow down to his new creation. Melek Taus, like the devil in Islam, refused. In Yezidi theology that is the point —

[82] Russell, 51.
[83] This and numerous other connections between Melek Taus and devil-like religious characters is explored in Acikyildiz, 73-80.
[84] Isya Joseph, *Devil Worship: The Sacred Books and Traditions of the Yezidis*, Part I Chapter II 'Mashaf Res – The Black Book', 36-37. https://archive.org/details/devilworship00jose.

God was testing his angels and Melek Taus was the only one who passed the test by refusing to bow to anything but God.

This story demonstrates quite clearly that the Yezidis are in fact monotheists, despite rarely invoking God in their prayers and directing their worship towards a pantheon of semi-divine beings.[85] While Melek Taus is their main object of worship, he exists as part of a trinity. Numerous religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions have perceived the sacred quality of the number three. In Christianity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy spirit are equal hypostates of the triune God, that is they are separate entities from each other, but God is identical to all three. The Godhead, lying in the centre of this triangle, emphatically cannot be conceived as a fourth member of the trinity. God is 'three in one', therefore three and one do not make four, three *equals* one.[86]



Belonging to this tradition, the Yezidis believe that God manifests Himself in three forms: Sultan Ezi, Sheikh Adi, and Melek Taus.[87] However in the Yezidi trinity these three characters are the face of a God who is extremely distant and transcendent, conceived of in a similarly apophatic manner as the God of the Druze or Plotinus's neoplatonic One.[88]

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The heterodox Islamic theologian, Hussein ibn Mansour al-Hallaj, declared 'I am God', by which he meant to be absorbed entirely by God, and says that God is one and the same with the universe. Rather than be cast down into Hell for his disloyalty, the devil

[85] Asatrian and Arakelova, op. cit.
[86] 266 "Now this is the Catholic faith: We worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance; for the person of the Father is one, the Son's is another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal" (Athanasian Creed: DS 75; ND 16).
[87] Acikyildiz, 2.
[88] Acikyildiz, 71.

himself was to redeem the world by his sacrifice. Melek Taus likewise is both the source of evil and salvation, for his tears extinguished hell. One could see this a doctrine of universal reconciliation.[89]

It seems very strange indeed that there is a strong tradition among thoroughly orthodox Islamic thinking of seeing the Devil as a redemptive and holy character. However, it makes more sense within the tradition of Sufi mysticism, which was often both hyper-Islamic and rather far out at the same time.[90] A recurring theme is yearning for the annihilation of the self, in being totally subsumed to God. To modern ears, this undeniably has a ring of hippie-mysticism, in the sense of feeling 'one with the universe', but also Yezidi theology with an important strain of Islamic Sufiism, and arguably, even, modern philosophy from Blake to Nietzsche.

The Yezidi belief that Melek Taus refused to bow to Adam, not out of pride, but out of a refusal to worship anyone by God Himself, is anticipated by accounts of the devil offered by Islamic theologians such as Hallaj, Sahl al Tustari, and Ahmad Ghazali (the younger brother of the better known al-Ghazali).[91] If Nietzsche's *Uebermensch* is someone who, when confronted with reliving their life over and over again for eternity, would embrace this fate without hesitation,[92] then Ahmad Ghazali's Satan, who accepts his eternal punishment in the fires of Hell with unflinching joy, is the greatest *Uebermensch* imaginable. In embracing his fate, Satan totally sublimates his Self to God. This is the greatest expression of *Amor Fati.* And, by inference, an indication that Yezidi theology is rooted in a place and a time and a philosophical sophistication that deserves respect.

[89] Russell, 74-76.
[90] Asatrian and Arakelova, op. cit.
[91] Acikyildiz 75-76, 85, Russell 74-76
[92] 'Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman – a rope over an abyss…I love those who do not know how to live except their lives be a down-going, for they are those who are going across…I love him wo lives for knowledge and who wants knowledge that one day the Superman may live. And thus he wills his own downfall'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 43-44.

7. Assyrian Christians and the Spectre of Religious Extinction

One can trace the descent of the many denominations of Christianity in the form of family tree. Scanning the chart, you can see where two factions split off from one another, at what council another was declared heretical, and where, occasionally, ecumenism prevailed and two denomination were joined in a single communion (albeit with a different liturgy). But more often an ecumenical council is attached to a fork rather than a join. The first seven 'canonical' councils are recognised by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants, but the Arian heresy earned its name by rejecting the first. Their reward for rejecting the First Council of Nicaea was to be condemned in the original 325 edition of the Nicene Creed.[93] Clearly, they seemed very threatening at the time, but they were to become a good example of the fact that often a group splits off only to die out. There is no historic Christian church still in existence which does not recognise the First and Second Councils of Nicaea[94]

Of course, you can't know without hindsight which group will sprout many offspring and which is an evolutionary dead end. The Dominican Order was once tasked with extinguishing the Cathar heresy, while the equally menacing Protestant heresy fell to the Jesuits. As a Dominican might say: 'Have you ever met at Cathar?' (This is an old and grim joke that Cullen Murphy repeats in his history of the Spanish Inquisition.[95]) Some groups split off recently on the tree and have score of close relatives. The Protestant Reformation, true to its name, produced a tangled skein of cousins, sisters, and half-sisters, who usually require a family tree all to themselves. In contrast, at the widest level of magnification, the Assyrians stand out as possessing the oldest continually-existing High-Church Christianity, and they have run on their own, almost, uncrossed track parallel to the rest of Christendom for more than fifteen-hundred years, ever since the third ecumenical council – the Council of Ephesus – in 431.

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[93] 'But those who say: "There was a time when he was not;" and "He was not before he was made;" and "He was made out of nothing," or "He is of another substance" or "essence," or "The Son of God is created," or "changeable," or "alterable"— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.'

[94] One can find a handful of Protestants (such as William Lane Craig) and neo-something-or-others who at least toy with rejecting the second canonical council – Constantinople, 381.

[95] Cullen Murphy *God's Jury: The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 10.

As with so many other schisms and heresies, it was a dispute over Christology that caused this split. Nestorius, Archbishop of Constantinople in the early fifth century, believed that Christ had two separate natures, human and divine, rather than mixed – as became the mainstream Catholic and Orthodox view (or combined into a single nature, as would be the later Monophysite view, from which derives the Miaphysite Christology of the oriental Orthodox Churches). Nestorius and his followers were condemned as heretics at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

At the time of Nestorius's condemnation, there already existed an independent Church headquartered in the Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon under the protection of the Shah. However the intendent destiny of the Church of the East (as it is called) was decided after refused to accept the Council of Ephesus. For this reason followers of the Church of the East are known to history as Nestorian Christians, although the extent to which its theology follows Nestorius himself is debatable.

After the schism Nestorians were persecuted in the Roman Empire, and many more found refuge under the Sassanian Shah. Shah Khosrow II (590-628) was in fact married to a Nestorian Christian named Shirin.[96] This Persian patronage was an early lucky break for the sect, and as we have seen throughout this thesis, there were many subsequent periods of imperial rule, including Ottoman rule, conducive to Assyrian Christian survival.

It is haunting, therefore, to consider, that after 1600 years, this branch of Christianity could face extinction in its native land, which could mean, in a certain sense, that it would not exist at all.

The simplest way to indicate the unhappy lot of Christians in the Middle East is to point to their population collapse. According one UK government report, Christians accounted for about 20% of the population of the Middle East a century ago in comparison to less than 4% today.[97] Decades of war and persecution have forced so many to abandon their homes and scattered them across the world that it may be little exaggeration to say to say we are living through the end of Middle Eastern Christianity. Of course, the precise situation varies a lot by region. Despite its past instability, Lebanon retains its historic religious diversity, and Christians will presumably remain a very large minority of the population for the foreseeable future. Likewise, the millions of Coptic Christians in Egypt are too large a

[96] Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 248.
[97] Patrick Wintour, 'Persecution of Christians 'coming close to genocide' in the Middle East – report', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2019, at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/02/persecution-driving-christians-out-of-middle-east-report

group to disappear any time soon. Nevertheless, the violence and persecution they have faced has been intense. One of the most important incidents came in February 2015 when ISIS fighters in Libya executed 21 Christians (20 of them Egyptian Copt) for refusing to renounce Jesus.[98] What makes this incident particularly important is that, for remaining loyal to faith in the face of death, the Coptic Church declared all 21 to be martyred saints. Their feast day is the 15th of February.[99]

The Christian community of Iraq has come has been all but wiped out is less than two decades. The Iraqi census of 1987 captured 1.4 million Christian or 8% of the population, but the number today is only a fraction of that.[100] The US State department estimated that there were 1.2 million prior to the 2003 invasion but only 300,000 by 2018.[101] One recent estimate indicates as much as a 10-fold diminishment from 1.5 million to 150,000 between 2003 and today.[102] It all adds up to the kind of reliable demographic one expects from a failed state. What is not in question is that the population has collapsed largely as a result of the chaos unleashed by the US invasion in 2003; perhaps a million have fled to the United States, Europe or neighbouring countries. The invasion accelerated a process that was underway for decades.

These numbers refer to the total number of Christians in Iraq, most of whom can be described as ethnically Assyrian, meaning they traditionally speak neo-Aramaic and use the Syriac alphabet as their liturgical script. However, because they are split into several different Churches, the terminology used to describe them and the nature of their ethnic identity is controversial. The religious groups that I would broadly refer to as 'Assyrian' include members of the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Ancient Church of the East. Of these only the last three are descended from the Church of the East. Yet the Chaldean Catholic Church is

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[98] Jack Carrigan, 'A Message from the Coptic Martyrs on the Value of Faith', *Catholic Herald*, 14 February 2019, at: https://catholicherald.co.uk/magazine/a-message-from-the-coptic-martyrs-on-the-value-of-faith/?platform=hootsuite

[99] *Vatican Radio,* 'Coptic Church Recognizes Martyrdom of 21 Coptic Christians', 21 February 2015, at: http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2015/02/21/coptic_church_recognizes_martyrdom_of_21_coptic_christians_/en-1124824.

[100] The New Humanitarian, 'Christian live in fear of death squads', 19 October 2006, http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/61897/iraq-christians-live-fear-death-squads

[101] Mark von Riederman, 'Remarks by Mark von Riederman', US Embassy to the Holy See, 25 June 2018 https://va.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-mark-von-riedemann/

[102] Cara Bentley, 'Archbishop of Iraq says talking to Jeremy Hunt about persecution was encouraging', *Premier*, 22 May 2019, at: https://www.premier.org.uk/News/World/Archbishop-from-Iraq-says-talking-to-Jeremy-Hunt-about-persecution-was-encouraging.

the product of a reunion with Rome which took place in fits and starts between the 16th and 19th centuries. As a result, only members of the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Ancient Church of the East (the product of a further schism in 1968) can be unambiguously described as 'Assyrians', since Chaldean Catholics tend to consider themselves a separate ethnic group.

The Assyrian Christian fate is emblematic of other minorities including Mandaeans, Yarsanis and Yezidis. The KRG, as we have seen, offers perhaps the closest thing to a safe haven for these minorities. Yet, even here, the Kurdish nationalist project puts pressure on non-Kurdish, or even ur-Kurdish, minorities. This is not entirely the Kurdish nationalists fault, for they are in competition with Iraq's Arab majority. Kurdification is in part their response to the pressures of Arabisation.[103] But it has caused the KRG to put pressure on Christian and Yezidi minorities.[104] That is not to say that the Kurds or the KRG are particularly malicious; one has to look at many of these incidents with a weary familiarity. The officials who spoke to us in March 2017 were probably making a glancing approach towards these issues when they eulogised the collective Arabization that their people had suffered, and insisted on a 'right of return' in order to reverse their losses.

It is therefore somewhat misleading to view Iraqi Kurdistan as a bastion of liberal modernity in a sea of religious fanaticism. A lot the reporting that emphasises things like the high status of Kurdish women, while not false, is directed especially to a Western audience. In truth, the Kurds are on the whole a very conservative people, as one might expect for a

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[103] Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 218-225.

[104] 'Human Rights Watch reported that Christian and other minorities have been victimised by Kurdish authorities' heavy handed tactics, "including arbitrary arrests and detentions, and intimidation, directed at anyone resistant to Kurdish expansionist plans". To incorporate Nineveh and other Christian lands into Kurdish territory, it was claimed Kurds have offered minorities inducements while at the same time "wielding repression in order to keep them in tow". It was alleged by some Assyrian groups that the systematic and widespread attacks on Christians that took place in 2008 in and near Mosul were committed with KRG responsibility "with the aim of undermining confidence in the central government's security forces" and at the same time strengthening confidence in the KRG. During the killings of Christians in Mosul, the Kurdish-dominated security forces seemed unable to stop the attacks. Those allegations were denied by the KRG, and the perpetrators have not been found. HRW also stated that "KRG authorities have relied on intimidation, threats, and arbitrary arrests and detentions, more than actual violence, in their efforts to secure support of minority communities for their agenda regarding the disputed territories". A Chaldo-Assyrian leader described the Kurdish campaign to Human Rights Watch as "the overarching, omnipresent reach of a highly effective and authoritarian regime that has much of the population under control through fear. During important elections, threats against minority community politicans and voters were reported.' Human Rights Watch, 'On Vulnerable Ground: Violence Against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories', 10 November 2009, at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/11/10/vulnerable-ground/violence-against-minority-communities-nineveh-provinces-disputed

relatively poor and (until recently) very isolated mountain race. They are traditional and tribal, but the twist is that their traditionalism is not particularly Islamic, but rather Kurdish, as we have seen. A Kurd is generally a Kurd first and a Muslim second. Elementary history should caution that nationalism is hardly a safer keeper of peace than religiosity. However, it does have quite different (and to most Westerners more familiar) political implications. Nationalism in its best sense can be liberal, but even liberal nationalism poses problems for religious minorities, as the next chapter will explore.

8. Beyond Liberalism

Most people today living in Europe and its descendants are liberals in the broadest sense of the term, and in this I am including people who are on both the right and the left, conservative and progressive, atheist and religious. Such was Alasdair MacIntyre's complaint when he wrote that liberalism accomplishes this hegemony by 'pre-empting the debate by reformulation quarrels and conflicts with liberalism, so that they appear to become debates within liberalism', with the result that our allegedly free debates are actually constrained to be arguments 'almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals, and radical liberals'.[105] As Westerners, this presumption of liberalism colours our perception of the non-Western world in ways that we are apt to forget. To guard against this, I will briefly define some of the elementary principles of this small-l liberalism, in order to illuminate what I mean when I refer to it in this thesis.

For the liberal, the individual is the fundamental unit of political organization. He exists prior to a social or political context, he is the ultimate holder of rights and duties, and political legitimacy flows out from individual to the society or state. This means that the individual must be fully realised prior to any social context; that is to say, one does not hold a right merely in view of one's position in society. Therefore, the liberal does not agree with Aristotle's view that men are like pieces on a chess board. The pawn does not make sense except as part of the board within the context of the game, and thus by analogy social units such as the *polis* or the family are prior to the individual. Another important part of this liberalism has to do with a purported neutrality as to the ultimate good of human existence, since individuals are going to have different notions of what ultimate good is, the state which comes out of this should take a position of ontological neutrality as to purpose of human existence. The liberal thus prides himself for his tolerance of moral pluralism, as individual are free to pursue and create different conceptions of the Good as they see fit.

In absence of a thick notion of human purpose, moral questions become innately irresolvable. The view that one cannot derive an *ought* from an *is* only applies in the absence of teleology. For example it makes perfect sense to say that a knife ought to be able to cut well, and thus to say that a blunt knife is a bad knife is simply a matter of fact. This is

[105] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 392.

because ‘knife’ functional concept, meaning it has an in-built teleology; knives as supposed to cut things.[106] As MacIntyre explains, pre-modern societies also understood human beings teleologically, and thus to say that so-and-so was good or bad person was likewise a matter of fact. Within a given teleological anthropology there is no discontinuity between moral judgements and factual statements.[107]

In MacIntyre’s view, the is/ought gap and the consequent indeterminacy of moral judgements is the legacy of the inevitable failure of the ‘Enlightenment project’ to justify morality on strictly rational grounds.[108] Without a commonly shared notion of human teleology, moral judgements can scarcely rise above the level of personal opinion, and thus moral disagreements appear insoluble. It is possible, perhaps, to see modern political liberalism not as a cause but a response to this breakdown. The ontologically neutral state befits the absence of ontological consensus.

Whatever their theoretical and historical origins, liberal principles are certainly important in the political conflicts covered by this thesis. Most obviously, much of international law and diplomacy takes broadly liberal conceptions of human rights, political organisation, and the individual for granted, to the point that even so-called enemies of liberalism often adopt that same language.

But we should not be fooled. In this thesis, we are dealing with peoples who must be understood in a different language if they are to be understood at all. Mark Lilla put it well:

> ‘It is that we are separated from our own long theological tradition of political thought by a revolution in Western thinking that began roughly four centuries ago. We live, so to speak, on the other shore. When we observe civilizations on the opposite bank, we are puzzled, since we have only a distant memory of what it was like to think as they do. We see that they face the same challenges of political existence we face, and ask themselves many of the same questions we do, regarding justice, legitimate authority, war and peace, rights and obligations. Yet their war of answering those questions has become alien to us. The river separating us is narrow, yet deep. On one shore the

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[106] *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ‘Political Philosophy of Alasdair Macintyre,’ at: https://www.iep.utm.edu/p-macint/

[107] Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 67-71; Elizabeth Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, *Philosophy 33.124* (January 1958), at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3749051.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A7dc66c51d6c23ccd9c4e9c5e7d4da7b4

[108] Macintyre, *After Virtue*, Chapter 5 ‘Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality had to Fail’, 61-74.

> basic political structures of society are imagined and criticised by referring to divine authority; on the other they are not.'[109]

This river of separation delineates an at-least potential contradiction in liberalism's claims of tolerating moral pluralism. Such tolerance can, in principle, only go so far, whether liberals admit it or not. Liberalism readily allows for like-minded individuals to cooperate in pursuing their own notion of the Good together, but is made uneasy when their notion of the Good requires restricting the freedom of others. This is old paradox of 'we will tolerate everything except intolerance', noted by Karl Popper and John Rawls among others.[110] This paradox of tolerance can help us understand what the Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI was getting at when he described modern Western society as a – similarly paradoxical sounding – 'dictatorship of relativism'.[111]

The intolerance of intolerance and the absoluteness of relativism do not prove that peace is impossible, but do demonstrate that, not only are there inherently irreconcilable worldviews, but there are inherently irreconcilable worldviews *above which there can be no neutral arbiter*. In MacIntyre's view liberalism functions by presenting the illusion of a neutral pre-theoretical analysis when no such thing exists. No choice is also a choice. MacIntyre is identifying what he regards as two mistaken assumptions that are often made in understanding ideas and their contexts. The first is to treat the realm of ideas as intellectually separable from their social context, such that the history of ideas runs parallel to the history of man. To the extent that historical contexts are relevant, it is only in explaining where these ideas came from, not what they fundamentally are. The second mistake is to treat society as almost or entirely unaffected by the realm of ideas, to take a sociological or vulgar Marxist view, in which social conditions, and people pursuing their interests within those social conditions, exist prior to theoretical commitments. But MacIntyre insists that it makes no sense to talk about interests prior theoretical commitments, *since those commitments will determine what those interests are taken to be*. Whether I think it is my interest to get rich or become a great warrior will depend on what I and my society consider to be the purpose of life. In MacIntyre's view these two opposite mistakes mirror and paradoxically reinforce one

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[109] Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 4-5.

[110] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), 216-221.
[111] Joseph Ratzinger, 'Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice', Homily, 18 April 2005, at: http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html

another, since they are both a means to untether ideas from traditions, which he believes that these are fundamentally the same thing.

The Yezidis, for example, observe of practices and strictures that would not play well within a liberal polity. Their rigid caste system, and their blanket ban on intermarriage, not only to non-Yezidis but among different castes, may offend Western sensibilities. But if the Yezidis cease their core practices then in a very real sense they have ceased to be Yezidis.[112] Therefore, to make the case that they should not only be free of persecution, but that the survival of this people is itself a positive good, requires a conceptual vocabulary that goes beyond generic liberal tolerance.

To grapple towards finding this vocabulary, we might start with a shocking question: What is wrong with genocide? I do not mean to ask what is wrong with mass murder, or with forced sterilisation, or with forced relocation and dispossession of land and property, or with inflicting hatred and persecution so intense that the afflicted decide to abandon their home and forget their past. All of these may be means to accomplish a genocide, and all of them are abhorrent in their own way, but they do not constitute genocide itself. The crime in question is not the killing of individual people, but the killing of *a* people – with or without resort to homicide, sterilisation etc. In fact, it may be accomplished by a method which is difficult to deplore in and of itself. A people can gradually be erased by the migration of a foreign people into their homeland until the newcomers form a majority. It is accurate enough to say that the European colonisation of the Americas precipitated a long-term 'genocide' against American Indians, just as there is no question that much violence with genocidal intent has been inflicted on indigenous peoples throughout history, but it is more generally true that the colonisers can simply swamp the natives rather than actively exterminate them.

Economic development can render old ways of life no longer viable, and as those ways of life die so do the cultures attached to them. Hunter-gatherer and nomadic herdsman cultures have been in inevitable retreat to agriculturalists from the Epic of Gilgamesh to the

[112] From the Soviet period and continued today, Yezidis in Armenia have been encouraged to maintain their cultural identity while minimising its religious aspect. Acikyildiz reports that they are rather ignorant of their religion and have heavily syncretised it with Christianity. They also have a lower birth rate and allow marriage outside the faith. 'A good example of this can be seen in the Armenian state's encouragement of and financial support for two quite distinct radio stations: one aimed at the Yezidi Kurds and the other at the Muslim Kurds, even though these are numerically almost non-existent in Armenia. This political will, which insists on the uniqueness of the Yezidis in relation to all of the Kurds, extends as far as the teaching of "their" language in the public schools.' Acikyildiz, regarding Yezidis as Kurds, finds this disappointing. Acikyildiz, 12-15.

settling of the American frontier. Buffalo and horses may not range freely across agricultural allotments. And in any case the mountain farmer may freely choose find work in the city, just as he may see no need to teach his children his dying language, or instruct them in the religion of their ancestors. And who are we to refuse his preference for the new ways? And if the government should encourage these changes through propaganda or political and economic incentives, how can we deplore free migration, economic development, and education in the most relevant modern skills?[113]

In his classic work, *Imagined* Communities, Benedict Anderson observed that cultural supremacism is by no means the sole preserve of traditionalists. Anderson recounts the words of early nineteenth-century Colombian liberal Pedro Fermin de Varas:

> "To expand our agriculture it would be necessary to Hispanicize our Indians. Their idleness, stupidity, and indifference towards normal endeavor causes one to think that they come from a degenerate race which deteriorates in proportion to the distance from its origin…it would be very desirable that the Indians be extinguished, by miscegenation with the whites, declaring them free of tribute and other charges, and giving them private property in land."

To this Anderson comments:

> How striking it is that this liberal still proposes to 'extinguish' his Indians in part by 'declaring them free of tribute' and 'giving them private property in land', rather than exterminating them by gun and microbe as his heirs in Brazil, Argentina, and the United States began to do soon after. Note also, alongside the condescending cruelty, a cosmic optimism: the Indian is ultimately redeemable…[114]

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[113] 'As Fukuyama writes in *The Origins of Political Order*, "Religious beliefs are never held by their adherents to be simply theories that can be discarded if proved wrong; they are held to be unconditionally true, and there are usually heaty social and psychological penalties attached to asserting their falsehood."' Hamid, 30.

[114] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 13, 14. Slavoj Zizek wrote in a similar vein: '[L]iberals insist that children should be given the right to remain part of their particular community, but on condition that they are given a choice. But for, say, Amish children to really have a free choice of which way of life to choose, either their parents' life or that of the "English," they would have to be properly informed on all the options, educated in them, and the only way to do what would be to extract them from their embeddedness in the Amish community, in other words, to effectively render them "English." This also clearly demonstrates the limitations of the standard liberal attitude towards Muslim women wearing a veil: it is deemed acceptable if it is their free choice and not an option imposed on them by

Extinguish the culture, elevate the man

Anderson's critique of liberalism here is analytical rather than normative. He is, however, leading us into deep and contentious waters. Consider this polemic from Missouri State University philosopher Daniel Kaufman:

> 'To try and convince others to abandon their religious identities is an inherently hostile act and involves at least tacit contempt for the other person's heritage. The only reason to try and convert someone, after all, is because one believes the other's religion to be defective in some way, an ungenerous attitude in itself. To target poor, vulnerable people, who may practice indigenous, native religions, which are often ancient and at risk of extinction, only makes the practice more abhorrent, and the tactics employed by missionaries are often highly sophisticated, involving misrepresentation, deception, and soft coercion, as well as taking advantage of their targets' weaknesses. The religious cultures of the world are human treasures. Efforts to erase or absorb them, consequently, cannot be anything but objectionable in the extreme.'[115]

On one level, this is absurd: Only a mind corrupted by vacuous modern liberalism could affirm such childish platitudes. If taken seriously, the notion that all efforts to erase other cultures are necessarily 'objectionably in the extreme' is the road to cultural relativism.

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their husbands or family. However, the moment a woman wears a veil as the result of her free individual choice, the meaning of her act changes completely: it is no longer a sign of her direct substantial belongingness to the Muslim community, but an expression of her idiosyncratic individuality, of her spiritual quest and her protest against the vulgarity of the commodification of sexuality, or else a political gesture of protest against the West. A choice is always a meta-choice, a choice of the modality of choice itself: it is one thing to wear a veil because of one's immediate immersion in a tradition; it is quite another to refuse to wear a veil; and yet another to wear one not out of a sense of belonging, but as an ethico-political choice. This is why, in our secular societies based on "choice," people who maintain a substantial religious belonging are in a subordinate position: even if they are allowed to practice their beliefs, these beliefs are "tolerated" as their idiosyncratic personal choice or opinion; they moment they present them publicly as what they really are for them, they are accused of "fundamentalism." What this means is that the "subject of free choice" (in the Western "tolerant" multicultural sense) can only emerge as the result of an extremely violent process of being torn away from one's particular lifeworld, of being cut off from one's roots.' Slavoj Zizek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 51-52.

[115] Daniel A. Kaufman, 'Provocations', *The Electric Agora: a modern symposium for the digital age*, 15 February 2016, at: *https*://theelectricagora.com/2016/02/15/provocations-4/.

Worse, it encourages us to abandon our real moral duties to other people and other cultures under the distorted banners of 'cultural preservation', 'tolerance', and 'love'. But to truly love someone is to desire the best for them – parents do not love their children correctly by encouraging them to maintain their bad habits – and for that you need a robust conception of the Good. Kaufman wants us to forfeit our ability to make any value judgements whatsoever.

But this is really a caricature of Kaufman's important insights. Of course, love of the cultural Other must always coexist with the need to make judgements about the rightness or wrongness of different ways of life. And everybody recognises this at least some of the time. I think Kaufman's point is simply that any effort to erase another culture is *always* a hostile act, *even when it is the right thing to do.* A missionary who persuades the tribe of baby-killers to abandon the ways of their ancestors and cease their blood-sacrifices to the great god Moloch, has committed an act of great violence against another people. Do not let discourse about betterment and ordering to the common good dislodge this lump in your throat.

In September 2015, the canonisation of the 18th century Franciscan friar Junipero Serra generated some controversy. The Blessed Serra was tireless in his mission to spread the faith among the natives of California, not only teaching them to understand and affirm the Catholic religion, but working to integrate them fully into the civilised life with property and all the accoutrements necessary for a sustainable life of farming, under the paternal care of their newly installed parish priest. Doubtless not all his activities are mild and inoffensive to the sensitive mind, but then the American frontier in the eighteenth century was not a mild and inoffensive place. There is every reason to believe that Serra was motivated purely by love, to care for and guide a people whom most Europeans were content to detest and destroy.[116] And yet, to defend Serra brings us close to defending Kant's proposed 'euthanasia of Judaism,' as Lilla notes.[117] Or, as Patrick Deneen argues, along with the project freeing individuals of their unchosen social bonds, by abolishing those institutions or

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[116] And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your [f]stay *here* in fear; **18** knowing that you were not redeemed with [g]corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition from your fathers, **19** but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. **20** He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was [h]manifest in these last times for you **21** who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.' 1 Peter 1, 17-21. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Peter+1&version=NKJV

[117] Lilla, pp. 140-162.

undermining those social relations which perpetuate that unliberty, liberalism appears to say, in effect, 'you shall be forced to be free'.[118]

The point is: almost everybody believes that cultures and peoples have inherent value, even if they do not realise it. We see this in the particular horror that is attached to the word genocide. We assume that trying to wipe out an entire race of people, to aim at the extinction of a particular nation, ethnicity, or religion, is a crime above merely slaughtering a similar number of people without such discrimination. The Nazi's crime was not simply murdering millions of people, but the fact that those people were *Jews.* Attempting to erase a culture, even by means without physical violence, is understood as a violent act in its own way.

In the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars of recent years, the Yezidi people have been subjected to a spectrum of genocide, from the most horrific massacres and enslavement by ISIS,[119] to alleged forced conversion at the hands of Turkish aligned rebels.[120] According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, some 3000 Yezidis, mostly women and children, remain unaccounted for after having been abducted by ISIS in 2014.[121] As the last patch of ISIS territory was being reduced in early 2019, many enslaved Yezidi women and children were sold into the hands of criminals seeking to capitalise of ISIS's fall by demanding enormous ransoms for their captives.[122] The fate of thousands remains unknown.

They have also, in the shifting and messy circumstances of such times, been confronted with the collision of ethnocide and mercy. Of the many of Yezidis kidnapped by

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[118] 'The expansion of markets and the infrastructure necessary for that expansion do not result from "spontaneous order'; rather, they require an extensive and growing state structure, which at times must extract submission from the system's recalcitrant or unwilling participants. Initially, this effort is exerted on local domestic economy, in which the state must enforce rationalisation and imposition of depersonalized modern markets. Eventually, however, this project becomes a main driver of liberal imperialism, and imperative justified among others by John Stuart Mill in his treatise *Considerations on Representative Government*, which he calls for compulsion over "uncivilized" peoples in order that they might lead productive economic lives, even if they must be "for a while compelled to it," including through the institution of "personal slavery".' Patrick J Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 50.

[119] Richard Hall, 'Yazidi leaders call for help finding thousands of missing women and children kidnapped by Isis', *The Independent*, 28 February 2019, at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-syria-iraq-women-children-missing-yazidi-a8800996.html.

[120] Patrick Cockburn, 'Yazidis who suffered under Isis face forced conversion to Islam amid fresh persecution in Afrin', *The Independent*, 18 April 2018, at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-yazidis-isis-islam-conversion-afrin-persecution-kurdish-a8310696.html.

[121] https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5cd156657.pdf

[122] Chloe Cornish, 'Yazidi hostages traded to criminals as Isis loses ground', *Financial Times*, 14 March 2019, at: https://www.ft.com/content/cabb2f68-4570-11e9-a965-23d669740bfb

ISIS and displaced by war, thousands have been given new homes in the adoptive care of Muslim families. Rescued from slavery, rape, and death, this kindness has been answered with outrage from Yezidi activists, and it's not hard to see why.

The Yezidi community is facing the prospect of thousands of their own children being raised as Muslims, often knowing little about their Yezidi identity. Some families have been able to reclaim their children from foster parents, but these children often have no memory of their former family or the religion they were born into. Indeed, even to say that such children are *really* Yezidi and not Muslim is already a possible source of conflict. As one adoptive mother explained 'My objective was to win favour [with God]. To be honest, I wanted to teach him my religion, Islam'.[123] Note that Islam considers anyone who has recited the *shahada* to be a Muslim who may not apostasise.

Even more tragic is the case of children born of rape to Yezidi women and their ISIS captures. Freed mothers have been forced to give up their children to adoption or to orphanages because, since Yezidism allows neither conversions nor mixed marriages, their religious leaders will not recognise these children as Yezidis.[124] Of course this rule makes historical sense: the closed-off nature of the Yezidi community is a means of resisting assimilation, and the taboo against mixed marriages a response to Islamic law bestowing on offspring the religion of their father while forbidding Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men. Furthermore as of 2015 Iraqi national law registers anyone with at least one Muslim parent as Muslim, even if born of rape, and while conversion to Islam is permitted conversion from Islam is illegal.[125]

Ontological warfare[126]

[123] Isabel Coles, 'Sold by Islamic State, bought by strangers: Yazidi child reunited with family', *Reuters*, 3 February 2017, at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-mosul-child/sold-by-islamic-state-bought-by-strangers-yazidi-child-reunited-with-family-idUSKBN15H2A0

[124] Jane Arraf, 'In Syria, an Orphanage Cares for Children Born to Yazidi Mothers Enslaved by ISIS', *NPR Morning Edition*, 6 June 2019, at: https://www.npr.org/2019/06/06/729972161/in-syria-an-orphanage-cares-for-children-born-to-yazidi-mothers-enslaved-by-isis?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social; Arraf, 'Freed From ISIS, Yazidi Mothers Face Wrenching Choice: Abandon Kids or Never Go Home', *NPR*, 9 May 2019, at: https://www.npr.org/2019/05/09/721210631/freed-by-isis-yazidi-mothers-face-wrenching-choice-abandon-kids-or-never-go-home

[125] Ewelina U. Ochab, 'Let the Children be Yazidis', *Forbes*, 3 April 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2019/04/03/let-the-children-be-yazidis/#152f739622f8.

[126] A term suggested to me by Sarah Albers.

How is liberalism to cope with such cases? The harshness of a Yezidi community rejecting its women's children, or Muslims being unwilling to give up Yezidi born children whom they now consider converted to Islam, can only be understood if we appreciate the ontological stakes for both the Yezidis and Muslims. In the Western context, it is worth recalling a notorious 19th Century episode between Catholics and Jews. A Jewish child in Bologna, which was then the second largest city of the Papal States, was secretly baptised by his Christian nanny, because he was sick and she feared for his death. When he was six years old, authorities removed the child from his family and took him to Rome, for the simple reason that the Catholic Church considers it its solemn responsibility to raise a baptised child as the Catholic that the baptism made him. This is not just an artefact of long-gone superstitions; from perspective of Cannon Law his seizure was justified, and serious Catholics justify it to this day on the basis of similar ontological stakes.[127] This section will explore those stakes in philosophical – which is to say, very real – terms.

We might start by noting that a liberal analysis does not have conceptual room for understanding the distinctions between treason and apostasy. If a man defects from country A to country B while the two are at war, country B will no doubt feel itself justified in taking the defector in and using him as an asset, but will also recognise that, inasmuch as A and B are both sovereign states with legal equality, this man is indeed a traitor and is considered such by all who accept the legitimacy of the state system. Compare him to a man who converts from Christianity to Islam. His erstwhile coreligionists are certainly right to consider him an apostate, given what they believe, but his new brethren certainly should not, since one cannot be an apostate for abandoning a false religion for the true one. Although they might acknowledge the resulting estrangement from his former community as an unfortunate side effect of substituting truth for error, the only good solution to that would be the conversion of the entire community.[128] At most it might be recognised that this man *would* be an apostate *if Christianity were true*; but since it is not, he is not. His act was a betrayal in the same sense that one 'betrays' the principle that 2+2=5 to affirm that 2+2=4. So, in the former case, a God's-eye-view sees all nations as equally legitimate in their respective domains, and thus all

[127] Romanus Ceasario, 'Non Possumus', *First Things*, February 2018, at: https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/02/non-possumus

[128] 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.' (Luke 14:26), https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+14%3A26&version=KJV

interactions between nations are symmetrical. But in the latter case, God must fix His gaze on a single ordering principle; there is no higher court of appeal.

National identity is by its nature relativised, because no nation as such aspires to universality. A nation that encompasses all mankind is not a nation at all. By contrast religious claims may be absolute, and therein lies the difference between apostasy and treason. Of course, culture and human psychology can make these abstractions much more nebulous in practice. Anderson points out that as the West advanced into the modern era the forces causing a more national mindset were also leading to a more relativised view of religion.[129] , e.g. the way Marco Polo described the religions under the Khan of China.

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What are these strange doctrines, these adventures in scholastic space, these labyrinths of the mind, that man has erected, as if to divide himself into incommensurable species living in separate Universes of Truth? Why not tear down these barriers? They are but monuments to our petty hubris, to think that we have read – or even just partially glimpsed – the final words of eternity. We must know that our final Good is our common human fellowship, and violent divisions are the enemy of human flourishing. But there lies the problem: it is our metaphysical disagreements about the nature of human flouring, the nature of the Good, and the final purpose of man, that entails these heavily fortified walls. There is no avoiding metaphysical questions. If two people are at a fork in the road and argue about which path to take, one cannot sensibly say to them, 'stop your petty arguing and go the right way'.

Perhaps a liberal is the person who favours taking neither road, to give up on the journey and forget the destination. Perhaps one whose deracinated individualism leads to a kind of 'occasionalist ironism' wherein there is never any last word on anything.[130]

The two great religions of the world, Christianity and Islam, are alike in that they are both universalist and soteriological.[131] Put plainly, they both believe that all human souls are destined for reward or punishment in an afterlife, and that submitting to their creed is the only means of achieving salvation. As a result, the fundamental project of both Islam and Christianity is soteriological, and the fundamental duty of a Muslim and Christian is to work

[129] He detects a waning in the 'unselfconscious coherence' of Christendom already in Marco Polo's description of the religious policies of the Great Khan of China. Anderson, 16-17.
[130] Tracy B. Strong, 'Forward' to Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, op. cit., xiii-ix.
[131] The third largest, Hinduism, is not comparable in that it is not a creedal religion.

for his own salvation and for the salvation of all mankind – for that salvation is the ultimate purpose of human existence. This same basic point was teased out by Samuel Huntington in making the argument that Islam and Christianity are by their nature driven to oppose one another.[132] In his particular formulation, the three key characteristics of both religions are that they are Missionary, Universal, and Teleological. That is, they are both religions that seek to convert others, claim to be true for all people and all times, and believe that they and they alone disclose the ultimate purpose of human existence. Jesus instructed his followers to 'make disciples of all nations',[133] and god commanded Muhammad 'Messenger, proclaim everything that has been sent down to you from your Lord – if you do not, then you will not have communicated His message'.[134] Unsurprisingly the existence of two incompatible 'Great Commissions' (so to speak) led to conflict.[135]

This is why it is no contradiction to say that Christianity and Islam are literally united by their common differences. Each is able to immediately understand the other's claims to exclusivity, since he makes the very same claims. As Bernard Lewis wrote in the fraught aftermath of 9/11, 'When Christians and Muslims said to each other, "You are an infidel and you will burn in hell," each understood exactly what the other meant, because they both meant the same thing.'[136] It was a different matter entirely when Christendom sought to subdue pagan remnants on its northern and eastern frontier, or when Muslim proselytising and Jihad reached Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, and African animists. These were asymmetrical ontologies; only one side claimed absolute ontological justification in the manner that Lewis suggests. In the same way, their greedy monotheism contrasts with the pagan mindset of classical antiquity within which another people's gods could readily be 'translated' into one's own a la *interpretatio graeca.* Hence the ease with which Herodotus explained to his readers that 'Osiris' is the Egyptian name for Dionysus, and that when they make statues of Zeus they give him the head of a ram and refer to him as 'Amun'.[137]

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[132] Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs,* Summer 1993, at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations.
[133] Matthew 28, 19.
[134] Quran 5: 67.
[135] Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, *The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 419-446.
[136] Bernard Lewis, '"I'm Right, You're Wrong, So Go to Hell": Religions and the Meeting of Civilization', *The Atlantic,* May 2003, at: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/05/-im-right-youre-wrong-go-to-hell/302723/
[137] Histories; 2, 42

It is also perhaps why the vague ecumenism of writers like Karen Armstrong is so annoying to religious rigorists. To the Christian, the only sense in which Islam and Christianity are of the same essence is that Islam is just as committed to being false as Christianity is committed to being true.

It is obvious that, within such an understanding, disagreements about how one achieves salvation are of the greatest importance. Within such an understanding, the stakes in the argument are literally infinite.[138] Furthermore, ever since certain intellectual luminaries in Western world began to seriously challenge traditional religion, there has been a certain undeniable tension, an eschatological anxiety, gnawing at all sides in the debate.[139] Auden captures this anxiety of separation in four lines of 'Leap Before You Look':

'A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear.
Although I love you, you will have to leap,
Our sense of safety has to disappear.'

Restricted versus unrestricted ontological warfare

Ontological warfare is restricted if both sides can, in principle, appeal to some higher power to mediate their dispute, whether this be God, the Pope, International Law, etc. Ontological Warfare is *unrestricted* if the principle being fought for is not limited by any principle outside itself, or in other words if both sides reject the highest principle recognised by the other. [140] Furthermore, the principle does not permit any ecumenism unless that ecumenism is conceptualised as absorption of the one principle by the other. Any religion that is universal, exclusivist, and missionary, is by definition engaged in Unrestricted Ontological Warfare with any other person or thing that refuses to submit to it. In Schmittian terms, we could say that such a universal religion must regard that which intrinsically opposes it not merely as a

[138] 'The most profound boundary in the Late Antique world was the one drawn after death. The invisible chasm between the 'saved' and the 'damned' stood like a deep moat round the little groups, pagan and Christian alike, the came to chisel out a position for themselves at the expense of the time-honoured consensus of traditional worship. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 57.
[139] https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/01/liturgy-of-liberalism
https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/11/a-christian-strategy
[140] 'These [conflicts] can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm, nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party'. Carl Schmidt, *The Concept of the Political*, tr. George Schwab (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27.

political enemy but a foe, that is 'an enemy who no longer must be compelled into retreat to his own borders only' but 'utterly destroyed'.[141]

In such a situation, the only possible peace consists of the unconditional surrender of one side, that is, by agreeing to submit to the highest principle recognised by the erstwhile enemy.[142] (However this does not preclude utilising some apparently higher arbitrating authority when it is in the interest of spreading your own ontological worldview.) So, while such a religion is incapable of making a permanent peace with any who refuse it, permanent physical war is not inevitable and peace agreements are possible so long as they are conceptualised as temporary truces. This is recognised in the traditional Islamic distinction between the House of Islam and the House of War; in an ultimate sense Muslim powers exist in a state of permanent war with the non-Muslim world, but peace treaties in the form of 'truces' are permitted.

It starts to seem as though trust is impossible between people of irreconcilable universal worldviews. How can you sign a treaty with someone who denies the very ontological foundation of morality?[143]

But the alternative to submitting all mankind to a single principle simply a state of nature where no people or persons recognised any authority above their own power and interest? Man has dreamt of uniting the world under a universal Christendom,[144] a universal Ummah, or a universal regime of liberal law, precisely to *avoid* the nihilism of a war of all against all.

This war of all against all is what partisans of the old order detect in the logical foundations of liberalism, sovereignty, and secularism. The outward peace of the Social Contract is underwritten by 'ontological violence'[145], namely the assertion of sole legitimate use of force by the sovereign. But ontological warfare simply replicates *between* different

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[141] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 36

[142] 'You can dialogue with the fallen world — indeed, you've got to. But you shouldn't expect to live at peace with the fallen world — unless and until it is converted.' Thomas Pink, 'Why Catholic Teaching is Increasingly Embarrassing to Church Leaders', *National Catholic Register*, 23 October 2018, at: http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/why-catholic-teaching-is-increasingly-embarrassing-to-church-leaders-part-1.

[143] Some level of common purpose and practical cooperation is certainly possible, however. J. Augustine, 'Integralism, Macintyre, and Final Ends: Towards a Secular Account of Christian Politics', *The Josias*, 21 March 2018, at: https://thejosias.com/2018/05/21/integralism-macintyre-and-final-ends-towards-a-secular-account-of-christian-politics/.

[144] The same kind of messianic ambition cannot exist in nationalist ideology, Anderson, 7.

[145] Andrew Willard Jones, *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Academic, 2017), 13. Jones is citing the phrase coined by John Milbank.

ontologies what it denies within its own realm. It is like the Great Khan believing all the inhabitants of the world pay tribute to his divine majesty – meaning he has no rival nations or kings, only rebel subjects – and thus declaring 'world peace' (ontologically speaking) in a single stroke. Except the Khan is God, and his deputy (who or whatever that may be) makes the announcement.

Ontological warfare is irresolvable by its nature but historically and conceptually this doesn't have to lead to a permanent state of actual violence. An ontologically strict rule does not have to be tyrannical nor demand the violent extermination of ontological aliens. Western religious tolerance is often said to derive from the historic separation of Church and State in Western Christianity,[146] in turn deriving from Augustine's suspicion of state power and strong denial of the perfectibility of human society within the *saeculum.*

Augustine was very far from an anarchist or a pacifist. Indeed he supported extensive political and religious coercion[147] including famously the use of torture against Donatist heretics. But did not endorse these things out of a grand and optimistic account of state power, but viewed harsh rule as a tragic necessity brought on by man's low condition after the fall. It is precisely because of the profound weakness of human agency that Augustine believed a Christian should obey his rulers rather than pursue the impossible goal of heaven on earth. He obeys his rulers because a good man is obedient, not because his rulers are good.[148]

So while Augustine placed great emphasis on the importance of social order and obedience to authority, he came in his later years to see government authority as existing to preserve a basic level of peace, which he considered the highest temporal good,[149] in a radically fallen world, rather than to build a substantially good temporal society in harmony with the rational order of the universe. As Robert Markus explained:

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[146] The extent to which this truly applies to medieval Christendom is questionable. As Andrew Willard Jones explains, the oppositions of 'Church and State' and 'Religious and Secular' meant something very different in the middle ages. Willard Jones 'Introduction: Church and State'.
[147] Robert Markus, *Saeculum: history and society in the theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge University Press 2007), Chapter 6, '*Coge intrare:* the Church and political power', 133-153.
[148] Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 28-38.
[149] 'For peace is so great a good that even in relation to the affairs of earth and of our mortal state no word ever falls more gratefully upon the ear, nothing is desired with greater longing, in fact, nothing better can be found.' Augustine, *City of God* 19.11, tr. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 866.

> 'Having discarded the idea of a rational order which can be embodied in a society and of a justice attainable in social terms, in the *City of God* Augustine adopted an image of the social order which sprang from a strong sense of conflicting purposes, of uncertainties of direction, of divergent value systems and irresolvable tensions in society. In this perspective, government and its agencies, though their function is a more modest one of keeping outward order, have as crucial a place as ever.'[150]

In other words he had an extremely deflationary view of the ultimate aim of earthly authority. Although coercion is often necessary, including in defence of the true faith and to 'compel them to come in',[151] its purpose is to maintain the peace necessary to allow the City of God to exist beneath the surface of temporal affairs.

One could say that Augustine's concept of temporal peace (in contrast to the true peace of the heavenly city) could be better described as a kind of truce, in that it does not aim at ultimately resolving tensions but limiting their damage. A long-standing truce is always possible. But in Iraqi Kurdistan it would have to be a truce not only between Muslims, Christians, Yezidis and Zoroastrians, but also between Western liberals (including, in a sense, Kurdish nationalists) and the aforementioned faithful.

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[150] Markus, xii.

[151] Markus, 134. 'And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.' (Luke 14:23), https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+14%3A23&version=KJV

9. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have considered the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East as a problem that needs to be understood not just through the disciplines of political history, international relations and state theory, or by analysing the psychological and material trauma wartime devastation. They must also be understood in their own religious and theological terms. I do not claim a deep and comprehensive understanding of what Yezidism, Zoroastrianism, or Eastern Christianities really mean from the inside. But what I have tried to do with my partial or even impressionistic analyses of their religious consciousness is to demonstrate how that consciousness matters in the realm of secular politics, because these religious beliefs are of paramount importance not only to the minorities themselves, but also to their persecutors among the majority – in this case, Muslim – populations.

In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that, in a society with a profound lack of metaphysical consensus, the Ottoman imperial system, notwithstanding undoubted repression and violence, was for important theoretical reasons a more successful means of keeping the peace and allowing substantial populations of potentially persecuted groups to survive amidst a latently hostile Muslim civilisation.

Chapter 3 analysed the transition from an imperial system to a western system based on the nation state and, in theory, the civic equality of citizenship. The chapter explained why this turned out to be a profoundly problematic model of state organisation for the region. Sykes-Picot is usually criticised for drawing borders based on French and British imperial interest rather than natural ethnic national coherence. This critique is silly. It is possible that closer attention to facts on the ground could have produced somewhat better nation states than the straight lines that were drawn on the map. But the deeper problem is not that borders of nation states were drawn badly, but that they were drawn at all, on the assumption that unitary nation states were possible. This was problematic for several reasons. The most obvious is the thoroughly mixed demographic situation; even attempting to approach homogenous states would make American gerrymandered congressional districts look reasonable. But it is also the nature of the divisions – the viability of religious enclaves in a metaphysically divided society rested on a physical and legal segregation incompatible with the civil principles of unitary nation states. The problem was obscured for much of the 20th Century. Dictatorships that replaced monarchies in the second half of that century were effective at denying everyone political self-determination, including the political imperatives

of their religion in a no-longer legally segregated society. Importantly, states such as Iraq and Syria – having been ruled in succession by British and French administrations, monarchy, and republic – gave way to dictatorships of minority elites, whose first targets of repression were the ethno-religious majorities – Sunnis in Syria and Shia in Iraq – with the consequence that repression of minorities was not the first-order problem. (To be sure, under these dictatorships and preceding monarchies, religious minorities suffered along with the majority, as in the thousands of Assyrians killed in the 1933 Simele massacre.)

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq, ostensibly bringing democracy, unleashed – as discussed in Chapter 4 – an open sectarian contest to capture the state, with dire consequences for the non-Muslim minorities. The Sunni dispossession drove many Sunnis to extremism, targets of which were religious minorities as well as the Shia. (One of the centres of conflict was Mosul where Sunnis and Christian had lived together; the Christians did not fare well.)

Amidst terror, it appeared that the Kurds, with their national aspirations and troubled history of American patronage, would finally succeed in consolidating the autonomy and self-rule that had been incubated under American protection after the first Gulf War. With secular nationalism and motivated and well-trained Peshmerga, the KRG Kurds have offered comparative safety to Yezidis and Christians, put to the test in 2014 by the genocidal onslaught of ISIS. However, while Kurdistan offers basic stability and the absence of direct and violent persecution, this is not to say that Kurdish nationalists, Yezidis and Christians are natural allies. There is a dense demographic overlap, for example, between Kurds and Assyrian Christians, and the departure of many of those Christians has been conducive to the aspirations of Kurdish nationalists.

Minority religions

The next three chapters are historical, cultural and theological in nature, and constitute my effort to provide an understanding of the rich histories of these endangered minorities, and to begin to understand why some religious conflict is irreducible. Against the backdrop of a supposed Zoroastrian resurgence in the KRG, Chapter 5 explored the connections between this ancient religion and Kurdish identity. Zoroastrianism is a tradition that, even though long-gone from the Kurdistan region, set the cultural and theological background to the religious history of Kurdistan and its surroundings. One reason this matters is that it is an important prerequisite to understanding the Yezidis, because Zoroastrianism appears to be one of the sources of Yezidism. Moreover, given their shared Aryan roots, what we say about

relations between Kurds and Zoroastrianism applies equally to the relationship between Kurds and Yezidis.

Chapter 6, the longest and most detailed, examined the Yezidis. This is most important case for my thesis, for several reasons. First, the Yezidi religion contains the syncretic 'pagan' elements of Zoroastrianism, but unlike Zoroastrians, Yezidis have an uninterrupted existence as a substantial religious group in and around Iraqi Kurdistan. And, as noted, they are the purest manifestation of hermitage as a survival strategy – what Sivan calls 'enclave culture'. Furthermore, they exist at an intersection of religious sectarianism and Kurdish nationalism, because of their ethnic and linguistic connection to the Kurds.

Chapter 7 considered Christians who, despite the unique and interesting history of the 'Nestorian' Christianity of the Assyrian Church of the East, requires the least explanation of either history or theology. However, the situation of Christians in Iraq and the Middle East in general is sufficiently precarious that it illuminates the general plight of the region's religious minorities.

Ontological battles

Just as the previous chapters tried to explain the theological roots of religious identity, Chapter 8 explored the theoretical limits of liberalism in resolving the issues of religious coexistence. These include the difficulties of constructing viable nation states after World War I, as well as the problematics of liberal solutions to religious conflicts. A poignant example is the fate of Yezidi children fathered by ISIS rapists – both their treatment under Iraqi law that defines them as Muslims, and Yezidis who reject them precisely because of the rigidity of enclave culture, which is in turn a mechanism for Yezidi survival.

The thesis thus arrives to concluding reflections on the nature of insoluble ontological divides. I want to end here by re-emphasising that my pessimistic conclusions about the irreducible nature of these divides does not assume that the Middle East, or any other place of humanity, is fated to endure an unending state of Hobbesian violence. In philosophy as in politics, conflict can be managed.

I draw no particular policy conclusions and I have no concrete policy proposals. I would note that the Western and particularly American efforts to support Christians in the region, understandable as these may be, must be implemented with care. It was US intervention and regime change that made difficult conditions for religious minorities almost intolerable. The Obama administration was certainly justified in intervening again to stop the ISIS genocide of Iraq's Yezidis, among other purposes. Investment and general support of

religious minorities can do some good, but we should also remember that these minorities are already likely to be seen as fifth columnists.

Religious minorities have been suspected throughout history of being traitors. Among the charges historically levelled at the Jews by Christians was opening the doors to Muslim invaders. One might point out that the Jews of Europe had every reason to resent what the Christian majority had done to them. But there is a deeper problem here: what loyalty can a Jew be expected to have to a Christian state *even in principle*? What loyalty does a Muslim owe a Jewish state, and what loyalty can a Yezidi or Christian be expected to have to a Muslim state? One what grounds, *other than pure force*, but rather by communicating in terms of right and wrong, can a state ordered to Catholicism demand the loyalty of non-Catholics? How can you make *any* appeals to justice, truth, or right and wrong across a fundamental religious divide, without at least implicitly demanding that the other adopt the truths of your religion?

Recent experience suggests that military intervention creates more chaos than it resolves. However, liberal internationalists should note that it is not just the problems of war that complicate their task; they should also be careful about trying to introduce liberal values and governance through political, economic and cultural influence. These efforts fail or even prove counterproductive as a consequence of the theoretical incompatibility of liberal democracy and fierce ontological divides. By no means should liberals imagine that their humanitarian values exempt them from the lust for domination.[152] On the contrary, to purport to speak for humanity is a dangerous act of political aggression, since it denies one's opponent's allegiance to humanity. A war fought in the name of humanity has the potential to be the most inhumane war in history.[153]

The best we can hope for may be an uneasy truce.

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[152] To use Augustine's concept. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of St Augustine*, 36.

[153] 'Humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy, at least not on this planet. The concept of humanity excludes the concept of the enemy, because the enemy does not cease to be a human being – and hence there is no specific differentiation in that concept. That wars are waged in the name of humanity is not a contradiction of this simple truth; quite the contrary, it has an especially intensive political meaning. When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponents. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilisation in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy.

The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism.' Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 54.

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11. Appendix: the Quran on Religious Tolerance

Source: *The Quran*. A Translation by Abdel Haleem. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Had God willed, He could have made you one congregation. But He thus puts you to the test through the revelations He has given each of you. You shall compete in righteousness. To God is your final destiny—all of you—then He will inform you of everything you had disputed. (5:48)2

'They [People of the Book] also say, "No one will enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian." This is their own wishful thinking. [Prophet], say, "Produce your evidence, if you are telling the truth." In fact, any who direct themselves wholly to God and do good will have their reward with the Lord: no fear for them, nor will they grieve. The Jews say, "The Christians have no ground whatsoever to stand on", and the Christians say, "The Jews have no ground whatsoever to stand on" though they both read the Scripture, and those who he no knowledge say the same; God will judge between them on the day of resurrection concerning their differences'. (2: 111-113)

'Any revelation We cause to be superseded or forgotten, We replace with something better or similar' (2: 106)

Sura 5 details how God sent the truth to the Jews and the Christians before, yet many of them deviated from the righteous path, and it reaffirms that all Believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabians, will be judged according to their faith and their adherence to the law on the Last Day.

'God took a pledge from the Children of Israel. We made twelve leaders arise among them, and God said, "I am with you: if you keep up the prayer, pay the prescribed alms, believe in My messengers and support them, and lend God a good loan, I will wipe out your sins and admit you into Garden graced with flowing streams. Any of you who now ignore this pledge will be far from the right path". But they their pledge, so We distanced them [from Us] and hardened their hearts. They distort the meaning of [revealed] words and have forgotten some of what they were told to remember: you [Prophet] will always find treachery in all but a few of them. Overlook this and pardon them: God loves those who do good. We also took a

pledge from those who say, "We are Christians', but they too forgot some of what they were told to remember, so We stirred up enmity and hatred among them until the Day of Resurrection, when God will tell them what they have done.' (5: 12-14)

'We revealed the Torah with guidance and light, and the prophets, who had submitted to God, judged according to it for the Jews. So did the rabbis and the scholars in accordance with that part of God's Scripture which they were entrusted to preserve, and to which they were witnesses. So [rabbis and scholars] do no fear people, fear Me.'

We sent Jesus, son of Mary, in their footsteps to confirm the Torah that had been sent before him: We gave him the Gospel with guidance, light, and confirmation of the Torah already revealed – a guide and lesson for those who take heed of God.'

'We sent you [Muhammad] the Scripture with the truth, confirming [all] the Scripture that came before and protecting it: so judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do not follow their whims, which deviate from the truth that has come down to you. We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and he will make clear to you the matters you differed about. So [Prophet] judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do no follow their whims, and take good care that they do not tempt you away from any of what God has sent down to you. If they turn away, remember that God intends to punish them for some of the sins they have committed: a great many people are lawbreakers.' (5: 42-49)

'You [Prophet] see many of them rushing into sin and hostility and consuming what is unlawful. How evil their practices are! Why do their rabbis and scholars not forbid them to speak sinfully and consume what is unlawful? How evil their deeds are! The Jews have said, "God is tight-fisted", but is they who are tight-fisted, and they are rejected for what they have said. Truly, God's hands are open wide. He gives as He pleases. What has been sent down to you from your Lord is sure to increase insolence and defiance in many of them. We hae sown enmity and hatred amongst them until the Day of Resurrection. Whenever they kindle the ifre of war, God will put is out. They try to spread corruption in the land, but God does not love those who corrupt. If only the People of the Book would believe and be mindful

of God, We would take away their sins and bring them into the Gardens of Delight. If they had upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have been given abundance from above and from below: some of them are on the right course, but many of them – who evil is what they!

Messenger, proclaim everything that has been sent down to you from your Lord – if you do not, then you will not have communicated His message – and God will protect you from people. God does not guide those who defy him. Say "People of the Book, you have no true basis [for your religion] unless you uphold the Torah, the Gospel, and that which has been sent down to you from your Lord," but what has been sent down to you [Prophet] from your Lord is sure to increase many of them in their insolence and defiance: do no worry about those who defy [God]. For the [Muslim] believers, the Jews, and Sabians, and the Christians – those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds – there is no fear: they will not grieve.' (5: 61-69)

'As for the believers, those who follow the Jewish faith, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the idolaters, God will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection; God witnesses all things. Do you not realise [Prophet] that everything in the heavens and earth submits to God: the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, and the animals? So do many human beings, though for many others torment is due. Anyone disgraced by God will have no one to honour him. God does whatever he will. These two kinds of people disagree about their Lord. Garments of fire will be tailored for those who disbelieve, scalding water will be poured over their heads, melting their insides as well as their skins, there will be iron crooks to restrain them. Whenever, in their anguish, they try to escape, they will be pushed back and told "taste the suffering of the fire". But good will admit those who believe and do good deeds to Gardens graced with flowering streams; there they will be adorned with golden bracelets and pearls; there they will have silken garments. There were guided to good speech and to the path of the One Worthy of all Praise'. (22: 17-24)

Pledge of Honesty

"On my honour as a student of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it."

Signature: _____

Vita:

John Christoph Allin was born in 1993 in Berlin, Germany. An Austrian-American dual national, he grew up in Kingston, an outer borough of London, UK. Before enrolling at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, he attended Kingston Grammar School for A-levels in History, Latin and English, and read Modern History at St. Anne's College, Oxford University. He has worked for nine summers on the island of Elba as a garden labourer and research assistant to Professor David P. Calleo of Johns Hopkins University, and has completed an internship at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Washington D.C. Christoph is an avid runner and he has rowed competitively for Kingston Grammar School and St. Anne's College, Oxford.