

The 'Banu Ma'ruf' of the Levant – Druze Identity and Religion

Abstract

This short article discusses several important elements that distinguish the Druze in the area of religion and the family. On these two planes, a huge gap is noticeable between Islamic religious law and Druze religious law: the Druze believe in human form—Califa al-Hakim bi'amr Allah—as the embodiment of the divine spirit; they do not believe in Muhammed as the last of the prophets; they do not fast during the month of Ramadan, they do not go on pilgrimage to Mecca (the hajj). All this raises the question: Why, then, do the Druze often represent themselves as Muslims despite the fact that they are not of this religion?

The answer is related to the fact that the Druze broke away from Islam in the 10th century and crystallized for themselves a faith that contradicts Islam. This brought about their persecution by the Muslims. In order to save themselves from such tribulations, the Druze faith allows the use of the concept known as takiya—pretension. This enables the Druze, contrary to their true belief, to present themselves outwardly (zahir) as members of the ruling religion, while inwardly (batin) they have to continue to believe in the Druze uniqueness, belief in halifa al-hakem as the embodiment of the divine spirit.

This explains why the Druze act as Muslims in all overt life-cycle ceremonies: circumcision, engagement, marriage, and death; by their very nature, these ceremonies are open to the participation of their Muslim neighbors. This is not so, however, in regard to religious assemblies on Sundays and Thursdays, which are intimate events, and control over their participation is completely in the hands of Druze religious leaders themselves.

Keywords: *Banu ma'ruf, Druze, Religion, Islam, Qur'an, 'Id al-Adha, Circumcision, Engagement, Marriage, Funeral, 'Ulama', Suyyuti, Murtadd, Hajj, Mecca, Ramadan, Shari'a, Shahada, Muhamed, Kutub al-Hikma, Rasa'il al-Hikma, 'Uqqal, Juhhal, Hakim, al-Kashf, Muwahhidun, Fatalism, Khalwa, Taqiyya, Zahir, Batin*

Anyone who follows the lifestyle of the Druze easily notices their great similarity to Arab-Muslims. Their language is Arabic; their food is Oriental; their culture and popular beliefs are typical of Middle Eastern nations.¹

The Muslim signs of their external behavior are prominent. They recognize the sanctity of the Qur'an, the holy book of the Muslims. They celebrate the Feast of the Sacrifice (Id al-Adha²), the most important Islamic festival, which is known to the Druze by the same name and celebrated on the same day.

In their lifecycle ceremonies, the Druze conduct themselves exactly as their Muslim neighbors. In ceremonies celebrated shortly after birth, in the circumcision ceremony for sons, as well as in engagement, marriage and funeral ceremonies, the prayers are the same prayers said by Muslims under similar circumstances.³

In the 1950s, the '**Ulama**', the sages of the al-Azhar University of Cairo, Egypt, and the most important Islamic university in the world, researched the religious status of the Druze, with an aim of demystifying the issue of their religious identity. After a thorough examination, they concluded that the Druze are Muslim.

Contrary to this approach, however, other Muslims sharply oppose any recognition of Druze as Muslims. For example, Jalal ad-Din as-Suyyuti (1445-1505),⁴ one of the greatest Muslim sages of all time, strongly argued that no trust should be placed in Druze who claim they are Muslims, and that their external behavior, as believers in Islam, is merely a pretense. He added that, according to Islam, the Druze should be treated as infidels of the worst kind (Murtaddun),⁵ whose property should be confiscated and who might even be subject to a sentence of death, such as befits those Muslims who renounced Islam.

The legal ruling is presented in its entirety in a volume I recently published, "The Druze in the Middle East,"⁶ which summarizes several years of research in this field.

In this brief review, supported by religious texts that are zealously preserved by the Druze, we will attempt to reconcile the severe contradiction implied in Druze identity.

Firstly, let us examine the Druze attitude towards the five fundamental commandments of Islam, in practice. Based on forty years of my personal close contacts with Druze,⁷ I can state that the Druze do not perform the commandment of the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca required

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1. The world Druze population numbers about 1,500,000, the vast majority living in the Middle East: Syria (900,000), Lebanon (450,000), and Israel (130,000).
 2. Id al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice) is considered the most important Muslim holiday and is celebrated immediately after the conclusion of the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). The Druze do not observe the ritual of the Hajj.
 3. See Dana (2003), chapters 2 and 3.
 4. Jalal ad-Din as-Suyyuti lived in Egypt (1445-1505) ; he composed many books on Islam, but mainly wrote commentaries on the Qur'an.
 5. Murtaddun is a term denoting someone who was a Muslim but converted to another religion.
 6. See Dana (2003).
 7. The author of this survey was in charge of religious services for non-Jewish communities in the State of Israel for 40 years.

by the Islamic faith. They do not obey the commandment of the fast of the Ramadan. Nor do they obey the commandment of charity according to a predetermined system of rules as the Shari'a instructs. They do not pray five times a day. In fact, the concept of prayer, as it is known in monotheistic religions, is non-existent among the Druze. Especially problematic is the principle of **Shahada**(testimony), which is considered an essential foundation of the Islamic faith, involving belief in a single God and in Muhamed as the last of the prophets. In fact, as we shall see, the Druze deviate sharply from the Muslims' approach to these two doctrines. This matter will be further elucidated below.

After pointing out the tremendous gap between the Druze and the Muslims, regarding the practical performance of the five fundamental commandments, let us devote the remainder of our discussion to a thorough study of the foundations of the Druze faith and their family structure.

Foundations of the Druze Faith

The Druze possess a religious book⁸ entitled "Kutub al-Hikma" or "Rasa'il al-Hikma" (The Book of Wisdom, or The Epistles of Wisdom). This book is considered secret, and only religious sages ('Uqqal) are permitted to peruse its six volumes. Religious sages constitute no more than 25% of the sect: The majority of the Druze are considered "secular" (Juhhal) and are not permitted to study religious books or assume a role in the religious assemblies that take place on Sunday and Thursday evenings.

"Kutub al-Hikma" are written in Arabic and their publication in print is forbidden. These texts are copied by religious sages and calligraphers, to prevent unauthorized study.

The Druze religious books define seven foundations of faith: The **first** element is holding one's tongue,⁹ which emphasizes several speech-related issues: observance of promises; recognition of an error by the erroneous party; avoiding gossip and profanity; speaking the truth; bearing pain with equanimity; maintaining secrets, etc.

The **second** element is defined as guardianship of brothers.¹⁰ According to this tenet, The Druze are required to demonstrate solidarity with other sect members who experience distress when advocating a righteous issue. Druze are required to uphold the dignity of other sect members and avoid assuming a stance of conceit towards any other sect member.

The **third** element is avoidance of idol worship,¹¹ the placing of statues; bowing to Statues; or exhibiting any expression of adoration of "sacred" stones, etc. The Druze faith, contrary to Islam and Judaism, recognizes personification, that is, tangible manifestations of God. This

8. The Druze religious texts are called "Kutub al-Hikma" or "Rasa'il al-Hikma" (The Book of Wisdom, or The Epistles of Wisdom).

9. See Dana (2003).

10. Ibid.

11. Tark ... 'Ibādat al-Buhtān; ibid.

element is explained by the human difficulty in perceiving an abstract God. Therefore, God, in his infinite compassion towards humans, assumes human form to facilitate people's perception of God.

The **fourth** element is defined as disassociation from the demon and evil deeds.¹² The demon is defined as the anti-thesis of any positive deed – in the realm of faith and in the realm of morals. Any righteous deed, such as an act of charity or hospitality, keeps the devil away.

The belief underlying the **fifth** element is defined as the singularity of God.¹³ This, in fact, is the most important of the seven religious instructions of the Druze faith and therefore warrants clarification. The Druze faith recognizes the Fatimid Caliph, al-Hakim, bi-Amr Allah, who reigned in Egypt between 996 and 1021, as the embodiment of the godly spirit. This concept, defined in the Druze faith as "Kashf" (revelation), stands in complete contradiction to the Islamic concept of monotheism. Nevertheless, the Druze insist that they alone are worthy of the term Muwahhidun (Unitarians, monotheists) because they alone were allowed to recognize the visible god.

The **sixth** element is the willing acceptance of the acts of God.¹⁴ According to this instruction, everything from God must be accepted submissively and God must be blessed for all acts, even if they involve a great tragedy. An extreme example in Kutub al-Hikma expresses this idea: "If god asks one of you to kill his child, he is obligated to do so without hesitation or sense of compulsion, otherwise - he will receive no reward for it." In this context, we note that Druze, contrary to members of other faiths, do not mourn the dead or obey laws of mourning.

The **seventh** and final element is defined as total acquiescence in God's decrees.¹⁵ At the basis of this faith lies the concept of fatalism. In other word, blind faith in an unalterable fate imposed on humans in advance. In this context, we note that the Druze are strong believers in reincarnation, and thus, defilement of dead bodies is considered a negligible matter. This also explains the signs of neglect found in Druze cemeteries, and the burial customs of mass graves in many Druze villages.¹⁶

Family Laws

Considerable differences between Druze and Muslims also exist in the area of family laws. This is especially prominent with regard to women's status. According to Islam, men may be simultaneously married to four women. Druze, on the other hand, are punctiliously

12. Al-Tabarru' ... Min al-Shaytān; ibid.

13 Tawhīd al-Mawla; ibid.

14 Al-Rida bi-Fi'lihi; ibid.

15 Al-Taslīm li-'Amrihi; ibid.

16 Dana (1998), p. 129.

monogamous. If a Druze man marries a second wife while his first wife is still alive, his second marriage is invalidated.¹⁷ Regarding the age of marriage, Muslim laws also permit marriage of a female minor, whose consent is not necessary for the process, while Druze laws define the minimum age of seventeen as a condition for a young woman's marriage. Her **consent is required in advance of the marriage.**¹⁸

The greatest difference concerns the laws of divorce. According to Islam, a husband may divorce his wife and accept her return three times. Among the Druze, divorce of a couple is final and irrevocable. The divorced Druze couple is also required to avoid any contact, even the most trifling conversation.¹⁹ The most prominent difference concerns the fact that Druze women are permitted to apply to the religious Druze courts to receive a ruling that effectively separates her from her husband. This practice does not exist in Islam, which endows the husband with the exclusive right of divorce.

In addition, several unique Druze laws stand contrary to Muslim laws. For example, Juhhal are not permitted to assume any role in religious ceremonies, including assemblies that take place in a special structure called the **Khalwa** (site of isolation). In this context, we note a unique phenomenon concerning woman's religious status: In contrast to Islam, Druze women take an active part in these religious assemblies and may even attain senior status in the religious hierarchy. Such a case occurred in Lebanon, two generations earlier, when a woman named **Sitt Nazira** served as the religious leader of the Druze in Lebanon.²⁰

Conclusion

In our brief review, we have examined several of the important elements that distinguish the Druze in the areas of religion and family law. In both areas, an enormous difference between Muslim laws and Druze laws is evident, a fact which serves to highlight the question posed at the beginning of our discussion: Even though they are not Muslims, why do the Druze frequently represent themselves as such?

The answer is related to the fact that the Druze renounced Islam in the tenth century, and "adopted" a faith that stands contrary to Islam, which led to their persecution by Islam. To save themselves, the Druze faith advocates taqqiyya (dissimulation), a practice whereby the Druze conceal their true beliefs and outwardly (Zahir) accept the dominant religious faith, while inwardly (Batin) they continue to be true to the unique Druze faith, that is, the belief in al-Hakim as the embodiment of God, etc. This, of course, is the obvious explanation for the

17. Laws of Personal Status, articles 1 and 10; see Dana (1998), pp. 229, 232.

18. Laws of Personal Status, articles 14-15; see Dana (1998), pp. 233-234.

19. See Dana (1998), p. 116ff.

20. Dana (1998), p. 122.

similarity of Druze and Muslims customs in all life cycle ceremonies: circumcision, engagement, marriage and death, which are inherently public in their nature. In contrast, the intimate assemblies of Sunday and Thursday evenings are not open to strangers and are entirely subject to the control of the Druze.

Apparently the wise men of al-Azhar were impetuous in subscribing to conclusions based on external conduct (**Zahir**) of the Druze, which explains how they were untenably defined as Muslims.

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