

Changes in the Yazidi Society and Religion after the Genocide—A Growing Rapprochement with Human Rights?

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Abstract

In 2014 the troops of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” conquered the areas of northern Iraq and turned on the long-established religious minorities in the area with tremendous brutality, especially towards the Yazidi. Huge numbers of men were executed; thousands upon thousands of women and children were abducted and wilfully subjected to sexual violence. Although the Yazidi have violated religious rules which have existed for over 800 years by taking women back who have been raped during their captivity at the hands of the IS, they refuse to accept the children resulting from rape by IS terrorists because a person can only be Yazidi by birth. The Yazidis therefore faced with the question as to how far the Yazidi community is coping with the disaster and the new challenges of a changed society with regard to human rights.

Keywords

Yazidi, Terror, Religion, Human Rights, Society, ISIS

1. Introduction

The Yazidi faith does not know a compulsory religious scripture comparable to the Bible for Christians. Religious traditions and beliefs have mostly been passed orally from one generation to the next generation. Yet there are generally binding concepts of faith [1]. Human rights and their understanding of religion are characterised by cultural, political and social memory, which to date has been accompanied by persecution, flight, oppression and massacre. A mixture of collective-patriarchal values and norms with universal religious ideas characterises

the lives of the Yazidi in the Middle East as well as in migration. This can be traced back as far as the 14th century B.C. [2]. In order to protect their religion and their community they lived in isolation in the Kurdish hills up to the end of the 19th century. The Yazidi see themselves as members of the oldest religion in the world and predominantly as Kurds. They belong to a small group, neither determined ethnically nor linguistically, but a group defined by religion, with its own values and norms, which have developed within the Kurdish community over centuries [3]. The Yazidi believe that the majority of present-day Moslem Kurds were Yazidi and, with the wave of Islamisation in the Kurdish regions after 622, either converted to Islam of their own free will or were forced to do so [4].

The Yazidi live today in Turkey, Syria, the former Soviet Union, Iraq and, predominantly, in what we know today as north Iraq. Worldwide, they number an estimated 800,000 to one million [5]. Since the 1960s more than 240,000 have migrated, mostly to Europe [6]. With the beginning of the terror in Iraq since 2007 and then through the ISIS 2014 more than 120,000 Yazidi have left Iraq to Australia, Canada, USA and Europe [7]. In the age of globalisation and with their migration, especially to Europe, they are faced with an enormous challenge which includes cultural and religious changes and, as a result, a new approach to human rights [1].

In the following we will first discuss the religion of the Yazidis and their caste system, so that a basic understanding for the social-religious community develops and then analyze the aspect of human rights in the Yazidi community.

2. The Religion of the Yazidi: A Loving and Punitive God

Elements of the Yazidi religion stretch back as far as the Mithras religion in the 14th century B.C. and presumably have similarities with the ancient Indian (Vedic) god Mitra [1] [8]. During the course of history, the Yazidi faith has developed into a monotheistic religion. God is almighty and created the world. As in ancient Iranian Zoroastrianism, there is no dual system based on good and evil which are constantly in conflict [9]. In their concept of religion there can be no other power outside God. If one should exist who leads man to be evil and if God cannot prevent this, then God could not be almighty. This is clearly illustrated in the etymology of the Kurdish word for God (“Xwedê”, also “Xweda”). The word is a compound of “xwe” (oneself) and “dê/da” (given) and means the self-created one (“xwe da”) in other words, the creator [4] [10].

As a sign of God’s omnipotence, the name of the Evil one is never spoken. This comes from the idea that, first and foremost, human beings themselves are responsible for their own actions, yet at the same time are guided by God and can be punished by him [6].

In everyday Yazidi discourse, God stands for healing and blessing but also for punishing and destroying. Expressions such as, “May God make you well again,” “May God protect your house and your family” or “May God kill you,” “May

God blind you” etc. are commonplace today in various situations in the Yazidi community. Therefore, God is given the power and the right to punish and to kill people. Since he is the creator, put bluntly he can also violate human rights, not in a wilful way but because there is an important reason to punish the people [11]. Man has been created by God and must adhere to his rules, rules which are manifested in the Yazidi faith. Therefore, man is dependent on God who determines his fate [4].

In the Yazidi faith, as in many other religions, Adam is seen as the first man created by God. In another variation this role is taken by the archangel, Melek Taus or Peacock Angel, on behalf of God, since God has a somewhat passive role in shaping the world and protecting the Yazidi whereas Melek Taus has an active one [11] [12].

The Yazidi believe that Adam disregarded the rules which were laid down and was punished by the archangel, who cast him out of heaven and sent him down to earth [12].

At all times, Man must be thankful to God and obey him. Yet God is not only seen as a lawmaker but also as the loving, merciful one who assigned Melek Taus to take care of and protect the Yazidi on earth. For this reason, the first Wednesday in April (*Carşema Sor: Red Wednesday*) is celebrated by the Yazidi as their New Year, the day when the Peacock Angel comes down to earth and holds a council meeting [12] [13]. The old year is reviewed, evaluated and a good future is planned for the believers. This system of beliefs is based on universal principles such as ethics and moral, right and wrong, justice, truth, loyalty, mercy and love [12].

3. The Reformer Sheikh Adi and the Development of Hierarchical-Collective Structures

For the Yazidi, Sheikh Adi is the incarnation of Melek Taus. Lalish Valley is his seat, and is seen as the holiest temple in the Yazidi faith and became their place of pilgrimage [10]. Moslem historians describe Sheikh Adi as a man of great spiritual charisma and gifts (*mujahada*) which enabled him to work miracles (*karamat*). The famous ascetic Moslem, Abdul Kadir Geylani, described him as follows: “If anyone has deserved to become a prophet by performing miracles and good deeds, then it is Sheikh Adi” [14].

Historians identify his doctrines with those of the Sunni Islams. His statements on tradition correspond to those of the prophet (Hadith) in the Koran. According to tradition, Sheikh Adi was a representative of the Omayyad dynasty. He wanted to prove that both evil and good, as mentioned above, came from our perception of God. This conviction already existed in the Yazidi community prior to Sheikh Adi and increased in importance because of his Sufism [1].

At that time the Yazidi assumed that Sheikh Adi received his mental and spiritual power from Melek Taus. Even today they still deny or suppress his Moslem roots since they consider their own religion to be older than Islam and

want to clearly distance themselves from Islam on account of the numerous reprisals and persecution carried out in the name of Islam. This is why they are attracted to the traditional story that it was the Peacock Angel who sent Sheikh Adi to lead them [4]. His new religious doctrine, called “Sad u Had”, “Rights and Duties” is a part of this [3].

In addition to a ban on marrying a person of a different religion and the conviction that a person can only be Yazidi by birth, this includes a hierarchical and collective caste system with many individual restrictions which is still valid today (see **Table 1**) [15].

4. The Caste System

The Yazidi faith sees man as a being endowed with reason and created by God in the cosmos. Although equality among people is repeatedly stressed, the prevailing hierarchical caste system challenges this viewpoint, above all in practice [15]. This has been the case since the 12th century and because Sheikh Adi entered the Yazidi community. It has changed the whole structure of the community and has re-defined the relationship of the various groups to each other [16].

On the one hand there were the *Sheikhs* (teachers), on the other the *Murids* (lay people). This structure also exists with the Sufis. The group of the priests (*the Pirs*), which already existed, lost their role as the main teachers in the Yazidi religion. Their tribes were divided among the Sheikhs and the Pirs. Each Sheikh and Pir who was in charge of a tribe had to have a connection to the teacher of the other tribe in each case [1]. Marriage between the Pirs and Sheikhs was forbidden, as was marrying outside one’s own caste or marrying a person of a different religion. This was punished with exclusion. Within the sheikh caste, only the descendants of the one group were allowed to marry within their group [15].

Many of these obligations, such as the prohibition of certain food or having a moustache are no longer so strictly adhered to, and this is tolerated by the Yazidi dignitaries. This development is certainly due to active contact to other ethnicities and religions in the country of origin and in migration, especially as many young people simply do not adhere to these rules [4].

A significantly higher awareness of human rights has arisen as a result of socio-political changes, migration and globalisation in general. The majority of Yazidi distance themselves from using violence if these rules are not adhered to. Punishment as such cannot be found in Yazidi literary texts and in prayers or in oral traditional stories [4].

The secular leader of the Yazidi, the Mir, the Prince, is a descendant of the reformer Sheikh Adi (1172) and is chosen for this role from within this family [17]. In earlier times he was able to punish, ostracise or compel the Yazidi to do certain tasks. In line with the basic affirmation of any political and religious leader as a result of this hierarchical system, similar to that of the Roman Catholic Pope, the sovereignty of the princely family was legitimised and the priesthood safeguarded [1].

Table 1. The Yazidis' obligations.**Religious Commandments**

- Recognising Sheikh Adi as a reformer and implementing his rules in the daily life of each Yazidi.
- Recognising the Sheikhs (teachers) who communicate the teachings of Sheikh Adi.
- Inviolability of the authority of God and Melek Taus.
- Each Yazidi must have a Sheikh and a Pir.
- During this life, each Yazidi must specify a sister/brother for the afterlife.
- One can only be Yazidi by birth. Conversion via missionary work is not foreseen.

Social Commandments

- Marriage is only permitted within the Yazidi religious community (Sheriat).
- Marriage is only permitted within one's own caste (Tariqat).

Obligations which are not seen as binding everywhere in the community

- Yazidi are not allowed to mention the name of evil.
- A Yazidi is not allowed to shave his moustache.
- In the case of illness, Yazidi are allowed use all means and medications available which are necessary for their recovery.
- Pork, and in some castes other animals (fish, rabbit/hare, male chicken) as well as certain types of salad and vegetables (e.g. cabbage) should not be eaten.
- Once a year the Yazidi should fast in honour of Melek Taus.
- Once in his life, every Yazidi should visit the shrine in Lalish, Kurdistan.

5. Missionary Work and Relation to Other Religions

As is the case with most other religions, the Yazidi faith claims that only its principles are true, but it does not place any value missionary work, not least since a person can only be Yazidi by birth [1]. There is no pretension to power over other religions and their members. The Yazidi hope that their religion will be accepted by Christianity and Judaism as well as by Islam. They hope that in this way they can prevent any violent missionary work from Islam - to date without success. Islam does not recognise the Yazidi faith as an autonomous religion and again and again makes it the target of brutal wars of annihilation such as in the times of the Ottoman and Persian Empires [13] [15].

6. Human Rights

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 claims that these rights are equally valid at all times for all people all over the world. Criticism came above all from Asian countries, especially from Moslem countries, who regard this concept as too much oriented towards the western world.

Instead, sharia puts Islamic law above all other rights, as a basis and scope for interpretation, and grants collective rights significantly more importance than does the UN Declaration [18]. This interpretation emphasises the welfare of the community which from a patriarchal point of view corresponds to the given identity of the individual, the family, and the community. As far as human rights are concerned, the individual rights of a person are seen as secondary [19]. Although the notion "human right" has been known since the early phases of Islam

under the heading “Rights of the Individual” (ḥaqq al-ādami) that is “Rights of the Addressee of the Norm” (ḥaqq al-mukallaf), in Islam there is, as yet, no clear and concrete theoretical basis for human rights and no concept of human rights [20].

It is often argued that Moslems do not need any human rights since they observe a just order of things simply due to fact that they are god-fearing. Abdulla Bin Abdul Mohsin al-Turki, Secretary General of the Moslem World League (MWL), explained this as follows: “A Muslim, guided by his true religion, does not need any new man-made laws. Allah the Almighty has perfected the religion for us, and completed his blessings and has chosen Islam as our religion. Therefore, whoever goes beyond this is deemed to have diverted from the right path and committed injustice” [21].

Although the Yazidi distance themselves strictly from Islam, for centuries they have been living in an area predominantly populated by Moslems and where Islam can indeed be regarded as the state religion. The reformer of the Yazidi in the 12th century preached Sunni Sufism and derived and spread his new ideas within the Yazidi on that basis [16]. As a result, the influence of Islam mixed with patriarchal concepts is quite apparent in the Yazidis’ lifestyle. Even the Yazidi see human rights as linked to the protection of the collective above the interests of the individual [7].

Their reformer, Sheikh Adi, emphasises the connection between rights and obligations, which in turn are linked to the welfare of the community. These obligations include protecting the family and serving the community, preserving cultural heritage and performing one’s individual duties within the caste system so as to contribute to the common good [3].

According to the conservative Yazidi understanding of human rights, the right to the free development of one’s personality—for example, by deciding not to fast or wanting to live outside the Yazidi community—is limited. The welfare of the collective has priority over the welfare of the individual. This conviction determines the relationship of the Yazidi to one another and means that the rights and duties towards the community can weaken the rights of the individual. At the same time, these rights and duties offer protection to the individual and strengthen his well-being. This is how the Yazidi show solidarity towards each other worldwide and feel obliged to support other Yazidis in an emergency. This also applies to the immediate and extended family.

7. Women’s Rights within the Yazidi Faith

The brutal action of the ISIS, especially against Yazidi women and their difficult reception and acceptance after liberation from ISIS hostage detention in the community, makes it necessary to explicitly discuss in this paper the role of women and their rights in the community.

The religion does not contain any elements which would justify disadvantaging, or discriminating against, women. However, in older generations there is

still a traditional patriarchal understanding of roles. In the past it was the family who organised a marriage but this has now become the exception. There are not even any laws in this respect. The couple must be asked in public if they consent to the marriage. Only when they have publicly agreed to the marriage three times can the marriage be solemnised. Arranged marriages, forced marriages and killing women on account of the perceived “violation of honour” are not motivated by religion, but by patriarchal ideas.

In their own interest, traditional families try to marry their sons and daughters to family members which are useful to them, something which was also practised in the past in the western world.

The Yazidi faith does not have a dress code as in Islam or the segregation of men and women as regards social contact. From a religious point of view women are equals but owing to traditional concepts are not really on an equal footing with men.

8. Human Rights for the Survivors of Terror

From 3rd August 2014 onwards, IS began terrorising Yazidi villages and soon gained control of the area. The Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga retreated, and the people were helpless, at the mercy of Islamic State terror. People were herded into buildings such as schools and town halls and their jewellery and valuables confiscated. IS then separated the men from the women. Many men were executed immediately. Older women, women with children, married women without children, young boys and girls between eight and 14 years had to form groups and were taken to various locations like Mosul and Raqqa. Older women and women with children were interned in mass accommodation or in villages, for instance near Tel Afar or Mosul, where the Shiites had previously lived. They were guarded by IS fighters, humiliated, beaten, raped. Not only IS fighters but also male civilians from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Tunisia and other countries turned up every evening because they wanted to buy the women and take them with them (UN Report on Genocide against the Yazidi [22]).

Women are forced to convert to Islam and to pray in Arabic every day, even though they only speak Kurdish. Children are drilled and exploited, similar to African child-soldiers. They are brought up to be brutal, even towards their own families. In camps they are trained to beat other children, to crucify them, or to bury them alive if they do not adhere to IS demands. Those who are not sent to fight serve as the emirs’ lackeys or as guards or spies in the villages or camps where Yazidi or other religious minorities are held captive.

Since the attack by the so called “Islamic State” (ISIS) at the beginning of August 2014, more than 7000 Yazidi have been killed and thousands of families have been held hostage in their villages and murdered if they refused conversion to Islam, and over 5800 young girls have been abducted, raped, sold in Arab markets, enslaved, or killed [12] [23].

Following the release of many Yazidi women from IS captivity in 2015, it was not certain if the Yazidi would take them back into their community. The reason for this is the closeness of the Yazidi community and the strict rules of the Yazidi faith which stipulate marriage only within their religion and the individual's own caste [24]. Prior to that time, sexual contact with a non-Yazidi had meant exclusion from the community. But the religious community, the religious council and first and foremost the secular leader Baba Sheikh amended these rules, which had existed for 800 years. They reacted in the sense of human rights and the traumatic experiencing of genocide, and took back the women and girls. An official blessing from Baba Sheikh in Lalish, the central shrine of the Yazidi, enabled social re-integration and the maintenance and reinforcement of the women's self-esteem, something which is especially important for life and coping with trauma [25].

Viewed rationally, the High Spiritual Councillor of the Yazidi has repealed the rules and obligations of Sheikh Adi and has de facto initiated the possibility of changing Yazidi rules. Even though the High Spiritual Councillor of the Yazidi and the population in general reacted with a humane approach and took their daughters and women/wives back into the community, this still represents a tremendous change and one which the Yazidi were not fully aware of when they took the decision.

But this humanity was not extended to the children born as a result of rape by IS terrorists. On 27th April 2019 the High Spiritual Councillor of the Yazidi announced that children conceived in IS captivity and born to Yazidi women were not to be taken into the Yazidi community [26]. This decision contradicts an earlier statement of the High Spiritual Councillor that all Yazidi survivors were welcome in the Yazidi community. The revision of this statement is apparently substantiated by the fact that, according to Yazidi tradition, children are only regarded as Yazidi if both parents are Yazidi. The decision means that the mothers of "war children" are faced with having to decide between their children and the community. This has further effects on their trauma as well as their health and general situation of the children. This decision is contrary to human rights, and the arch-conservatives' arguments based on blood and race are a reflection of a great schism in the Yazidi community.

Even the Iraqi government's arguments are not based on the UN Human Rights Charta but on sharia. The Iraqi government wants to register the Yazidi women's children as Moslems because, according to Moslem law, the rapists are Moslem and so their children are automatically Moslem.

9. Discussion

The spiritual leap from religious Yazidi concepts to a political understanding of human freedom is not yet complete. The constant threat in the Islamic world has led to a social and religious isolation from the world community which is only just beginning to change since the first migration to Europe at the end of the

19th century and, in particular, since the 1960s [7] [17]. The attacks from outside have reinforced the solidarity of the Yazidi among themselves. They still adhere to traditional rules and, even if they do not always comply with human rights, both collectively and individually, these rules have held firm. This has prevented any long-term discussion about the fundamental principles of faith and hierarchical structure of the Yazidi faith. To call the religious obligations and the system of order into question is seen as an attack on the religion itself. Hitherto, the Yazidi intelligentsia had little influence on the Yazidi community, but this has gradually changed in the last ten years because, amongst other things, of the broad discussion in the country of migration and origin brought about by publications in magazines, newspapers, television and radio as well as in the new media. And it is impossible to predict which direction this development will take.

A political idea following on from John Locke, namely that God and/or nature created man as free, equal and independent and a correspondingly clear attitude to religion and human rights are just beginning but are still light years away from being transferred to the Yazidis' lives in their homeland or migration country. The Islamic states in which the Yazidi live are definitely preventing such a development by trying to force the Islamic concept of human rights on to the Yazidi and are categorically sceptical about secularisation.

Only by secular enlightenment and the establishment of democratic states in the Middle East can religious institutions, above all Islamic ones, react positively to the modern concept of human rights and can re-orientate themselves accordingly. Minority religions such as the Yazidi in the Middle East will then have the chance to deal critically not only with religious obligations but also with the rights of individuals as regards human rights and democracy [19]. In the case of the Yazidi, only the influence of enlightenment, democratisation and secularisation of the relevant social systems can lead to a significant rapprochement with the modern concept of human rights. However, this discussion and possible amendments cannot at present help those women and their children born as a result of rape. They are threatened in their homeland, marginalized and will probably only survive if they are received by a country in which life is not determined by one religion, one race, one culture, but in which human dignity is regarded as inviolable and human rights are lived and shared by the community.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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