Response to Richard Foltz, “Religions of Iran: From Prehistory to the Present”  
By Eszter Spät (Central European University)

In Behzani, a small mixed town of Yezidis and Christians in Northern Iraq, Sheikh Khalaf proudly pointed at the cross carved into a piece of marble above the door of a Yezidi shrine, saying “this is the cross of Mithra.” The shrine, where those suffering from paralysis, rheumatism and mental illness came to seek release, belonged to Sit Habibi, a Yezidi holy being. The cross strongly resembled the Syriac crosses ornamenting a Syrian orthodox church barely three hundred meters away. However, for the guardian of the shrine it was a proof that this was once the site of a Mithraic shrine, and that the faith of the Yezidis could be traced back to the “Mithraims of the ancient Kurds.” He was not the only Yezidi to talk about their ties to “Mithraism.” I was given my first crash course on Mithraism, Mithraic bull sacrifice and their connection to the Yezidis in 2002 when I went to see the bull sacrifice at the Festival of the Assembly. I have since heard this many times, and read it in many articles authored by Yezidis.

The idea of Yezidi religion going back to “Mithraism” is a recent one, with Mithraism replacing Zoroastrianism as the origin of Yezidism. This latter notion goes back to the 1930s, when the Bedirkhan brothers, leading Kurdish intellectuals of their days, put forward the idea that Zoroastrianism was the original religion of Kurds and Yezidism was its modern day survivor. This idea is still very popular among nationalist Kurds in Turkey and Syria, where Yezidism and Zoroastrianism are closely associated with Kurdishness. Initially the idea of a Zoroastrian origin was also adopted by Yezidis, as is attested, for example, by the work of Emir Muawiyyah from the Yezidi Princely family, entitled To us spoke Zarahustra (Paris, 1982); by numerous Yezidi websites (mainly created in the Western diaspora) displaying the figure of Zarahustra (dressed in the garb of Parsi priests); and even by the graves in a Yezidi cemetery in Afrin (Syria) decorated with the figure of the Faravahar, the winged symbol of Zoroastrianism. However, there has been a shift lately, at least among the educated Yezidis of Iraq. While the notion that Yezidis represent the “original Kurdish religion” is today widespread among Yezidis (even among those who deny a Kurdish identity), Zoroastrianism is being replaced by Mithraism as the origin of Yezidi faith. The reasons for this may be manifold: the inclusion of Zoroastrianism in the ideological imagery of the PKK (the armed Kurdish movement in Turkey) may be one reason; literature on Mithraism as an Iranian religion predating Zoroastrianism may be another (in the age of the internet such ideas are
easily available “second hand,” without the necessity of reading the original work). Whatever the exact reason, Mithraism is certainly much referred to by educated Iraqi Yezidis, often confusing outsiders who connect the word with the religious landscape of the Roman Empire.

Having frequently heard Yezidis speak about this ancient Iranian Mithraism as if it were a religion known in great details, in fact as if there existed an “orthodox” Mithraic tradition, I read Richard Foltz’s chapter on Mithra and Mithra-worship among the ancient Iranian people with great interest. What he writes makes it clear that this is not the case. In the first case, there is very little data available on the religious beliefs of the ancient Iranian people, apart from inscriptions and occasional literary references indicating that the figure of Mithra was venerated in a wide circle among different Iranian people and that his figure was connected to the creation of the world, bull sacrifice and the sun. This lack of further details makes such statements (made by Yezidi researchers) as “there is a high degree of interrelation between Yezidism and Mithraism” stand on a rather shaky ground. Furthermore, while the Yezidi cosmogonical myth can be traced back to Western Iranian mythology, as demonstrated by Kreyenbroek, I would not feel comfortable with identifying this mythology as (Iranian) Mithraism. Such terminology would assume that all ancient Western Iranians were following a codified form of “Mithraism,” which in my view is not all that different from supposing that all pre-Islamic Iranian religiosity was Zoroastrian. As Foltz writes, “pre-Sasanian Iranian societies were highly diverse, in religion as in other domains.” Such a diversity makes it unlikely that there existed a fixed, orthodox form of Mithra-worship which Yezidis may have inherited. Instead of using the terms Mithraic and Mithraism, I find Foltz’s theory of an “Iranian religious pool” far more useful and to the point. Such a “pool” would offer a “set of possibilities rather than essential features,” to paraphrase the author.

This cultural/religious Pool Theory may also help us to better understand the nature of Yezidi religion and mythology. For the Iranian cultural pool was not the only one the ancestors of Yezidis drew from. Other “religious pools” of the region were also very important in forming Yezidism as we know it today. A case in point is the Yezidi origin myth mentioned by Foltz. This is indeed a pre-Islamic myth, but it has little to do with the “Zoroastrian elite.” The Yezidi myth of Adam claims that the 72 nations of mankind descend from Adam and Eve, while Yezidis come from Adam alone through his son, Shehid. This myth, as is the nature of oral tradition, is retold in several different versions: one speaks about Shehid being created from the seed of Adam; according to the other Shehid was created from the sirr, divine mystery or power, imbedded in Adam’s forehead and then removed from there
by the Peacock Angel when Adam was expelled from Paradise. Shehid, created from this divine sirr, became the forefather of the Yezidis, the Peacock Angel’s special race. This myth reflects the Gnostic interpretation of the Biblical story of Seth, who was created from “Adam’s seed,” that is, the divine spark of gnosis previously possessed by Adam. Seth then became the forefather of the “Seed of Seth,” the Gnostics, who constituted a special, spiritual race. Different versions of the Gnostic myth survived well into the Middle Ages among some religious groups of the Middle East.

Tracing the Yezidi myth of Adam to the Gnostic “cultural pool” can also explain the Peacock Angel’s role in Adam’s expulsion from Paradise. According to the Yezidi myth it was the Peacock Angel who convinced Adam to eat from the forbidden fruit (or wheat). This act, which is seen by Yezidis as God’s will because it made procreation (and therefore the beginning of mankind) possible outside Paradise, is often taken by outsiders as a proof that the Peacock Angel is identical with the Satan of the Bible and the Quran. In reality this is just the “other half” of the Gnostic myth of Adam mentioned above, where the divine being who induces Adam to eat from the forbidden fruit is none other than a divine messenger of gnosis coming to liberate Adam from the fetters of matter and ignorance. This is in no way to say that Yezidis are or were Gnostics or even dualist, attributing the creation of the material world to an evil power. The forefathers of Yezidis freely drew from the Gnostic mythological pool just as they drew from other cultural pools and reworked these elements, adapting them to their own world view: in this case, to a strong form of anti-dualism, rather than dualism, in which everything ultimately comes from God, and evil has no independent existence.

It is therefore rather disconcerting to read at the end of the chapter that Yezidis (and Yaresan) “share a dualistic view of the cosmos which is closer to Zurvanism than Zoroastrianism, in that they see good and evil as coming from the same source. Both consider evil to be a necessary counterpoint to good, and refrain from insulting Satan who is conceptualized as the Peacock Angel.” Yezidis, who believe that God is the source of all creation, could hardly be termed dualistic. It is even more confusing why Foltz states that the Peacock Angel is a conceptualization of the Satan, especially after pointing out that devil-worship is “merely a form of anathema commonly used in the polemics of various religious traditions against their ideological competitors.”

Neither the published Yezidi hymns, nor any of the material I collected among the Yezidis indicate that his figure is in any way seen as evil, or as antagonistic to God and goodness. The Yezidi religious system simply has no Devil. After all, it is not compulsory for
a religion to possess a Satan-like source of evil. Roman and Greek mythology, just to mention the best known examples, did quite well without it.

Foltz’s assumption that Yezidis’ view of Satan may have been influenced by the Sufi interpretation of the Fallen Eblis as the ultimate lover of God is rather doubtful. While outsiders’ works repeatedly report this “apology” for what is perceived as Yezidis’ adoration of the devil, Yezidis do not tell this myth (and while some journalists report having heard this tale from Yezidis, it is likely to be feedback from literature on Yezidis). Furthermore, accusations of devil-worship do not surface in our early sources on Yezidis. The first to make an allusion to any connection between Yezidis and the devil is Evliya Chelebi in the mid-17th century (when he mentions the Yezidi ban on cursing the Satan). This seems to roughly coincide with the time when Yezidis decisively came to be seen as a separate, non-Muslim community. Evidently, the accusation of worshipping the devil surfaces only once Yezidis irrevocably become the “other,” outside the Islamic fold.

As regards the taboo on pronouncing the name Sheitan (often quoted by Muslim Kurds as a proof that Yezidis worship the devil), it becomes easily understandable to anybody who spends a length of time in Kurdistan, working with Yezidis and Muslims. Hearing the accusation of Satan worship day in and day out from Muslims provokes a strong emotional reaction to the word, even in a non-Yezidi researcher, after a while. As a Yezidi friend said “we do sometimes say sheitan among ourselves sometimes, when clowning about, but if a Muslim says it, that is different, we know then it is aimed against us and our religion.”

And finally, a few words about the two “Yezidi sacred books.” These are not “early twentieth century forgeries made by Westerners.” Rather, these books were forged for Westerners, no doubt by locals spurred by the avid interest of Western travelers in Yezidis, the alleged Yezidi holy books, and manuscripts in general at the end of the nineteenth century. (One Jeremias Shamir, a lapsed Syriac monk, is a likely suspect.) On the other hand, while forgeries in the physical sense, as written texts, the content of these books is obviously based on genuine Yezidi oral tradition and should not, therefore, be easily dismissed when studying Yezidis. The fact that Western scholars, and even more non-scholars, continued to refer to these holy books as “material realities” is another question. As a result, in another instance of feedback, many Yezidis and Muslim Kurds also have come to believe in the existence of these books as genuine Yezidi sacred writings.