

## Religion in Kurdistan

"Compared to the unbeliever, the Kurd is a Muslim" (*li gora gawirî Kurd misilman e*). I do not recall where I first heard or read this unflattering Kurdish saying, but it was uttered with a certain pride.<sup>1</sup> I suspect that it was originally a Turkish or Arabic saying; it is the sort of thing people who feel that they are better Muslims than the Kurds would say. In fact, one often comes across beliefs and practices in Kurdistan that are hard to reconcile with Islamic orthodoxy. Kurdish nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s were fascinated with, and took pride in, such deviations from the "Arabian religion" of Islam, interpreting them as rebellions of the Kurdish spirit against Arab and Turkish domination. During its first years the nationalist cultural magazine *Hawar*, published in Syria from 1932 to 1943 by Djeladet and Kamran Bedir-Khan, showed a great interest in Zoroastrism as one of the sources of Kurdish cultural identity. With its Zoroastrian roots, the Yezidi religion, which had long been discriminated against and condemned as "devil worship," was idealised by some nationalists as the Kurdish religion *par excellence*.

But these nationalists were a tiny minority, and the followers of all heterodox *sects* combined form only a small fraction of the Kurds. The vast majority are Muslims, and many of them take their religion very seriously. The editors of *Hawar* discovered that the journal had to change its tone in order to find a wider readership. From 1941 on, each issue opened with Kurdish translations from the Koran and Traditions of the Prophet. Many other Kurdish secularised nationalists, before as well as after them, made the same discovery that in order to gain influence among the Kurds they had to accommodate themselves to Islam. This was never an easy thing to do since most of these nationalists considered Islam as one of the major forces oppressing their people.

The nationalist and poet Cigerxwin (1903-1984), who belonged to the circle around *Hawar*, toward the end of his life expressed his frustration with the Kurds' lasting attachment to Islam. Cigerxwin had himself in his youth pursued traditional religious studies at madrasas in various parts of Kurdistan. Later his Islamic piety gradually gave way to a strong emotional

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<sup>1</sup> It is often quoted in the literature of the first half of this century, for instance by Kamran Bedir-Khan in an article on ancient customs of the Kurds, in the journal *Hawar* 26 (August 18, 1935), p. 12.

devotion to the Kurdish nation and an increasing interest in Zoroastrianism. "The first volume of his posthumous *History of Kurdistan*, which deals with the pre-Islamic period, contains a short chapter on the religion of the Kurds today. Instead of the contented observation made by some of his friends a half century ago that the Kurds are Muslims only by comparison with unbelievers, Cigerxwin portrays them as pious but ignorant Muslims, exploited by greedy mullas and shaikhs:

The majority of the Kurds are Muslims, and most of the Muslim Kurds are Sunnis. Each year thousands of them go on the *hajj*, throwing away thousands of gold pieces for the voyage. In every village, little by little a mosque has been built, and the people support mullas and divines. They give a tenth of their income to the mullas and the poor, and they gather five times a day in the mosque and pray. Once a week, on Fridays, they perform a large prayer and listen to a sermon in Arabic, but the villagers do not understand what the mulla says, they only bend their heads and daydream a little; and at times some of them cry. For the only thing that they know is that the words of the mulla are the words of God and the prophets.

In every district there is also a shaikh or several shaikhs. The poor and destitute villagers become their disciples; they take their income out of [the villagers'] mouths; [the villagers] surrender themselves entirely to their shaikhs and will do nothing without them.... The shaikhs live in large mansions and palaces, while the villagers meet each other outside and shout and dance. They stay out in the sun, sitting against the wall, barefoot, hungry, naked, poor and destitute, and they work for the shaikh without payment. Very often they put their hopes for the hereafter in the shaikh, and they believe that when the Day of Reckoning arrives and God descends in Damascus, the shaikh will protect them from hellfire and open the gate of Paradise for them.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship of religion and nationalism has often been strained and ambivalent in Kurdistan. Many leading nationalists were irreligious or at least dissatisfied with the strong hold of mullas and shaikhs on the people. It has, on the other hand, usually been the orthodox Muslims who formed the backbone of the Kurdish movement. In order to gain support for their nationalist objectives, secularist intellectuals have time and again had to reach an accommodation with religion, either by choosing a popular religious leader as the figurehead of the movement-as happened to Shaikh Sa`id, who is still much better known than the

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<sup>2</sup> Cigerxwin, *Tarix a Kurdistan, I* (Stockholm: Weşanên Roja Nû, 1985), p. 17.

political organisation that prepared the rebellion with which his name has remained associated.<sup>3</sup>

### **Religious Diversity in Kurdistan**

Perhaps two thirds or three quarters of the Kurds are, nominally at least orthodox Sunni Muslims. Most of them follow the Shafi'i *mazhab* (school of Islamic jurisprudence), which distinguishes them from their Turkish and Arab Sunni neighbours, who generally follow the Hanafi school.<sup>4</sup> To some Kurds therefore the Shafi'i *mazhab* has become one of the outward signs by which they assert their ethnic identity. Islamic law has rules for virtually all aspects of human behavior and the four *mazhabs* have slightly different interpretations of these rules. Shafi'is perform, for instance, the morning prayer at an earlier time than Hanafis, they keep their hands in a different position during prayer, and have different rules for what disturbs ritual purity. Such minor details in behaviour have at times been deliberately used by Kurds to distance themselves from Turks and Arabs. In Iran the difference between the Sunni Kurds and the Shiite Persians and Azerbaijanis is even more conspicuous. After the Iranian Revolution most of the Iranian Kurds opposed the idea of an Islamic Republic, and Sunni-Shiite antagonism played an important part here.<sup>5</sup>

The southernmost part of Kurdistan, however, the province of Kirmanshah in Iran and the districts of Khanaqin and Mandali in Iraq, are predominantly Shiite. The Shiite Kurds of Iran

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<sup>3</sup> See Martin van Bruinessen, "Von Osmanismus zum Separatismus: religiöse und ethnische Hintergründe der Rebellion des Scheich Said," in: Jochen Blaschke and Martin van Bruinessen, eds., *Islam und Politik in der Türkei* (Berlin: Express Verlag, 1985), pp.109-165. The name of the organization, *Azadî* ("Freedom"), is not even mentioned by most of the studies of the rebellion. Its leaders, mostly military men and civil servants, deliberately approached Shaikh Sa'id to become the formal leader because of his prestige and influence as a religious leader.

<sup>4</sup> Four *mazhabs* are recognized as orthodox, namely the Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali schools of jurisprudence. In the Ottoman Empire the Hanafi *mazhab* was the official one; the Shafi'i *mazhab* has its adherents, besides Kurdistan, in Egypt, Hadramaut and especially Southeast Asia.

<sup>5</sup> It would be an exaggeration, however, to attribute the Kurdish resistance against the Khomeini regime simply to the Kurds' being Sunnis, as some journalists have done. For a detailed analysis of Sunni-Shii conflicts and their impact on political developments in the first year of the Revolution, see my "Nationalismus und religiöser Konflikt: Der kurdische Widerstand im Iran," in Kurt Greussing, ed., *Religion und Politik im Iran* (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1981), pp. 372-409.

have never taken part in the Kurdish national movement; in the first years after the Revolution the central government could easily recruit Kurds from Bakhtaran to fight against the rebellious Kurds further north. In Iraq, on the other hand, there has never been such a clear split between Sunni and Shiite Kurds. An interesting case is that of the Faylis, a Shiite community in Baghdad who are not recognized as Iraqi citizens because of their alleged or real Iranian descent. The Faylis are Arabic speakers, but they have gradually come to consider themselves as Kurds (and are accepted by the Kurds as such); some Faylis have even played leading roles in the Kurdish movement.<sup>6</sup>

Besides these two major varieties of orthodox Islam, we find various syncretistic sects among the Kurds, with beliefs and rituals that are clearly influenced by Islam but owe more to other religions, notably old Iranian religion. The most celebrated of these is that of the Yezidis, who are often erroneously called "devil-worshippers." The Yezidi religion appears to have followers only among the Kurds. Another originally Kurdish religion, that of the Ahl-i-Haqq, has, on the other hand, spread from the Guran of southern Kurdistan to the Azerbaijanis and Persians and to some of the Iraqi Turcomans. The third important syncretistic sect of Kurdistan used to be called Qizilbash and is now euphemistically called Alevi ("devotees of Ali"). The Alevi Kurds live on the north-western edge of Kurdistan and number at least hundreds of thousands, perhaps even more than a million.

Finally there are Christian minorities of various denominations living among the Kurds. Originally there were three communities, each with its own church, the Armenians and two groups speaking different Aramaic dialects. The Western Syrians, whose major centres were in the Tor Abdin mountains near Mardin, belonged to the Syrian Orthodox Church, while the Eastern Syrians (also known as Assyrians) of the mountains between Mosul and Urmia were Nestorians. Later new church denominations emerged under the influence of foreign missionary activities so that there are now Syrian Catholics, Armenian Catholics and Chaldaeans (Assyrian Catholics) and an even larger variety of Protestant churches.

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<sup>6</sup> On repeated occasions the Iraqi regime has expelled large numbers of Faylis to Iran on the pretext that they were foreign citizens, although their families had lived in Iraq for generations. Some Fayli families may originally have come from southern Kurdistan, but most appear to have originated in a region further to the south, while others may have no Iranian connection whatsoever. On the background of the deportations of the Faylis, see Samir al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp.135-138.

Older sources occasionally mention also Christian Kurds.<sup>7</sup> It remains unclear whether these were Kurds who had converted to Christianity or former members of Christian ethnic groups who had become Kurdicised. Most present-day Christians, however, are ethnically different from the Kurds. They consider themselves as being separate peoples, of different origins and with distinct histories of their own. Some, but by no means all, still speak Armenian or Aramaic. Most of the Western Syrians now speak Arabic as their mother tongue, while many members of each community living in villages are more fluent in Kurdish than any other language. In northern Iraq members of the Chaldaean and Nestorian communities have taken active part in the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. They identified themselves so much with the Kurdish cause that they did not protest when the Kurds called them "Christian Kurds." At present there is an Assyrian Democratic Party in Iraq, which cooperates with the Kurdish political parties in the Kurdistan Front.

The Christians used to constitute a much higher proportion of the population of Kurdistan than they do today. Massacres, flight, voluntary migration and conversions to Islam have seriously reduced their numbers. In various parts of Kurdistan (Siirt, Hakkari) I have met "crypto-Christians," people who were Kurdish speakers and who had outwardly become Muslims but still retained a vivid memory of having been Armenians or Nestorians. The relations between the remaining Christians and their Kurdish neighbours have often been less than cordial. The West Syrian Christians of Tor Abdin especially have often been subjected to brutal treatment by Kurdish tribal chieftains, who took their land, their property and even their daughters.

Finally there also used to be a Jewish minority in many Kurdish towns and villages, but this has virtually disappeared. Most of them have migrated to Israel, where the Kurdistan Jews are a distinct, recognizable community.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Yezidis**

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<sup>7</sup> The tenth-century geographer Mas'udi is said to have met Kurds who professed Christianity. See G. R. Driver, "The Religion of the Kurds," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 2 (1921-23): 197.

<sup>8</sup> See Claudine Cohen, *Grandir au quartier kurde: Rapports de générations et modèles culturels d'un groupe d'adolescents Israéliens d'origine kurde* (Paris 1975), and Birgit Ammann, "Kurdische Juden in Israel," *Jahrbuch für Vergleichende Sozialforschung* 1987/88 (Berlin: Edition Parabolis, 1990), pp. 241-258.

Of all the different sects in Kurdistan the Yezidis have exerted the strongest romantic appeal on foreigners — and not on foreigners alone. As said above, the Kurdish nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s idealised Yezidi belief as the only properly Kurdish religion. This positive appreciation of Yezidis was, however, something new in the attitude of the other Kurds. Their heretical beliefs were a warrant for discrimination and oppression at the hands of both the Ottoman authorities and the Muslim Kurds. During the past centuries there have been numerous massacres of Yezidis. Conversions have further contributed to a steady dwindling of their numbers.

A central element in the Yezidi religion is the belief in six (or seven) angels created by God and placed in charge of the affairs of the world. The first among them, of almost divine status himself, is the Peacock Angel, Malak Tawus. He was the angel who refused to obey God's order to kneel before Adam and who is therefore considered as the embodiment of evil by Muslims and Christians alike. Hence the accusation often made that the Yezidis are devil-worshippers. To the Yezidis, however, Malak Tawus is neither the lord of evil nor God's opponent in any other sense. Malak Tawus and the other angels have all manifested themselves in the world as saintly human beings. Malak Tawus was incarnated in Shaikh Adi ibn Musafir, whom the Yezidis venerate as the greatest saint of their religion. The annual pilgrimage to his shrine at Lalish is one of the major rituals.

Yezidi society has a caste-like stratification. The highest position is held by a princely family, which receives tribute from all Yezidis. Religious leadership is vested in a number of families of tribes of *shaikhs*, while other religious functions are held hereditarily by families of *pirs* and *qawwals*. There are even more specialised religious functions, but these are not hereditary. This rigid stratification is perhaps made more palatable by the belief in reincarnation. Everyone, saintly spirits as well as ordinary beings, travels through a chain of incarnations, not only in human but also in animal forms.

A factor that has much hindered the Yezidis' individual progress but kept their traditions intact is the ban on literacy. There was a tradition that Shaikh Adi himself had forbidden his followers to learn to read and write. Until a generation ago even the elite of the Yezidi community was entirely illiterate.

The recent, careful study by John Guest estimates the total number of Yezidis at 150,000, most of them living in Iraq. Some 40,000 of them live in the (former) Soviet republics of

Armenia and Georgia, perhaps 10,000 in Turkey, while only 5,000 are said to live in Syria.<sup>9</sup> In Iraq there are two main geographical concentrations of Yezidis, in the Shaikhan district north of Mosul where their most important sanctuary, the shrine of Shaikh Adi at Lalish, is located, and on Mount Sinjar to the west of that city stretching into Syria. In the 1970s both regions were subjected to Iraq's policy of arabisation. Numerous villages were evacuated, and Arabs were later settled there. In Syria we find Yezidis not only in the Syrian part of Mount Sinjar but also in the mountains north of Aleppo known as Kürt Dağı ("the Kurdish Mountains"), as well as in a few villages in the upper Mesopotamian plain west of Qamishli. Many of the Kurdish tribes here and in the contiguous part of Turkey used to be Yezidis but have now become Muslims.

In the nineteenth century, Turkish censuses still recorded Yezidis as far north-west as Sivas and in the Diyarbakir, Mardin and Siirt districts. Religious persecution has greatly reduced their numbers. Many were killed, numerous others converted either to Christianity or to Islam. Since the attitude of the Christian churches towards the Yezidis was more benevolent than that of most Muslims, individual Yezidis preferred conversion to Christianity. A fair number of the present West Syrian Christians are in all likelihood the descendants of converted Yezidis. More recently the continued existence of the West Syrian community itself has come under threat, making conversion to Islam a more secure alternative.<sup>10</sup> Several tribes that were still reported to be in whole or in part Yezidis a century ago, such as the Milli, the Berazi and the Hevêrkan, are now entirely Muslim — at least in outward behaviour. The remaining Yezidis in Turkey live under great pressure of discrimination if not persecution. Many have left for Germany as workers; since work permits are no longer given, the remainder of the community is attempting to join them as refugees.<sup>11</sup>

In the Trans-caucasian republics the Yezidis have been relatively free of persecution. They probably constitute the majority of the Kurds in both Armenia and Georgia. As a result the studies of Kurdish folklore made by Soviet scholars concern specifically Yezidi folklore. In

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<sup>9</sup> John S. Guest, *The Yezidis: A Study in Survival* (London and New York: KPI, 1987), p. 197. Guest's estimate of only 5,000 in Syria seems too low to me.

<sup>10</sup> In 1975 I met a person in Idil (near Cizre) who had been born a Yezidi, had converted to Christianity at a young age and had become a Muslim at a more recent date.

<sup>11</sup> See Robin Schneider, ed., *Die kurdischen Yezidi: Ein Volk auf dem Weg in den Untergang* (Göttingen: Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Völker, 1984).

the recent ethnic upheavals in Armenia, Muslim Kurds have been expelled (fleeing to Central Asia), while the Yezidi Kurds were left in peace.

### **The Ahl-i-Haqq**

The religion of the Ahl-i-Haqq ("Devotees of Truth") is also closely associated with Kurdistan. It first emerged among the Guran of southern Kurdistan or in neighbouring Luristan, and its most sacred writings are all in the Gurani language.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the Yezidi religion, however, it spread from Kurdistan to neighbouring areas and found followers among the Lur, the Azerbaijani Turks, the Persians in Iran and the Turcomans in Iraq. The French philosopher, the Comte de Gobineau, who spent several years in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, was the first westerner to write extensively on this religion, which he considered as "the most important religion of Persia, be it for its dogmas, for the number of its adherents, or for their quality."<sup>13</sup>

Among the Kurds the Ahl-i-Haqq religion has at present followers in four distinct areas. The most important of these is the region west of Kirmanshah near the Iraqi border. This is where the Guran live now and where we also find the major shrines of the Ahl-i-Haqq. A second zone of concentration is the Sahne district between Kirmanshah and Hamadan. Many of the Lur who live to the south of these two Kurdish Ahl-i-Haqq areas are also followers of this religion, and it is quite possible that in the past a significant portion of the inhabitants of the entire region were Ahl-i-Haqq. The third area consists of a string of Kurdish and Turcoman villages south of Kirkuk in Iraq, where the religion and its followers are called Kaka'i. The fourth consists of a cluster of villages near Mosul; this community goes by the name of Sarli. I do not dare to make an estimate as to the number of Ahl-i-Haqq among the Kurds. In the Guran district west of Kirmanshah, which I know best, they number in the tens

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<sup>12</sup> The Guran used to be a culturally distinct group among the Kurds, speaking a different language, Gurani. Most of the present Guran no longer speak Gurani but southern Kurdish dialects; Gurani has, however, remained the sacred language of the Ahl-i-Haqq, in which its most important religious texts are composed. See V. Minorsky, "The Guran", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11 (1943): 75-103; M. M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: On the Social and Political Organization of Kurdistan* (dissertation, Utrecht, 1978), chapter II.1.

<sup>13</sup> Comte de Gobineau, *Trois ans en Asie* (Paris: Grasset, 1923), vol. 2, p. 68.

of thousands. A recent study estimates the total number of all Ahl-i-Haqq at half a million, but most of these are not Kurds.<sup>14</sup>

The Ahl-i-Haqq believe that God and six or seven archangels, who represent various aspects of God's essence, have manifested themselves several times in the world in human form. One of these human incarnations of God himself was, according to their belief, Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. The belief in Ali's divine nature is shared by a number of other Middle Eastern sects of extremist Shiite (*ghulat*) origin, such as the Nusayris (Alawis) in Syria and the Qizilbash (Alevi) in Turkey. Their more orthodox neighbours often lump these sects together under the nickname "Ali-Ilahis." To the Ahl-i-Haqq, however God's most important incarnation was not Ali but Sultan Sahak, the reputed founder of their sect. The Ahl-i-Haqq also attach more importance than other *ghulat* sects to the archangels accompanying the deity in all his manifestations, known together as the *Haft Tan*, the Seven Persons. This resembles the Yezidi belief in seven angels who were incarnate in seven saints; and it is of course reminiscent of the seven "Bounteous Immortals" (*amesha spenta*), angelic beings who play a similar part in Zoroastrian doctrine. Like the Yezidis too, the Ahl-i-Haqq believe in reincarnation of the ordinary human soul. Religious leadership is hereditary and exercised by a number of *sayyid* families descending from Ahl-i-Haqq saints, but there is not such an elaborate caste system as among the Yezidis.

Both sects emerged in a Muslim environment, as is clear from the names of their saints and religious leaders as well as from many of the terms in which their religious ideas are formulated. The Ahl-i-Haqq, however, appear to belong to the extremist Shia, whereas the Yezidis may originally have been an extremist anti-Shia Muslim sect.<sup>15</sup> Their similarities are due to the pre-Islamic background that they share. Some of the Ahl-i-Haqq stress, like the Yezidis again, that they are not Muslims but a separate religion, while others (among the

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<sup>14</sup> M. Reza Hamzeh'ee *The Yaresan* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1990), p. 39. The author, a Kurdish Ahl-i-Haqq himself, does not explain how he arrives at this estimate.

<sup>15</sup> Some Yezidi leaders derive the name of their religion from that of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid b. Mu'awiya, who was responsible for the violent death of Ali's son Husayn, the third Imam of the Shia. This derivation appears to be corroborated by the fact that we find in various early sources references to a strongly pro-Umayyad sect called Yazidis because of their sympathies for Yazid b. Mu'awiya. There is no evidence, however, as to whether the present Yezidis are the descendants of their medieval namesakes. (See Fritz Meier "Der Name der Yazidi's", in: Fritz Meier (ed.), *Westöstliche Abhandlungen Rudolph Tschudi zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1954). Others have claimed that the name is derived from the Iranian term Yazdan, "spiritual being".

Kurds mainly those of the Sahne district) prefer to present themselves as an esoteric sect within orthodox Shiism.

### **The Alevi (Qizilbash) of Turkish Kurdistan**

The most numerous of the heterodox sects in Kurdistan are the Alevi, who live on the north-western periphery of Kurdistan in an arc that stretches from Gaziantep to Bingöl and who have as their major centre the Dersim district, which comprises the present province of Tunceli and parts of Sivas Erzincan and Elazığ. The name Alevi is rather recent, and it is used in Turkey for a number of groups of Ali-worshippers not directly interrelated. The earlier name of Qizilbash given to these Kurdish as well as most Turkish Alevi has not yet entirely gone out of use but is rejected by most of the people concerned because it has become a term of abuse.

Qizilbash, literally "redheads," was originally the name given to the followers of the messianic Shah Ismail, a charismatic mystic and warrior who believed in his own divinity and who founded at the beginning of the 16th century the state that grew into modern Iran. Ismail drew his following chiefly from among the poor and disaffected tribesmen (and perhaps also peasants) in Asia Minor. The red headgear of some of his fighting forces gave the movement its name. Their beliefs were probably a mixture of shamanism, extremist Shiism (both Ali and Shah Ismail were considered as incarnations of God) and older Anatolian religions. Many of Ismail's followers joined him in Iran, but numerous others stayed behind in Anatolia. Several other Qizilbash rebellions followed, and all were bloodily quelled. The Qizilbash and related sects suffered severe repression during the following centuries at the hands of both the state, which always considered them as supporters of the enemy state of Iran, and their more orthodox neighbors, who objected to their laxity in religious duties and accused them of unspeakable sins, usually of a sexual nature. Persecution resulted in the Qizilbash's withdrawal to inaccessible mountainous areas. Dersim in north-western Kurdistan was one such area.

In Iran the Shiite extremism of the Qizilbash gradually gave way to 'orthodox' (i.e., *shari'a*-based) Twelver Shiism under the influence of the Shiite ulama Shah Ismail invited from southern Iraq, but there was no such development in Asia Minor. The Alevi of Turkey have little in common with present-day Iranian Shiites. They do not perform the canonical five daily prayers, do not make the pilgrimage to Mecca, and if they fast it is not in the month of

Ramadan but in Muharram, and only for three days. Their moral code is not based on the Koran, and one of the striking facts about their religious rituals is that women also take part in them — which is one of the reasons why they have often been accused of ritual promiscuity. The Kurdish Qizilbash of Dersim were, if anything, even more heterodox than other groups. There are vigorous remnants of nature worship (sun and moon, springs, rocks, trees), while the gradual assimilation of many local Armenians to the Kurds here has also left clear traces.

The secularising reforms in Atatürk's Republican Turkey were welcomed by the Alevis as a liberation and first step in their social emancipation. Not surprisingly the Kurdish rebellion of Shaikh Sa'id in 1925, with its strong Islamic overtones, was actively opposed by Kurdish Alevi tribes in the region.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that Kurdish nationalism had made no inroads among the Alevis (it had), but that the fear of Sunni fanaticism was much stronger than any Kurdish national sentiment. Nationalist-inspired rebellions of Alevi Kurds (the first in 1920 involving only the Koçgiri tribe; the most important one later in 1937-38 involving large parts of Dersim), conversely received no support from Sunni Kurds. The Alevi Kurds were at most times much closer to Turkish Alevis than to the Sunni Kurds.

When Turkey's politics gradually polarised from the 1960s on, the Alevis, and especially the Alevi Kurds tended to end up at the left end of the political spectrum. The old Sunni-Alevi antagonism was exacerbated by political rivalries between the left and the (religious and Turkish nationalist) right. Political agitation during the 1970s resulted in numerous violent clashes between Sunnis and Alevis, culminating in the riots of Kahramanmaraş in 1978, in which more than a hundred Alevis were killed by right-wing Sunni mobs. The military regime that took over in September 1980 attempted to deflate the tension between Sunnis and Alevis by organising reconciliation ceremonies and suppressing communal friction. The differences between Sunnis and Alevis were played down, and many Alevis complained of attempts at assimilation through building mosques and appointing Sunni imams to Alevi villages.

The suppression of Alevi identity was strongest in the Tunceli area. Since the Dersim rebellion of 1937-38, the government had always looked upon this province as the most unruly part of the country, not only Alevi but also a hotbed of Kurdish nationalism and later

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<sup>16</sup> On this rebellion and the role of religion as a factor motivating participants and opponents, see my "Von Osmanismus zum Separatismus.", pp. 244-257.

left-wing sympathies. Radical left parties and organisations, both Turkish and Kurdish, drew strong support here. Tunceli was one of the major targets of the military operations to restore law and order after the 1980 coup, and it has remained heavily policed ever since. Nevertheless, violent protest actions continued there, carried out by supporters of Partizan (a Turkey-wide radical left organisation whose members are almost exclusively of Alevi background) and the Kurdish PKK (Workers' Party of Kurdistan). The government announced plans to evacuate most Tunceli villages and resettle the inhabitants in various other provinces, ostensibly for reasons of reforestation, but most probably in order to break the spirit of resistance.

Around 1990 we see another change in government policy toward the Alevis. Neglect gives way to official recognition of Alevism as a variant of Islam in its own right. The annual celebrations for the great Alevi saint Haji Bektash, which in previous decades turned into an oppositional cultural festival suddenly received official sponsorship. Alevi culture receives praise for its richness, the press is full of long and favourable reports on Alevi history, Alevi traditions, Alevi spirituality, the Alevi background of Turkish literary works, etc. In one year more books were published on the Alevis than in all of the preceding half century. This reflects, but also stimulates, a search among young Alevis for their roots and a new pride in their religious identity. The Alevi revival is at least in part stimulated from above. As government critics see it, it serves a number of related purposes simultaneously. A renewed interest in the cultural and spiritual dimension of Alevism may lead Alevi youth away from leftist radicalism, and the Alevis may be used as a barrier against the rise of politicised Sunni Islam ("fundamentalism"), while the new emphasis on the Alevi identity may weaken the radical Kurdish movement, in which Alevi Kurds had been disproportionately represented.

### **The Sunni Majority — The Role of the Mystical Orders**

The saying about the Kurds being poor Muslims with which I opened this article is belied by the fact that they have produced a large number of great Islamic scholars who had an influence well beyond the boundaries of Kurdistan. During the past six centuries, Kurdish ulama could be found in influential positions at the Ottoman court and as teachers at the famous university of al-Azhar or in the Holy Cities of Arabia. Geographical accident had placed the Kurds between the three major cultural regions of Islam, and many Kurdish ulama knew Persian and Turkish as well as Arabic and, of course, Kurdish. This gave them an

important role as cultural brokers mediating between the Indian Muslims who wrote in Persian on the one hand and the Turkish- and Arabic-speaking world on the other. Kurds teaching in Mecca and Medina left a lasting impact as far as Indonesia.<sup>17</sup> The madrasas (traditional Muslim schools) of Kurdistan used to have a good reputation, but it is no doubt true that only a small elite studied there. The development of modern secular education (and the closure of the madrasas in Turkey under Atatürk) has to some extent drained the madrasas of intellect. But even so, the clandestine madrasas of Kurdistan were the only place in Turkey where traditional Muslim learning continued during the period of high Kemalism, and students from all over the country had to go to the Kurdish area for a thorough traditional education.<sup>18</sup>

The learned ulama were of course always a small elite only, and certainly not representative of the Kurds at large. Their piety and learning were admired and respected, especially by those who lacked these qualities. The common people often believed that the presence of ulama in their midst could compensate for their own religious shortcomings. The men of religion were often seen as mediators between ordinary men and God, who through their intercession could secure salvation for their followers. This belief gave the more enterprising ulama a fair amount of political leverage. A certain class of religious authorities in fact acquired considerable worldly powers. These were the shaikhs, the leaders of mystical orders.

The Kurdish conception of Islam has strong mystical overtones, and many Kurdish ulama were and are affiliated with a *tariqat*, or mystical order. Each *tariqat* has its distinctive mystical exercises, consisting of the regular recitation of God's names or other pious formulae, breath control, various forms of asceticism and meditation techniques. The *tariqats* are led by shaikhs who are the spiritual guides of their disciples, not only leading them onto

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<sup>17</sup> Biographical notices of important Kurdish ulama are collected by Mulla `Abd al-Karim Muhammad al-Mudarris in his *Ulamâ'unâ fi khidmat al-`ilm wa'!-dîn* (Our ulama in the service of learning and religion) (Baghdad: Dar al-Hurriyya, 1983). On their role as cultural brokers and their influence in Indonesia see my "Kurdish `ulama and their Indonesian students", in: *De Turcicis aliisque rebus commentarii Henry Hofman dedicati*. (Utrecht: Instituut voor Oosterse Talen en Culturen, 1992), pp. 205-227.

<sup>18</sup> The Turkish mulla Turan Dursun, who later became an atheist and published highly polemical anti-Islamic articles in the weekly *2000'e Doğru*, studied as a boy in a Kurdish madrasa. He writes extensively, and with rancor, on this education in his autobiographical *Kulleteyn* (Istanbul: Akyüz, 1990). Dursun, who was murdered in 1990, was a very learned man with a better command of the Islamic sources than his more pious opponents — which is a tribute to the quality of his education.

the spiritual path but also mediating between them and the unseen world. The more important shaikhs usually have a number of deputies (*khalifa*) to whom they delegate some of their authority and who are their representatives in other localities and, as it were, mediators between the common followers and the shaikh. The *tariqat* thus has a hierarchical structure, which is further emphasized by the importance of initiation. Not every follower of a shaikh is an initiate, but in order to take part in the mystical exercises of the order one has to receive an initiation, which is at the same time an oath of allegiance to the shaikh.

Several *tariqats* were active in Kurdistan in the past, but at present only two play a role of importance, the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya. In Iraq the Talabani and the Barzani are two well-known families of shaikhs, the Talabani associated with the Qadiris and the Barzani with the Naqshbandis. Mulla Mustafa Barzani and Jalal Talabani, the major nationalist leaders, were not shaikhs themselves, but the former especially owed much to his family's traditional religious role. The most important southern Kurdish nationalist leader of the 1920s, who even proclaimed himself king of Kurdistan, was Shaikh Mahmud Barzinji, the head of the most influential family of Qadiri shaikhs. His contemporary, Shaikh Sa`id, who led the first Kurdish rebellion against Atatürk's regime in Turkey, was a Naqshbandi and so were the most important local leaders in this rebellion. The very first Kurdish rebellion of a nationalist character was led by another Naqshbandi shaikh, Ubaidullah of Nehri, in Hakkari in 1880. In the half century following Ubaidullah's rebellion, it was primarily shaikhs who provided leadership to the incipient Kurdish movement.

There had occasionally been shaikhs of great political influence in Kurdistan before,<sup>19</sup> but from the second half of the nineteenth century on we see *tariqat* shaikhs emerge as the most important class of political leaders. This is directly related to changes in the political environment, which were in turn responses to European imperialism.<sup>20</sup> The Ottoman government had, under European pressure, embarked upon a policy of administrative reform, breaking up the formerly semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates and for the first time bringing the area under direct central control. Most of the tribes had previously been part of one of the emirates, so that their conflicts could be held in check by a higher authority, the Kurdish

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<sup>19</sup> One striking example in the seventeenth century is discussed in my article, "The Naqshbandi Order in 17th-Century Kurdistan," in Marc Gaborieau et al., eds., *Naqshbandis: Historical Development and Present Situation of a Muslim Mystical Order* (Istanbul and Paris: Isis, 1990), pp. 337-360.

<sup>20</sup> The following paragraphs are a summary of the argument developed in greater detail in my *Agha, Shaikh and State*.

emir, who could also unite the tribes for military purposes. With the disappearance of these overarching emirates, Kurdish society disintegrated into quarrelling and feuding tribes. The only Kurdish personalities left whose authority transcended tribal boundaries were the shaikhs. It is true that some tribes were entirely the followers of one or the other shaikh, but most shaikhs drew their following from more than one tribe, and the shrewder ones established themselves on the boundary between two or more important tribes.

Another factor that played a part in the increasing prominence of the shaikhs during the mid-nineteenth century is the extensive activities of European missionaries among the Christian minorities, which caused concern about the Europeans' ulterior motives in the region. The anti-Christian and anti-European reaction also stimulated Islamic sentiment and thereby strengthened the shaikhs' position.

It was especially the Naqshbandi *tariqat* that took advantage of these changes, since it was much more dynamic than the Qadiri. In the latter *tariqat* the position of shaikh had become hereditary and was monopolised by a few families. The Naqshbandis had recently experienced a revival through the activities of the charismatic Mawlana Khalid, a Kurd from the Sulaimaniya region who had been initiated in a reformist branch of the order in India and who, between his return in 1811 and his death in 1827, appointed over sixty *khalifas* all over the Middle East, half of them in Kurdistan. In most cases these *khalifas*, whom Mawlana Khalid authorised to act as shaikhs in their own right, did not belong to shaikhly families themselves; the monopoly of the established shaikhly families was thereby broken. Many of Shaikh Khalid's *khalifas* appointed their own *khalifas* in turn so that in a few decades all of Kurdistan was covered by a network of Naqshbandi shaikhs and *khalifas*, some of whom came to wield considerable political influence. The Kurdish shaikhs were not, in general, unworldly characters; many felt as much at ease in the saddle as on the prayer mat and handled their rifles as confidently as their rosaries. It was such men who became the leaders or figureheads of the early nationalist movement. The Naqshbandi network showed itself capable of mobilising large numbers of men from different tribes for common action.

### **Shaikhs and the Modern State**

After Shaikh Sa'id's rebellion, the Turkish government banned all *tariqats*, a ban that is still officially in effect. Even in recent years the press has occasionally reported police raids in houses where clandestine *tariqat* meetings are held. In the 1930s and 1940s control was very

tight indeed. Although the mystical exercises of the *tariqats* had to be discontinued (or at best carried on in secret in very small circles), the shaikhs did not lose their prestige among the population. With the reintroduction of a multi-party system in Turkey after World War II, tribal chieftains and shaikhs became important vote-getters for the political parties. The political parties soon discovered that it was impossible to win elections in the Kurdish provinces without the support of shaikhs or powerful chieftains. In exchange for delivering the votes of their followers, the shaikhs could claim various favors from the central, provincial or local government. This in turn helped them to dispense patronage and build up a stronger following. The process obviously gave them a vested interest in the status quo; although some of the shaikhs may have Kurdish nationalist sentiments, they are wary of radical change.

The alliances with political parties are contracted on purely pragmatic grounds and have nothing to do with the parties' political stand. At first sight some of the alliances are rather surprising: the descendants of the Kurdish nationalist Shaikh Sa`id, for instance, joined so unlikely a party as the pan-Turk fascist Party of Nationalist Action, as did several other Naqshbandi shaikhs in the Malatya-Elazığ region. Another member of a famous shaikhly family from Kurdistan, S. Ahmet Arvasi, became one of the chief ideologists of the Turkish nationalist right wing and a staunch opponent of Kurdish separatism.<sup>21</sup>

With their increased political leverage, several shaikhs have again begun openly acting as mystical teachers. The Naqshbandiyya has once again become a significant force in Turkish politics. Several shaikhs in Istanbul have influence at the highest political levels (it is well known that President Özal's family has Naqshbandi connections), while some of the Kurdish shaikhs have countrywide influence among members of the lower middle class.<sup>22</sup>

In Iraq and Iran the *tariqats* were never banned, but the shaikhs paradoxically do not have the political leverage that their colleagues in Turkey have by virtue of the liberal political

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<sup>21</sup> S. Ahmet Arvasi, *Türk-İslam Ülküsü* (The Turkish-Islamic ideal), 2 vols. (İstanbul: Türk Kültür Yayını, 1980). This book purports to give Turkish nationalism a conservative Islamic underpinning. Like many earlier Turkish nationalist authors, Arvasi declares the Kurds to be full-blooded Turks. Earlier in the 20th century, another member of the same family, Shaikh Şefik Arvasi, had played an active role in the Kurdish nationalist movement.

<sup>22</sup> On the Naqshbandiyya in modern Turkey see Hamid Algar, "Der Nakşibendi-Orden in der republikanischen Türkei," in Jochen Blaschke and Martin van Bruinessen, eds., *Islam und Politik in der Türkei* (Berlin: Express,

system there. Shaikh Mahmud Barzinji of Sulaimaniya and Shaikh Ahmad Barzani of Barzan in northern Iraq were popular leaders of resistance against the British in the 1920s. The popular support they mustered was based as much on Kurdish nationalist sentiments as on traditional religious loyalties; Shaikh Ahmad's younger brother, Mulla Mustafa, was the man who first united the Kurds on a purely nationalist platform. Among the Kurds whom the Iraqi government armed and paid to fight Barzani and his nationalists, we find traditional rivals of the Barzani family, notably the rival Naqshbandi shaikh from northern Iraq, Shaikh Rashid Lolan. In southern Kurdistan, a shaikh from the Barzinji family, Shaikh Abdulkarim Kripchina, collaborated with the government against the Kurdish movement. These shaikhs, however, gradually lost their influence over the younger generation and sank into insignificance.

By far the most influential shaikh of southern Kurdistan in the mid-1970s, when I did fieldwork there, was Shaikh Osman of Tawela in the mountainous district of Hawraman. He was the scion of an important and rich shaikhly family on the Iraqi side of the border. After the left-wing populist coup of Colonel Qassem in 1958 he fled to Iran, as did many other landlords and tribal chieftains. He established cordial relations with the imperial authorities, who did not interfere with the stream of visitors, foreigners as well as Iranian Kurds and Turcomans. His following consisted mostly of peasants and poor townsmen from all over southern Kurdistan. When the revolution brought the Shah down and a Shiite regime was installed in Tehran, Shaikh Osman, who was then well over seventy years old, established his own counter-revolutionary movement, the *Supahi Rizgari* ("Liberation Army"). Armed and financed by Iraq, it was perhaps the last dervish army, consisting mainly of the shaikh's Hawramani disciples. It did not prove a very effective fighting force; resistance against the central government and the various Shiite forces in Iran was soon entirely dominated by the two secular organisations, *Komala* and the *Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Iran*. After a year or so, the "army" entirely disintegrated and the shaikh left, first to Europe, then to Saudi Arabia. His influence in southern Kurdistan appears to have dwindled because of these events.

Not all *tariqat* shaikhs in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan have seen their influence diminished, however. One important exception is Shaikh Muhammad Khalid Barzani, the son of Shaikh

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1985), pp. 167-196; Ruşen Çakır, *Ayet ve slogan: Türkiye'de islami oluşumlar* (Koranic verse and slogan: Islamic formations in Turkey) (Istanbul: Metis, 1990), pp. 17-76.

Ahmad.<sup>23</sup> He had long remained rather inconspicuous, outshone by Mulla Mustafa and his sons, in whose entourage he lived in Iranian exile since 1975. In the mid-1980s he suddenly appeared on the Iraqi Kurdish scene as the leader of a guerrilla force that called itself the Hizbullahs of Kurdistan and vowed to expel the left-wing parties from the shaikh's ancestral region. The Iranian regime, though continuing to support the (Iraqi) *Kurdistan Democratic Party* of Mulla Mustafa Barzani's sons, made various attempts to establish among the Iraqi Kurds Islamic parties that would be more easily controlled from Tehran. Of their various clients, Shaikh Muhammad Khalid was the most credible because he could claim the traditional authority of his family. His *peshmergas* were recruited among Kurdish refugees in Iran loyal to the Barzani family. Generously armed and financed by Iran, the shaikh's organisation presented itself as a serious rival to his cousins' *Kurdistan Democratic Party* and an actual threat to the left-wing *peshmerga* units in the area. It was the only Islamic formation among the Iraqi Kurds that had a more than ephemeral existence. Although never becoming dominant, it is still a force to be reckoned with.<sup>24</sup> While Mulla Mustafa Barzani's position as a secular nationalist leader initially owed much to his family's religious authority, Iranian support of Shaikh Muhammad Khalid thus reinforced the religious dimension of the family's authority and strengthened the shaikh's position vis-à-vis the secular branch of the family.

### **Religious Modernism and Radicalism**

Even before Atatürk banned the *tariqats*, a Kurdish religious scholar known as Sa`id Kurdi, "Kurdish Sa`id", had declared his opposition to them — not on political but on religious grounds. Sa`id Kurdi (later preferably known as Sa`id Nursi, after his birthplace, Nurs) was probably the most original Muslim thinker to appear in Turkey in this century. In his youth he had received a traditional Kurdish madrasa education, and at least one of his teachers had been a Naqshbandi shaikh. In the first years of this century he moved to Istanbul where he

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<sup>23</sup> On the authority relations and succession problems within the Barzani family, see the more detailed notes accompanying the genealogical charts in my *Agha, Shaikh and State*, chapter 4, appendix.

<sup>24</sup> The actual military force of Shaikh Muhammad Khalid's Hizbullah remains unclear and their present dependence on Iran untransparent. The first published interview of which I am aware was made as recently as March 1991 by a Kurdish journalist from Turkey, Cevat Korkmaz, who reported it in his book *Kürt Kapanı* (The Kurdish Trap) (Ankara: Yurt, 1991), pp. 49-69. Korkmaz unconvincingly tries to implicate the shaikh in alleged Islamic terrorism in Turkey and throws little light on his activities in Iraqi Kurdistan.

was in contact with both Muslim modernists and leading Kurdish nationalists and where he became involved in attempts at popular education. In the Balkan War and World War I he served as a commander of Kurdish militia troops, distinguishing himself incidentally by saving Armenian families from the massacres of 1915. His dream was to educate his people and lift them from the ignorance and backwardness in which they lived. The *tariqats*, in their state then were to him part of that backwardness. The education he proposed was both Islamic and scientific.

In the early 1920s Sa`id broke with the Kurdish nationalist movement, in which he had belonged to the non-separatist wing, and devoted himself to writing his magnum opus *Risale-i Nur* (Treatise on the [Divine] Light). This is a series of texts of varying length on various moral and religious subjects, based on dreams and visions, strongly mystical in tone, and written in an idiosyncratic, old-fashioned Turkish. It became the sacred text of Sa`id's increasing numbers of disciples, who came to be known as *Nurjus*, "Devotees of the [Divine] Light." The Nurju movement, in spite of persecution by the state, kept growing in numbers and has at present several million followers throughout Turkey, Turks as well as Kurds.<sup>25</sup>

The Nurjus constitute probably the most tolerant and open-minded of the various Sunni Muslim movements in Turkey and have from the beginning distinguished themselves by their positive attitude toward modern science. This is not to say that among the followers of so large a movement there are not here and there fanatical groups. It is ironical, given Sa`id Nursi's rejection of the Sufi orders, that the Nurju movement has itself assumed some of the structural characteristics of a *tariqat*, with a hierarchical organisation based on closeness to the late master and degrees of initiation in the arcane secrets of the master's texts. I have even met Nurjus among the Kurds who were also Naqshbandis.

There are at present several separate tendencies within the Nurju movement emerging out of conflicting views on the political stand that the movement should adopt. Among the Kurdish Nurjus a moderately nationalist tendency has emerged in the 1980s that names itself after the *Medreset-üz-Zahra*, the university that Sa`id Nursi had dreamt of establishing in

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<sup>25</sup> On Sa`id-i Nursi and his religious teachings, see Hamid Algar, "Said Nursi and the Risala-i Nur", in *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honor of Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi* (London, 1978), pp. 313-333; Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). On the Nurju movement see Paul Dumont "Disciples of the Light: The Nurju Movement in Turkey," *Central Asian Survey* 5:2 (1986): 330. See also Ruşen Çakır's observations in *Ayet ve slogan*, pp. 77-99.

Kurdistan. They emphasise Sa'id's role in the early Kurdish movement, which the official Nurju spokesmen had long passed over in silence. This group appears to represent relatively well-educated urban youth of Nurju family backgrounds. The emergence of Kurdish nationalism in these Islamic circles is not an exceptional occurrence. We find a parallel development in other Muslim groups among the Kurds, in spite of Islam's ideally non-nationalist attitude.

Among the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds, Islamic political movements have never gained much of a following. Immediately after the Iranian revolution, before political parties had got themselves organised, religious personalities emerged as spokesmen for the Kurds. This was no doubt in response to the role played by the Shiite ulama in and after the revolution and did not reflect a sudden turn to religion. The most popular of these personalities was Ezzeddin Hoseini of Mahabad, a religious functionary who spoke like a nationalist rather than like a cleric, and who allied himself with the radical left. A more explicitly Islamic politician was Ahmad Moftizadeh of Sanandaj, who sought co-operation with the relatively liberal Shiites around Bani-Sadr.

Both men's positions were soon marginalised when the secular *Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Iran* (KDP-I) and *Komala* consolidated themselves and organised the population. Hoseini lost his initial mass support but not popular sympathy. With a small personal following he took part in guerrilla action when the Iranian army and Revolutionary Guards reoccupied Kurdistan. Since the mid-1980s he has lived in European exile. Moftizadeh's fate was more tragic. He fell out first with the nationalist Kurds in his town, who saw in him a stooge of Tehran, and then also with the Iranian authorities, who found him insufficiently co-operative. He has languished in an Iranian prison for almost a decade at the time of writing (1991). There is no significant Islamic organisation or tendency among the Iranian Kurds now, and apparently no potential support for such a movement either.

As said before, Iran's post-revolutionary authorities have made various attempts to establish Islamic organisations among the Iraqi Kurds, but these have not been very successful. There have been small formations led by Abbas Shabak, a former Talabani associate, and by Najib Barzinji, a less prominent member of the well-known shaikhly family, both financed and armed by Iran; but neither ever amounted to much. The only significant force is Shaikh Muhammad Khalid Barzani's Kurdish Hizbullah, who are held together by traditional loyalties to the shaikh of Barzan rather than Islamic ideology. Although many Iraqi Kurds are pious Muslims, Islam as such is not a rallying force.

The situation seems different in Turkish Kurdistan. During the 1970s and 1980s the National Salvation Party and its successor, the Welfare Party, both of them explicitly Islamic political parties, consistently polled 20 per cent or more in the Kurdish provinces, which is well above the national average. This does not necessarily mean that the same high proportion of the Kurds has embraced Islamic political ideals. For one thing the party represents a distinct class interest, that of small-town traders and entrepreneurs who view complete integration in the western economy as a vital threat. It is therefore only natural that it receives stronger support in the more economically backward areas. Secondly, the party has always refrained from the Turkish chauvinist attitude towards the Kurds that has characterised almost all other political parties in Turkey. Moreover, Kurdish voting behaviour is often more dependent upon patronage relations than upon ideological motivation. A vote for the Welfare Party is not necessarily a deliberately Islamic vote, while conversely many committed Muslims have voted for other parties. (Most of the Kurdish shaikhs, and also the Nurjus, for instance, have allied themselves with other parties.)

Political commitment to Islam is most unambiguous among the supporters of clandestine or semi-clandestine Islamist groups. Their clandestinity makes it difficult to find reliable information about these groups. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, apparently under the influence of the Iranian revolution, there was a short-lived group styling itself the Islamic Liberation Army (IKO, İslam Kurtuluş Ordusu), with some supporters in the Tatvan and Batman districts. Students of the schools for religious functionaries (*imam-hatip liseleri*, state-run schools present in many Kurdish towns) formed informal networks of Islamist radicals, into which they also drew many other urban youth. In the second half of the 1980s these Islamist groups increasingly emphasised their Kurdish identity in opposition to the Turkish military operations in Kurdistan. At several places the initially antagonistic relations between the Islamist groups and the Marxist PKK (Workers' Party of Kurdistan), which has carried on a full-blown guerrilla war since 1984, became quite cordial.

The major Islamist formation among Turkey's Kurds at present appears to be the Islamic Party of Kurdistan (PIK, Partiya Islamiya Kurdistan). It is Kurdish nationalist as well as Islamist—in fact, its party organ, *Judi*, writes more about the Kurds than about Islam—and it enjoys some support in places like Batman (which is also a stronghold of the Welfare Party) and in districts with a history of Sunni-Alevi confrontation such as Malatya. It is unlikely that this party will play a role of importance in the near future, although some articles in the Turkish press have attempted to present it as a dangerous militant

organisation.<sup>26</sup> Compared to secular parties such as the PKK or the other, much weaker, leftist formations, the mobilising potential of the PIK remains quite low.

### **Conclusion: Islam and Nationalism**

Islam was the factor that united Turks and Kurds in the aftermath of World War I against the infidel victors and the local Christians (Armenians and Greeks). Many Kurds willingly took part in the Kemalist movement because it was a movement of Muslims against non-Muslims. When Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) dethroned Islam after the establishment of Republican Turkey, he undermined the very foundation of Turkish-Kurdish unity. It is hard to disentangle Kurdish and Islamic sentiment in the first rebellions against his regime, but attachment to Islam in these rebellions took the form of attachment to an Islamic leader, usually *a tariqat* shaikh.

And so it is today. The religiosity of the (Sunni) Kurds is most frequently expressed in their loyalty to a shaikh. Modernist and fundamentalist currents in Islam have not made serious progress among the Kurds. The one movement that began as modernist (be it of an idiosyncratic kind), the Nurju movement, has become among the Kurds a tariqat-like organisation. The Muslim Brethren and similar neo-fundamentalist movements never gained influence among the Kurds, and the impact of Iran's revolutionary Muslim ideologists has also been limited. The only important Iran-supported group among the Kurds is significantly that of the Naqshbandi shaikh, Muhammad Khalid Barzani.

When the Turkish military took over in 1980, they perceived three dangers threatening the Kemalist state: communism, Kurdish separatism and Islamic radicalism. Legalising and even sponsoring moderate Islamic activities that had previously been banned seemed to them the best way to fight the former two dangers and to prevent the radicalisation of the third. Combined with severe repression of the left and the Kurdish nationalists, this policy did in fact result in a general depoliticisation of society and a general turn to religion. The lasting confrontation between the armed forces and the Kurds, however, and the physical repression from which no Kurdish family remained exempt, caused a strong Kurdish nationalist

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<sup>26</sup> In March 1990 over thirty alleged members of the Partiya Islamiya Kurdistan were arrested and a few arms were confiscated in police raids in Istanbul, Ankara and Malatya. The press called the detainees "Islamist terrorists" and claims that the PIK had declared *jihad* ("holy

backlash. While Muslim radicals of the early 1980s denied the relevance of ethnicity, most of the Kurdish Islamists appear to have become nationalists as well. The nationalists, on the other hand, including the PKK, have given up their earlier arrogant attitude toward Islam, recognising it as an important, potentially progressive social force.

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war") with the aim of establishing an independent Kurdistan based on Islamic principles

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