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Yezidi Understanding of the Concept of Religion

Abstract:
When referring to their religion, Yezidis do not self-identify using one unifying name or term. This article examines this phenomenon. It also explores the terminology used to designate the Yezidi religion in academic contexts, and considers why some Yezidis reject such terminology outright. The article also reviews the historical development of the concept of religion itself and its meaning across different time periods, considering the current understanding in academic environments and its general applicability in Yezidi studies. In the interests of integration, mutual tolerance and understanding, it ultimately seeks to determine how Yezidi diasporas worldwide can identify and align themselves with the concept of religion per se.

Keywords:
Religion, Yezidis, Yezidism, *Şerfedîn, Êzdiyatî, Milet, Dîn*.

Introduction

Although Yezidis have been the subject of various studies for quite a long time, the question of their religious self-identification has rarely been raised. As a rule, the authors of various works have assigned names themselves to Yezidi beliefs and cults; for instance: 'the Cult of the Peacock Angel' or simply 'Yezidism'. However, the most common designation used to describe the object of research has been 'Devil Worshippers'. Given heterogeneity and the origin of these terms, it is interesting to consider how Yezidis themselves consider the concept of religion per se.

For this purpose, the first step is to examine the very concept of religion, tracing its historical development and origins. Then, we explore whether the Yezidis themselves have an equivalent term in their language and an understanding of the general concept of religion within their worldview. Ultimately, addressing these fundamental questions can potentially contribute to the establishment of a clear religious identity for Yezidi diasporas worldwide, which accords with the general understanding of religion and foster integration, mutual tolerance and understanding based on shared terms of reference and on the extant conceptual framework of what religion is.

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The Term Dîn (Religion) and its Environments in the Yezidi Context

Nowadays, when we ask a Yezidi about their personal religious affiliation, the immediate answer often varies. Some interviewees simply say 'Yezidi', identifying their religious belonging using their endonym. Others, with a certain degree of probability, will respond with '*Êzdiyatî*' (Yezidiness). Additionally, a number of interviewees, especially those from post-Soviet countries and the Sinjar region, may answer with '*Şerfedîn*'.[1]

Such ambiguity in religious self-identification among Yezidis highlights the very novelty of this concept for them. It raises questions about which word should be used to define their faith and, more broadly, what religion means to Yezidis themselves. To explore this, we must consider the Yezidi worldview paradigm. Let's begin by examining the three fundamental components of Yezidi faith: îman (unshakable conviction), *atqat* (sincere faith with all the heart), and *dîn* (religion).[2] These three aspects of faith are personified as follows: îman is represented by *Tawûsî Melek*, *atqat* by *Siltan Êzîd*, and *dîn* by Şerfedîn.[3] Among these, the third element *(dîn)* is typically translated from Arabic as 'religion' and is also perceived by some of Yezidis as the equivalent of the term religion, but how much this reflects reality and is actually applicable to Yezidis remains unclear. Therefore, the meaning of dîn needs to be considered in more detail.

The word *dīn* itself is an Arabic word that has entered the Yezidi language. However, even in Arabic it has a kind of overlapping meaning since it incorporates both classical Semitic denotations (law, duty, judgment, including the judgment of the last day) as well as the meaning of the Middle Persian word *dēn*, (faith, vision, true believers, and religion).[4] For the purpose of this research the A. Jeffery's translation the word *dēn* as 'religion', because of the modern undefined paradigm of its understanding, will be deliberately ignored as an unnatural term for people not from the Christian world, originating from Western Europe. Besides, if we consider the origins of the word *dēn*, we should refer to the Avestan *Daēnā*, which is the genius of faith of Zarathushtra,[5] in addition to being the escort of the soul to the other world. Appearing in the form of a maiden, *Daēnā* presents her beauty commensurate with the good thoughts, good words, and good deeds of the soul during the period of their earthly life.[6] In addition, it should be emphasized that in the language of the *Gāt* (Early Avestan) mainly abstract concepts

[1] In the Yezidi tradition, he is a savior who is currently absent from this world but will certainly return at the end of time (see: Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 4, 33).
[2] See: Пирбари and Щедровицкий 2016: 249.
[3] *Ibid*.
[4] See: Jeffery 1938: 131–3.
[5] See: Dhalla 1914: 123.
[6] See: *Ibid*: 176.

prevailed, while in Late Avestan already a transition to more concrete qualities with new associations took place. Bearing in mind that these qualities became expressed in personifications,[7] it should be concluded that *Daēnā* initially denoted a simple vision and became a personified phenomenon thereafter, whereby the term began to acquire additional mythological connotations.

Returning to the Arabic *dīn* and turning to the Qur'an, we can undoubtedly see this word very often in a variety of contexts and meanings, which make it altogether difficult to pinpoint a single definition of this word. At the same time, there is much scope for interpretations of Qur'anic texts in this regard. Thus, the term *dīn* was interpreted by many as a set of three components, the set and understanding of which varied depending on the position of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence to which the author belonged. For example, Hanafites[8] authors emphasized the importance of faith, Ash'arites[9] authors focused more on the importance of observing the rules, while Hanbalites,[10] and later Ibn Taymiyya dwelled upon the importance of 'true tradition' of the Qur'an and Sunnah.[11]

Within Yezidi tradition, the term *dīn* holds a significant place as a fundamental element of faith, albeit with a certain duality. Firstly, it refers to the performance of certain actions that are associated with tradition, such as the rites of *sunet* (circumcision) and *biskhildan* (cutting off a tuft of hair from a one-year-old boys). Similarly, it also refers to *mor kirin* (blessing with water from *Kaniya Sipî*[12] in Lalish), and the prerequisite that all "Yezidis must have five priests (*şêx, pîr, hosta* (teacher), *merebî* (mentor), *yar-birê axretê* (brother in the beyond) all of whom belong to the castes of sheiks and pirs)".[13] It also extends to the celebration of various (religious) holidays, observing fasts, performing prayers and so on. Thus, in this context, the word *dīn* can be defined within the framework of the Yezidi paradigm and Yezidi practice, as a duty to be observed. Secondly, the term can be applied in the context of belief in the coming of a savior on the Day of Judgment, whom the Yezidis call Şerfedîn.

Speaking about how the word *dīn* came to Europe, we should turn to the history of translations of the Qur'an. The *Surah al-Fatihah* was translated by Salman Farisi into Middle Persian as early as the 7th century, and the flourishing of the variety of

[7] See: *Ibid*: 76–7.
[8] Representatives of the Hanafi Madhhab (see: Abdal-Haqq 2006: 26).
[9] Representatives of the theological school of Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari (see: Halverson 2010: 14–22).
[10] Representatives of the Hanbali Madhhab (see: Abdal-Haqq 2006: 28–9).
[11] See: Милославский et al. 1991: 70.
[12] 'The White Spring' is the holiest spring of the Yezidis It flows out of the Mshat mountain in the Lalish valley (see: Pirbari et al. 2008: 34–5).
[13] *Ibid*: 13.

translations of the complete text of the Qur'an into various languages began in the 16th century. The first translation of the entire text of the Qur'an into a European language was done by Robert Ketton. It is a translation into Latin, which dates from 1143.[14] Later this translation was prepared for printing by Theodore Bibliander in 1543 and published by Johannes Oporin. As early as 1550, the translation was improved in terms of content and form, and subsequently republished.[15] It was from this time onwards that Europeans actively translated the Qur'an into various European languages. Initially, these translations were secondary in nature, as they were made from Latin translations. This approach resulted in a significant loss of intellectual depth and led to the ambiguity of some Arabic words, including *dīn*, which came to be interpreted in different ways.

It should be emphasized that at the same time, the Reformation[16] was actively underway in Europe, within the framework of which a global rethinking of the role of the church in the social life of Europeans took place. Against this backdrop, a transformation of the term *religio* occurred in Europe. The word *religio* itself, has an unclear etymology and derives either from *relegere* (to turn constantly or deliberately observe), or from *religari* (to bind oneself back), or from *reeligere* (to choose again).[17] However, this is in principle not very important for the purpose of this research. Rather, it is much more valuable to trace how this word has come to mean somewhat different concepts throughout its history. Thus, in the period of the pre-Christian Roman Empire, the term *religio* denoted more fear and anxiety about something,[18] the obligation to perform certain ritual actions,[19] as well as taboos.[20]

A new form of understanding of the term *religio* was introduced by Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius in his work *Divine Institutes*, written between 303 and 311 AD, in which he used *religio* for his apologetics and as a concept to connect with God through the bonds of God piety.[21] In addition, through Lactantius's *Divine Insititutes*, the concept of *religio* became associated with Christianity. Later, Jerome of Stridon, in one of the first translation of the Bible from Greek into Latin, in the late 4th century, used *religio* in the sense of ritual, translating the Greek word *threskeia* (religious observance, ritual practice, way of worshipping) in the New Testament and the Old Testament into various

[14] See: Bibliander 2010: i.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] For the concept of the Reformation (see: Clark et al. 1922: 1–22).
[17] See: McBrien 1994: 359.
[18] See: Fowler 1911: XV–I.
[19] See: *Ibid*: 198.
[20] See: *Ibid*: 34.
[21] See: Lactantius 2007: 296.

terms for ordinance and ritual prescription,[22] further associating the term *religio* exclusively with the Christian world of Western Europe.

Later, during the High Middle Ages, the term took on new meanings, such as a life associated with monastic vows and monastic orders.[23] For instance, Thomas Aquinas interprets *religio* as an important moral virtue associated with justice.[24] Nevertheless, it is only during the Reformation that the term takes on the shape of a modern concept,[25] whereby the use of the word *religio* became increasingly synonymous with the word 'faith' in English.[26] It should also be noted that although research on numerous peoples such as the Yezidis utilizes 'religion' as a category, these peoples have no similar equivalent in their languages at all.[27]

To conclude, it can be said that the concept of religion per se appeared in the Western world and continued to be developed in the academic environment, and is therefore a product of Western culture. However, from the beginning of its existence in the academic environment, the term 'religion' and its concepts have yet to acquire a unified meaning; in one definitions and theories we can find shifts of emphasis on the concept of the sacred and on ritual practice, as Emile Durkheim established.[28] Authors such as Edward Tylor, James Frazer, and Mircea Eliade contributed in a different way, attributing significance to the belief in the supernatural.[29] In addition, some critical scholars question the value of the term 'religion', such as John Hinnells wrote:

There have been numerous debates about definitions and presuppositions in the study of religion. Many scholars have questioned whether there is any such 'thing' as religion, there are only the religions. But some have gone further and questioned the value of the term 'religion' at all. In various languages, in Sanskrit for example, there is no word for 'religion'. Is 'religion' a Western construct imposed on various cultures as a part of intellectual imperialism? It has been said that 'words mean what we want them to'. My own opinion is that the word 'religion' is useful, but should be used with caution.[30]

The uncertainty around the concept of religion can also be traced throughout the study of religions, beginning with the 19th century, when the discipline of religious studies was born. At that time, it was already considered that Christianity would not be the

[22] See: Smith 1991: 28.
[23] See: Huizinga 1922: 86.
[24] See: Harrison 2015: 7–8.
[25] See: Insoll 2004: 6.
[26] See: Taylor 1998: 271.
[27] See: McCutcheon 2001: 10.
[28] See: Pals 1996: 99.
[29] See: *Ibid*: 164.
[30] Hinnells 2005: 2.

only religion, but the only so-called world religion. In addition, it was held that there were also two national religions, namely Judaism and Islam. Furthermore, scientists derived a third group of religions, which were considered to be various idolatrous beliefs. With the beginning of research on Buddhism, a substantial shift occurred whereby the scientific community began to perceive Buddhism and Islam within the framework of world religions, alongside Christianity. Later, the category 'world religion' was supplemented by Shintoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Judaism. However, in recent scholarly activity, the typology of world religions has come to be considered no longer useful.[31]

Over time, as scholars discovered new beliefs of different peoples, they faced even greater methodological uncertainties in identifying what could be considered a religion and what not. Things became particularly complicated in the 20th century, when various secular ideologies emerged that had the trappings of religion, but the representatives of these ideologies rarely considered themselves religious. This is especially true of nationalism[32] and Marxism,[33] which some scholars define as secular religions.

In summary, the term 'religion' and its definitions were unknown to the Yezidis themselves until recently, as they are a product of Western culture. However, they were familiar to Western explorers who came into contact with the Yezidis to study Yezidism as a religious and social phenomenon. Contact between Yezidis and Western travelers, explorers, missionaries, and adventurers began to gain momentum in the 18th century, and from the 19th century onwards, research of an academic nature on the Yezidis gained momentum. In the early days, such research on the Yezidi community did not have a definite term religion of the Yezidi people. Moreover, whether the Yezidis were considered to have had a religion from the point of view of Western-centered researchers is unclear. For the enclaving Muslims the Yezidis were just "apostates",[34] pejoratively called "devil worshipers"[35] i.e., a dubious Middle Eastern sect.

Considering the written accounts listed below as well as in other early sources which mention the Yezidis, we may clearly observe that there are no specific words for their religion. Neither Yezidism, nor Şerfedîn nor any other term is used by the authors themselves, much less by the Yezidis with whom the authors came into contact: *Nineveh and Babylon: With Travels in Armenia, Kurdistan and the desert: Being the Result of a Second Expedition Undertaken for the Trustees of the British Museum* (1853) and N*ineveh and its Remains: With an Account of a Visit to the Chaldean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis,*

[31] See: *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions* 2006: 1148.
[32] See: Smart 1998: 22–5.
[33] See: *Ibid*: 25–6.
[34] Frank 1911: 1.
[35] Badger 1852: xxi.

or Devil-Worshippers, and an Enquiry Into the Manners and Arts of the Ancient Assyrians (1849) both by Austen Henry Layard. This also applies to *The Nestorians and Their Rituals: With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan* [*Kurdistan*] *in 1842-1844, and of a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1850; Also, Researches on the Present Condition of the Syrian Jacobites, Papal Syrians, and Chaldeans, and an Inquiry Into the Religious Tenets of the Yezeedees* [*Yezidis*] (1852) by G. P. Badger. *Persia Past and Present: A Book of Travel and Research, With More Than Two Hundred Illustration and a Map* (1906) by A. V. Williams Jackson also belongs to this category. In addition, in the 20th century, on the territory of the USSR, a controversial issue arose regarding the ethno-nationality of the Yezidis, with the Yezidis being viewed by some as an independent ethnicity and by others as ethnic Kurds – so-called Yezidi Kurds,[36] with the latter considering the word 'Yezidi' itself to be the name of the original Kurdish religion. However, if we trace the history of how the Soviets were disposed towards Yezidis and Kurds, the uncertainty regarding the definition of the ethnicity of each of the two groups is undeniable. Thus, according to the 1926 USSR census, Yezidis and Kurds were considered separate peoples, while in subsequent USSR censuses of 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979 and 1989, both Yezidis and Kurds were listed together as Kurds.[37] With the independence of the former Soviet republics, they were again defined as independent peoples in the countries where the Yezidis mainly reside.[38] This fact suggests that the definition of Yezidi ethnic and religious identity was based more on political than on scientific grounds.

Returning to the origins of the early Yezidi studies, we should emphasize the difficulty of studying these people due to their culture of secrecy. The Yezidis also tried, through deception and cunning, to lure people into delusions regarding their beliefs.[39] The closed nature of their relations with outsiders often led researchers to collect quite contradictory information regarding the beliefs of the Yezidis and their sacred figures; in addition to the fact that the information obtained was very limited, i.e. it was based on individual interviews rather than on quantitatively substantial data. In this regard, an aura of mystery grew around the Yezidis, which led researchers to conflicting theories, in which some saw Yezidism as a remnant of ancient Eastern cults (Mazdeism and Manichaeism). Others used Nestorian documents, attributing Christian sources to the Yezidis, whereas alternative perspectives perceived Yezidism as Muslim heresy.[40] Thus, one can agree with Kreyenbroek that, in many ways, "Modern Yezidism, therefore,

[36] See: Ali et al. 2021: 259–60.
[37] See: Амоев and Мосаки 2014: 16–58.
[38] See: *Ibid*: 59–78.
[39] See: Lerch 1856: 48.
[40] See: Lescot 1938: 19.

was widely thought of as the debased form of an older and more impressive cult which scholars – consciously or unconsciously – set out to reconstruct".[41] Unfortunately, this approach steered the study of the Yezidi community into the realm of speculation.

Few researchers have approached the study of the Yezidi community in a comprehensive manner with research and scientific substantiation of such facets of Yezidi culture as language, ethnicity, nationality, religion and how the Yezidis define themselves. Thus, research to date reads as if these are already settled issues. Neglecting the need for such fundamental studies, unsubstantiated assertions have frequently been made about the Yezidi, such as Khanna Omarkhali's claims that the majority of Yezidis to Kurdish identity, and call the term *Êzdikî* a regional subdialect.[42] However, it is obvious that this word for Yezidis, who use it is the linguonym,[43] replaces the scientifically established word 'Kurmanji'. In conclusion, addressing the lack of in-depth research in the aforementioned issues could shed light on many aspects of Yezidi identity,[44] and in turn, could ultimately serve to assist the Yezidi community itself to integrate into modern contexts.

Continuing the search for a word to designate the Yezidi religion in the academic environment and within the Yezidi community itself, it should be emphasized that currently, the term 'Yezidism' is used in the academic environment to designate the Yezidi religion. The term itself is derived from the ethnonym 'Yezidi' by adding the suffix '-ism' to it. It should, however, be noted that the term exclusively exists in the academic environment. Such word formation within a framework of academic research is a normal practice in various disciplines, in particular when the subject of study does not yet have an established name. For example, we can cite Buddhism, which understandably had no such name in the era of formation and flourishing, and scientists arrived at it through a word formation, namely by adding the suffix '-ism' to the name of the main protagonist of this doctrine. Subsequent to the establishment of the term 'Buddhism' in 1821, other '-isms' of a similar kind followed, such as Hinduism in 1829, Taoism in 1839, and Confucianism in 1862.[45]

The first to introduce the term 'Yezidism' into academic circulation was Isya Joseph in his 1919 book with the (not particularly pleasant) title *Devil Worship*, which he used

[41] Kreyenbroek 1995: viii.
[42] See: Омархали 2023: 19–20.
[43] The specific unit of metalanguage that designates a specific language as an object of description; linguonyms make up the nomenclature of a language (see: Жеребило 2010: 180).
[44] Certainly, there is some influence, as the Yezidis do not exist in isolation and are also a subject of academic study. However, the specifics of how academic research influences various groups within the Yezidi population is a substantial topic for further investigation. Therefore, it may be inappropriate to explore this issue in greater detail within the scope of this article.
[45] See: Taylor 1998: 276.

to describe the Yezidi faith. Thereafter, the term 'Yezidism' was picked up by other authors, including, R. H. W. Empson, who was one of the first to use it. Empson pointed out that the Yezidis have no religion and no God in the usual sense of "civilized peoples", but rather believe in and worship the Prince of Evil.[46] Throughout the work he refers to Yezidism as "The Cult of the Peacock Angel".

In addition to the word 'Yezidism' in Yezidi historiography, there was once present the term 'Yezidstvo', which was introduced by the Soviet linguist and ethnographer O. L. Vilchevsky. To describe the Yezidi religion, he used the Russian word 'Езидство' [Yezidstvo] (Yezidiness) based on the Russian words 'Христианство' [Khristianstvo] (Christianity) and 'Мусульманство' [Musul`manstvo] (Islam), in the journal "Atheist" No. 51 of 1930. It should be noted that Vilchevsky presents the definition of 'Yezidstvo' in a very ambiguous way, i.e. "not as a specific religion, which has come down to us in the form of a sect despised by all, whose teachings are professed by several tribes lost in the mountains of Kurdistan, but as a once powerful interaction of ethnic collectives of Asia Minor and Transcaucasia with their national patron gods, against the idea of an interethnic religion",[47] or as one of the national religions of Kurdistan.[48] Later, in scientific studies in the Russian language devoted to Yezidis, this term was replaced by the term 'Yezidism'.

In turn, a similar word is also present in the Yezidi language – *Êzdiyatî*, which can be interpreted as 'Yezidiness'. Here, the Yezidi religion is not referred to as a noun, but as an adjective characterizing anything that is related with Yezidis in general. However, we can safely say that this word was in fact only recently introduced into the Yezidi community, as it would seem that such an important word has yet to be found in the Yezidi *qewls*.[49] *Êzdiyatî* was used in the scientific environment by X. Silêman and X. Cindî Reşo in their 1979 book *Êzdiyatî: Liber Roşnaya Hindek Têkstêd Aîniyê Êzdiyan*. However, as previously mentioned, there is the word Şerfedîn, in the Yezidi language, which is very often used by the Yezidis of Sinjar and the post-Soviet countries to designate their religion. This word is found repeatedly in both Yezidi prayers and *qewls*, but it has, until recently, never appeared in the scientific literature as a name for the Yezidi creed.

Nevertheless, the term 'Yezidism', which has become entrenched in academia, tends to anger a number of ultra-nationalist Yezidis, for many of whom the term 'Yezidism' is an imposition, the origins of which stem from Kurdish assimilation policies. Accordingly,

[46] See: Empson 1928: 77.
[47] Вильчевский 1930: 88.
[48] See: *Ibid*: 81.
[49] Hereinafter in the text: the Yezidi sacred hymns (see: Rodziewicz 2022a: 90–9).

such perspectives consider academic research on their people with skepticism. This antagonism towards the term 'Yezidism' is illustrated in the slogan "*Мылəте мын – Эзди, Зымане мын – Эздики, Дине мын – Шəрфəдин*"[50] [Kurm. *Miletê min – Êzidî, Zimanê min – Êzdikî, Dînê min – Şerfedîn*] (En. My nationality is Yezidi, My language is Yezdiki, My religion is Şerfedîn), which can be seen as an attempt to express their national, linguistic and religious identity. Similarly, the word *milet*, is not fully connected with the terms denoting nationality or nation, although in the Kurdish-Russian dictionary of K. K. Kurdoev the word *milet* is translated as nationality.[51] It should be recognized that such an interpretation is a product of the Soviet policy aimed to obliterate unwanted religious connotations from this Arabic word, which is translated as 'religion, faith, a nation, people'.[52] The word *milet* stems from the Arabic *milla*, used by Muhammad fifteen times in the Qur'an. It is necessary to emphasize that the word *milla* itself is most likely a borrowing by Muhammad from Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac. It means 'word' but can be used figuratively for the religious beliefs of a person.[53] Interestingly, the Syriac term *melltā* constitutes a translation of the Greek word *logos*,[54] which in fact can mean 'word'. And in turn, the word *logos* itself, which have deep philosophical thought of ancient Greek philosophers, the understanding of which varied depending on the philosophical thoughts of one or another philosopher,[55] and as well as the meaning of *Logos* in Christianity – a parallel of which can be found in the Yezidi cosmogonic myth.[56]

Similar to the word words *religio*, and *dīn*, the word *milla* changed over time in numerous ways as linguistic, religious, and political contexts changed. Thus, in addition to meaning 'utterance' and 'word', *milla* came to refer to the religious beliefs of a person, then it became a community of people, and in recent times, it is used to refer to a nation. In turn, in the Yezidi paradigm, the word *milet* is, in particular, used in the formula "*Miletê min Êzidî*". Thus, *Miletê min Êzidî* can mean 'my religious society/association of believers in *Siltan* Êzîd', as well as 'my nationality/nation/ethnicity is Yezidi'. Consequently, the term *milet* when currently used in relation to the Yezidis, is best understood as an ethno-religious and/or a national-religious concept.

In addition to self-identifying themselves through the word *milet*, Yezidis also use this word to designate other communities, thereby distancing and distinguishing

[50] The slogan of the ԷԶԴԻԽԱՆԱ (Ezdikhana) newspaper published by the Yezidi National Union of Armenia (Հաջոյան 2013: 1).
[51] See: Курдоев 1960: 540.
[52] See: Richardson 1777: 1834–5.
[53] See: Jeffery 1938: 268–9.
[54] *Ibid*.
[55] See: Armstrong 1999: 518.
[56] See: Rodziewicz 2022a: 433–69.

themselves from other peoples, thereby declaring their uniqueness. A similar distinction can be traced back to the myth about the origin of the Yezidis, in which they do not consider themselves as the descendants of the union of Adam and Eve as part of the 72 *milets* that emerged from this union.[57] They rather believe to be the descendants of Adam only, through his son Shahid bin Jarr.[58] Also in the *Qewlê Şêşims*[59] we can find other *milets*, and how the Yezidis see them:

Here Turke, here Tetere
Ew xafilêt bê nedere
Ewan jî Şêşims mfere.

All Turks, all Tatars
They are ignorant, without the views
Sheikh Shems is their refuge also.

Here ʻErebe, here ʻEceme
Ewin xafilêt bê kereme
Ewan jî Şêşims pêşqedeme.

All Arabs, all Persians
They are ignorant, without mystical power
Sheikh Shems is their leader also.

File ku filene
Bi keşîş û abû nene
Ew jî li dû Şêşims diherine.

The Christians, being Christians
Have priests and monks
They also follow Sheikh Shems.

Cihû ku cihûne
Di selefxor û buxtan û nebûne
Ew jî bi Şêşims bi recûne [...]

The Jews, being Jews
Are usurers, slanderers and liars
They also have hopes of Sheikh Shems [...]

Heftî û du milete
Heştî û duhezar xulayaqete
Şêşims hemûya mor dikete.

Seventy-two nations
Eighty-two thousand creatures
Sheikh Shems ʻbaptizesʼ them all.

Of course, speaking about other *milets*, it would be incorrect to consider them from the position of modern national and religious concepts, since such concepts did not exist when the Yezidi *qewls* were written. Furthermore, in this *qewl* the Yezidis only describe certain communities and tribal associations of their time, which limits the terms explanatory power.

When considering the skepticism of a number of Yezidis towards academic research on their people, it would be unfair not to mention that such skepticism is not

[57] More about the myth of the origin of the Yezidis see Spät: 2002.
[58] The Yezidi Forefather in the Yezidi tradition (see: *Idem* 2018: 287–92).
[59] See: Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 205, with a corrected translation by the author.

unfounded.[60] The younger generation of Yezidis were not convinced by the theories propagated by some researchers, pursuing of exclusive discoveries or linking Yezidi beliefs with the religions of other peoples. The current generation of Yezidis increasingly turn to outside resources to find answers to questions about their religion and origins. Perhaps the situation for young Yezidis can improve in the near future. With the establishment of the International Yezidi Theological Academy (*Akadêmiya Teolojiya Êzdîtiyê ya Navdewletî*) in 2019, Yezidis can begin to better understand the principles of their religion and may also feel a desire to live according to them.[61]

Analysis and Outcome

Based on the above, it can be summarized that the term 'religion' has a long history and in different periods the understanding of the meaning of the word has changed. In addition, in the modern academic discourse, the term has not received an unambiguous interpretation and hence, we can agree with J. Z. Smith that "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy".[62]

Similar to theories dealing with other religions, the theory of a Yezidi religion exists only within the academic environment; it is the product of its attempts to grapple with the disorganized nature of the world. Consequently, it is not so important which word is used to refer to the Yezidi religion within the academe. For the Yezidis themselves, concepts such as religion do not exist at all. Their worldview paradigm is in many ways still anchored in pre-modernity and is based on their beliefs, cults, and customs, which are largely determined by tradition.

Confirmation of this can be found in the Yezidi *qewls*, in which the words *sunet* (tradition) and *sunetxane* (literally 'house of tradition', which in a semantic translation means *sunet* society, *sunet* people, *sunet* world, i.e. 'people of tradition' – Yezidis) in relation to themselves, which are derived from the Arabic word *sunnet*, meaning 'nature, habit, custom, manner, institution, regulation, and mode of living'.[63] This should not, however, be confused with the *Sunnet* of Muhammad, which orthodox Muslims consider an addition to the Qur'an, giving it almost the same authority, thus the name

[60] What I mean is that several researchers have aimed to be the first to examine supposedly sacred Yezidi texts and present them as sensational discoveries, or to study sacred Yezidi hymns, often relying on very dubious informants. All of this has been and is being done for their career advancement, rather than to help the Yezidi community understand themselves through the lens of academic scholarship.

[61] See: Rodziewicz 2022b: 105–6.

[62] Smith 1982: xi.

[63] See: Richardson 1777: 1047.

'Sunnis'. Yezidis, however, by using the words *sunet* and *sunetxane* emphasize the importance of naturally formed habits, customs, and manners that regulate their way of life, which they pass on from generation to generation through oral tradition.

In addition, being a people of tradition in theological and metaphysical aspects, the Yezidis refer to the tradition of transmitting as *sur*, which is a borrowing from the Arabic word *sirr*, which has two meanings. The first notion is that of secret, mystery, or *arcana*, in the sense of a teaching, a reality or even a doctrinal point, hidden by nature or which is kept hidden from persons considered unworthy of knowing it.[64] The second notion is that of a subtle organ, one of the layers of the heart, making up the human spiritual anatomy, which may be translated by "secret, inner consciousness".[65] "In the Yezidi *qewls* and stories it denotes a pure divine essence that has its own personality and will, described as the light (*nûr*) coming from a source imagined as a lamp (*qendîl*) and called *Sura Xudê* ('*Sur* of God')".[66]

Regardless of this world view, it is impossible for Yezidis to completely entirely ignore established societal concepts such as religion, ethnicity, and nation. Both globalization and scientific discourse require that peoples in transition, like the Yezidi, to identify themselves ethnically and religiously. The question of whether internal or external forces will dominate in this process i.e. whether Yezidi beliefs based on tradition within community, or the influence of outside stakeholders will prevail, remains to be seen.

If we define Yezidis within the framework of an ethnic and religious nomenclature in an unbiased manner, we can assert that the Yezidis are on their way to identifying as an ethno-religious minority;[67] this includes an awareness of both an ethnic and a religious self-identification, as well as an interconnectedness of these two concepts. This development is a phenomenon which is also worthy of academic research.

A term or identifier which would be deemed satisfactory by the majority of the Yezidi community that jointly designates their ethnonym and their religion could be beneficial to the Yezidi and to society as a whole. Clarity and unity of designation can help foster unity among the Yezidi, as well as mutual understanding, tolerance and integration in the countries and societies in which Yezidis reside. It can also serve to aid their interaction with mainstream society as well as their self-organization and the advancement of their interests in times of need.

[64] See: Amir-Moezzi 2004: 752–4.
[65] *Ibid*.
[66] Rodziewicz 2018: 301.
[67] See: Ali et al. 2021: 15.

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საკვანძო სიტყვები: რელიგია, ეზიდები, ეზიდიზმი, Şerfedîn, Êzdiyatî, Milet, Dīn.

Gevorg Dzhalilov

Têgihîştina têgeha dînî bal êzdiyan

Abstrakt: Dema ku êzdî behsa bawerîya xwe dikin, xwe bi nav û têgeheke yekgirtî bi kar nayînin. Ev gotare vê fênomênê lêkolîn dike. Herwisa ew termînolojiya ku ji bo destnîşankirina dînê êzdiyan di çarçova akademîk da tê bikar anîn vedikole, û dinêre egerê ku bo çi hindek êzdî evê termînolojîyê bi tevahî înkar dikin. Dîsa ev gotar pêşveçûna dîrokî ya têgeha dînî bi xwe û me'nîya wê di qonax û serdemên cuda da nîşan dike, tevî berçavwergirtina fehm kirina niha heyî û nirxîndina wê di derdor û atmosfêra akademîk da, pêkanîn û cîbicîkirina wê ya giştî di nav êzdiyan da. Ji bo giringîpêdan û berjewendîyê întêgrasyon, tolerans û têgihîştina hevdû, ev lêkolîn di dûmahîyê da hewl dide, ku diyar û eşkere bike, ka êzdîyên dîasporayê li hemû dinyayê çawa dikarin xwe bi têgîna dînî bi xwe bidin nasîn û ser vê pirsê li hev bikin.