Yezidis
Who are the Yezidis?

- Currently under persecution and the threat of genocide by ISIS/L (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria / the Levant) in the northwestern, traditionally Kurdish-controlled territory situated around the cities of Mosul and Sinjar.

- Isolated pockets of Yazidi exist in Canada. Individuals and groups have fled persecution in the past.* The pressing concern, which will ultimately determine the context of any future dialogue with the surviving Yazidi refugees, is the present violent threat to their existence.
Social Concern For the Yezidi

- In August, 2014 ISIS forces drove some 400,000 Yezidis (the majority of the entire people group) from their homes in Kurdish Iraq to the Sinjar Mountains.

- The United Nations reports that 5,000 men were executed and 7,000 sold into sex slavery (Daily Mail, 14 October 2014).

- Many are still in need of aid.

- ISIS dogma does not recognize Yezidis as a ‘people of the book;’ furthermore, the Yezidi emphasis on Tawusi Melek (Azazael/Shaytan) that has often led to the charge of devil-worship has thrown fuel on ISIS’s fire.

- ISIS has used the sale of Yezidi women as sex slaves as a means of raising both membership and funds (J.K. Melchoir, 21).
Context for Engagement

• Our context for engagement with the Yezidi people corresponds with the predominant feature of the Yezidi religion and society: it involves a practical response to persecution.
Characteristics of the Yezidis

- Religion is rooted in social organization and community life – emphasis on practice.
- Doctrine and mythology is not systematic; a certain amount of secrecy abounds.
- People will be judged for their actions, not their beliefs.
- The community is organized based on strict, functional castes and the interdependence of members for a series of rituals that emphasize rites of passage and relationships.
Toward Ecclesiology

- *Yezidi by Birth;* excommunication the result of inter-religious marriage.
- *Born into and marriage among Castes (endogamy)*
Sheikh Caste

- Sheikhhs are paid religious and moral teachers in charge of organizing and overseeing ceremonies and festivals.

Sheikh Families/Roles:
- Qatanis
- Shamsanis
- Adanis
Sheikh Caste

- Qatanis – represented by a Mir (Prince): these are secular leaders and ‘defenders of the faith.’ A patriarchal lineage that continues the original delegation by Sheikh ‘Adi and the Peacock Angel (Tawusı Meleq).
Sheikh Caste

• Shamsanis – represented by Baba Sheikh: the religious head of the community. Is present and oversees all the ceremonies and rituals at the Sanctuary of Sheikh ‘Adi (in Lalish). works alongside the…

• Adanis – represented by the Pesh Imam who was traditionally the only literate Yezidi. He is an expert in ceremony and represents the semi-Islamic sector of the community.
Pir Caste

• Each Yezidi must have a Pir in addition to a Sheikh as a religious guide.
• Pir’s are of Kurdish origin and function like Sheikhs but are not as prestigious.
• They tend to be more withdrawn/ascetic in their practice.

Feqrayas: virginal women in service to the sanctuary of Sheikh ‘Adi. They maintain the Shrine’s operations and prepare meals for notables during the feasts.
Community Rituals and Ceremonies

- **(First) Haircut** (*biska pora*): a boy’s forelock is cut by his ‘brother of the hearafter’ who is a sheikh or pir. Symbolic of becoming a Yezidi.

- **Baptism** (*mor kirin*): performed at the baptistery of Kaniya Spi at Lalish. A private ceremony where one is declared a lamb and Servant of Ezi.
Community Rituals and Ceremonies

• (Male) Circumcision: 20 days after baptism. A Godfather (kerif) is chosen in order to create a bond between families that would not otherwise have close. Intended to strengthen relations with Kurdish Muslim families in this way.

• Prayer: un-regulated for the most part; 3 times daily if practiced and one opens one’s hands to the sun while standing.

• Brothers and/or Sisters of the Hereafter: Each Yezidi has one Sheikh and one Pir to assist in the rites and rituals throughout life. Men-men; women-men/women.

• Bride Price: arranged by fathers of (15 yr. old) coupes. Adanis Sheikhs administrate and celebrate.
Community Rituals and Ceremonies

- **Death**: Brother/Sister of the Hereafter prepares body for internment by washing and clothing the deceased in a white shroud and placing him/her in a sarcophagus; a silent procession ends in a burial with head facing east.

- **Reincarnation**: Soon after funeral a Kochek is consulted at the family house. In a trance state, this functionary determines if the soul has been judged sinful and ended up in an animal and should be redeemed by purchase by the family or has passed into a Yezidi for goodness.
Characteristics of the Yezidis

• Religion is rooted in social organization and community life – emphasis on practice.

• Doctrine and mythology is not systematic; a certain amount of secrecy abounds.

• A great variety is evident in the religious texts of the Yezidi.

• Is it hidden, forgotten, or unimportant?
Towards a Doctrine of God

• God (Khode/Xwede) is the one Creator.
• He is known among the Yezidi by three manifestations:
  – The Peacock Angel (Tawusi Melek/Azazael)
  – A Young Man: Sultan Ezi (an admired member of the late seventh-century Uhayyad Caliphate)
  – The Old Man: Sultan ‘Adi (The Sufi Preacher who settled near Lalish in the early twelfth century and developed the Yezidi people from his original group of disciples, men to whom he taught his particular amalgam of Assyrian, Zoroastrian, and Islamic way of living).
Towards a Doctrine of God

Yezidi Symbol of Faith (Sehada Dini)

The testimony of my faith is One God, Sultan Sheikh ‘Adi is my King, Sultan Ezi (Yezid) is my king, Tawusi Melek is (the object) of my declaration and my faith. God willing, we are Yezidis, followers of the name Sultan Ezi. God be praised, we are content with our religion and our community.
Towards Creation and Providence

• God has created all things and is providentially aware of all occurrences.
• He is chiefly concerned with heavenly matters.
• He created an angel (khas/heft sir) for each of the first seven days in order to tend to earthly matters. The Peacock Angel is the most prominent among them (TM).
• These angels determine the destiny of the year to come during the Festival of Assembly; they bring new holy texts and rules to the Yezidi people every 1000 years.
Tawusi Melek

• Associated with the Judeo-Christian and Islamic concept of Satan: the fallen angel who brought corruption to the Garden/Paradise.

• The figure whose relationship with the Yezidi can be said to most directly define their unique identity. The Yezidi are the ones who were kind to TM when he was cast down to earth.
Towards Anthropology and the Doctrine of Sin and Evil

• Though the mythology varies in some confusing ways, the essential thrust of the Yezidi is that TM (Azazael/Satan) convinced Adam to eat wheat against God’s instruction.

• Tawusi Melek was cast into hell as a consequence of his misguided action but he repented by crying for 7,000 years and extinguishing the fire of hell with his tears.
Towards Anthropology and the Doctrine of Sin and Evil

- Evil and good are not, therefore, competing forces in God’s economy.
- Tawusi Melek demonstrates that one cannot stand outside of God’s will in a realm of evil and render God powerless.
- Thus, Yezidi do not consider themselves worshippers of Satan. They consider him to be beautiful and have ascribed the attributes of the Peacock (Angel) to him.
Towards Sin and Salvation

• Yezidis balance a concept of personal, moral sin with the ultimate non-existence of a triumph of evil/hell.

• Hell and paradise are recognized in ceremony but do not follow from mythology.

• Noting the tremendous emphasis on Yezidi community together with the belief in positive reincarnation as coming back as ‘one of our people’ it seems reasonable to conclude that salvation is being Yezidi.

• Is there an end or does time have a cyclical pattern?
Bibliography


"We Have a Responsibility to Protect the Yazidis of Iraq." New Statesman (August 15, 2014): 7.