

WHO ARE THE YEZIDIS?



The Yezidis – members of an ancient ethno-religious community – live predominantly in Northern Iraq and practice one of the most mysterious religions in the Middle East, misunderstood by even closest neighbors.

Yezidis generally speak Kurmanji, the dialect used by the vast majority of Kurds. Most Yezidis live in Northern Iraq, although many can also be found in Europe, Armenia, and Russia. The global Yezidi population has been estimated at approximately one million, although some believe the number is considerably lower.

The Yezidi religious tradition shares common roots with pre-Zoroastrianism and elements also found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islamic Sufism. Yezidism is stringently monotheistic, like the Abrahamic religions. Yezidis believe in a single God, referred to as Khude or Ezid. According to Yezidi tradition, God created and sustains the universe through seven angels. These angels are manifestations (but not equivalents) of God himself. Four of these angels are also angels in the Abrahamic religions.

The most prominent and central figure in Yezidi tradition is Tawusi Malak (Angel-Peacock), created by God before the creation of the world and head of the angels. Tawusi Malak embodies both light and darkness. According to Yezidi belief, everything in the universe has its opposite: the sun and the moon, day and night, etc. Yezidis believe in the primary importance of the sun. The source of truth is the all-penetrating light (ronai or nour) contained in the heart of each man and woman, and the basis of the human soul. The lighting of oil lamps during religious holidays is a testimony to the veneration of light.

According to tradition, Yezidis are not created from Adam and Eve but from Adam and the angels, and are thus a combination of the heavenly and the terrestrial.

One of the most influential figures in Yezidism is Sheikh Adi, who was born in Lebanon and led Yezidi tribes in present-day Iraq in the 12th century. He is buried at Lalish temple in Northern Iraq – a sacred site for Yezidis.

Yezidis have a social caste system. Sheikh is the religious caste and source of most political and spiritual leaders. The Pir caste is involved in other administrative and political activity; while most workers, artisans, and citizens are Murid.

Because Yezidis often faced persecution, ceremonies were passed on in secret. Legends, cosmology, holy texts, and prayers were passed from generation to generation orally. Muslim and Christian neighbors often mistakenly characterized Yezidis as devil-worshippers. Because of this inaccurate and unfortunate stereotype, most common among uneducated segments of the population, Yezidis have long been a target of persecution.

