INTRODUCTION

The Ḳuṣayrīs—also known as ‘Alawīs—have been in power in Syria for the past three decades. Little is known of their origins or their long history, while their religious creeds and thought are somewhat better known. The main reason for our fragmentary knowledge of the Ḳuṣayrī religion is that, since its beginnings, it has always been the secret faith of a self-conscious elite that zealously guarded its sectarian literature.

The Ḳuṣayrī faith is a clear example of a syncretistic religion. It combines and fuses elements of cults and creeds of very disparate, and remote, origins. Among these are various pagan beliefs (residues of ancient Mesopotamian and Syrian cults), as well as Persian, Christian, Gnostic, and Muslim—both Sunnī and Shi‘ī—religious precepts and practices. All these components have been brought together in a syncretistic religious system that has assumed a heterodox Shi‘ī garb.

This syncretistic complex has led to various hypotheses regarding the origins of the Ḳuṣayrī religion. René Dussaud, one of its pioneering scholars, saw its roots in the pagan circles of Late Antiquity.1 Henri Lammens, on the other hand, regarded the Ḳuṣayrī religion as a peculiar offshoot of ancient Syrian Christianity.2 Other scholars, among them Samuel Lyde, Heinz Halm, and Matti Moosa, view the Ḳuṣayrī religion as having developed from a radical Shi‘ī group. Our own investigation of Ḳuṣayrī sources has led us to espouse the latter view.

According to both Ḳuṣayrī and non-Ḳuṣayrī writings the beginnings of the Ḳuṣayrī religion are connected with the figure of Muḥammad b. Ḳuṣayr, a devotee of the tenth and eleventh Shi‘ī Imams, ‘Alī al-Hādī (d. 254/868) and Ḥasan al-‘Askarī (d. 260/873/4). The term “Ḳuṣayriyya”, the most common appellation of the new religion, apparently goes back to Ibn Ḳuṣayr. Other names by which

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the religion is commonly known are al-Namîriyya (or al-Numayriyya),
deriving from one of Ibn Nuṣayr’s nisbas, al-Namîrî (or al-Numayrî);
al-Khaṣîbiyya, after Abū ‘Abd Allâh al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdân al-Khaṣîbî
(d. 346/957–8 or 358/969), the great scholar and missionary of the
Nuṣayrî faith; and, in recent times, ‘Alawiyya, which seems to be
preferred by the Nuṣayrîs as emphasizing their affinity with ‘Alî b.
Abî Ṭâlib, who is venerated by all Shi’î groups. Also worthy of note
are the self-appellations ahl al-tawhîd or muwaḥhid—a—that is, unitar-
ians or monotheists. All of these appellations signify the self-percep-
tion of the Nuṣayrîs as the unique and only true monotheistic faith,
distinct from the rest of Islam, including the Shi’â. The Muslims, for
their part, have generally tended to regard them as heretics, outside
the Muslim fold.³

II

Little study has so far been devoted to the Nuṣayrî religion. Of the
various manuscripts of Nuṣayrî esoteric and sacred writings that have
reached European libraries, only a few have been published and stud-
ied. Modern research into the Nuṣayrî religion began in the middle
of the 19th century when European travellers, diplomats, and mis-
sionaries in Syria made contact with the Nuṣayrî people, became aware
of their peculiar religion, and managed to obtain some of their manu-
scripts. Among these pioneers was Joseph Catafago, who served during
the 1840s as chancellor and dragoman of the Prussian consulate-
general in Syria, located in Beirut. Catafago published some short
Nuṣayrî liturgical texts and began—but never completed—work on
the manuscript of a Nuṣayrî catechism. This catechism appears in
the present volume with translation. A few years later the first mono-
graph on the Nuṣayrîs—The Asian Mystery: The Ansaireeh or Nusairis of
Syria—was published by Samuel Lyde, a British missionary who lived
and worked for a time among the Nuṣayrîs. Lyde regarded his mono-
graph as a counterpart to Silvestre de Sacy’s groundbreaking study
on the religion of the Druzes.⁴ Lyde, however, was able to obtain

³ On the Muslim attitude toward the Nuṣayrîs, see e.g. the well-known legal opinion
of the 14th-century Ḥanbalî jurist and theologian Taqî al-Dîn Ibn Taymiyya, in S.
162–178.
⁴ See S. Lyde, The Asian Mystery: The Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria (London, 1860),
p. v.
only one Nuṣayrī manuscript; he therefore had to base his account on this single document, together with scanty earlier information and oral sources.

At the beginning of the 20th century Dussaud, who was unfamiliar with Lyde’s work, published a new monograph on the Nuṣayrī religion—Histoire et religion des Noṣairīs—using some additional manuscripts that had reached the National Library in Paris since the appearance of the earlier studies. One of the major sources available to Dussaud, as well as to scholars who followed him, was al-Bākūra al-Sulaymāniyya fī kashf asrār al-diyyāna al-nuṣayriyya. Published in Beirut in 1840, this work is a modern description and refutation of the Nuṣayrī religion written by Sulaymān al-Adhānī, a Nuṣayrī apostate. This book, unknown to his predecessors, supplied Dussaud with most of the material on which he based his description of the Nuṣayrī religion. Sulaymān concentrated primarily on the religious situation prevailing in his own time. Yet our study of the Nuṣayrī religion has led us to conclude that Sulaymān’s book testifies to the persistence of early Nuṣayrī doctrines and religious practices over the intervening centuries.

Following Dussaud, a textual study was undertaken by Rudolph Strothmann. He published a few Nuṣayrī manuscripts, among them a large manuscript containing the Nuṣayrī “Book of Festivals” (known as Kitāb majmūʿ al-ʾāyād) and also published important articles on specific doctrinal issues. More recently, Heinz Halm has concentrated on the early roots and traditions of the sect as well as its Gnostic background. His major contributions to the neglected field of Nuṣayrī studies have been his detailed and well-documented study on the proto-Nuṣayrī text Kitāb al-haft wa-l-ʾilīĥa, and his monograph Die islamische Gnosis: die extreme Schia und die ’Alawiten (Zurich and Munich, 1982).

The most recent survey on the Nuṣayrīs is Moosa’s Extremist Shiites: The Ghulāt Sects (New York, 1988), a mainly descriptive synthesis, based on both primary and secondary sources. Finally, a few books in Arabic appeared in the 20th century, purporting to present an authoritative picture of Nuṣayrī history and religion. These books are written either by Nuṣayrīs, evincing a markedly apologetic approach, or by non-Nuṣayrīs motivated by polemical considerations.

III

The present volume comprises our previous studies of the Nuṣayrī religion that have appeared in various scholarly publications (Chap-
ters 1 to 5 and 7)\textsuperscript{5} and our more recent work, appearing here for the first time (Chapters 6 and 8), and constituting nearly half of the book. Our previous studies have been substantially revised and adapted to book form. Together the chapters form a mosaic of fundamental aspects of Nuṣayrī theology and liturgy.

The first five chapters are concerned with issues of Nuṣayrī theology. Chapter 1, consisting mainly of a detailed analysis of the doctrines of trinity and incarnation, focuses on a 13th-century polemical treatise, demonstrating the complexity of medieval Nuṣayrī theology and presenting the diversity of religious thought within the Nuṣayrī fold.

Chapter 2 consists of a thematic analysis of the main theological issues of *Kitāb al-usās*, a medieval pseudepigraphic Nuṣayrī work that is a kaleidoscopic treasure of theological issues. In addition to the major theological doctrines, it covers such subjects as angelology, prophecy, theodicy, transmigration, and the Nuṣayrī attitude toward heretics and believers—all with a breadth unequalled in other known Nuṣayrī texts. This lengthy treatise is also marked by its preoccupation with Christian motifs, exemplifying the significance of the Christian element in Nuṣayrī theological thought.

Chapter 3 is devoted to a discussion of the mystical quest of the Nuṣayrī Gnostic for unification with the divine realm of emanation. Such unification is achieved by heavenly ascent through the degrees of gnosis of the mystery of divinity, perceived as an antinomian restoration of the pristine spiritual existence of the Nuṣayrī believer before his mythical fall from the divine world of light. This ideal quest is presented as the true meaning of Muḥammad’s night journey and heavenly ascent.

In contrast to chapters 1–3, which highlight major theological topics, chapters 4 and 5 contain two brief 10th-century theological treatises by Abū ʿAbd Allāh al Ḫusayn b. Ḥārūn al-Ṣāʿīgh, given here in their original Arabic and accompanied by an annotated translation. The treatise in chapter 4 focuses on the believer’s duty to know the mystery of divinity and sets out in detail the allegorical interpretation of Muḥammad’s night journey and heavenly ascent discussed in the preceding chapter. This treatise stands out in its peculiar concept of the dynamics operating between the various degrees of emanation, a process presented as a principle that can be applied to the heavenly ascent.

\textsuperscript{5} The original title of the earlier version of these chapters, and the publication in which they appeared are indicated in a list at the end of the book.
of the soul through these degrees. The treatise in chapter 5 basically pursues the same theme but focuses on the relationship between the two supreme persons of the trinity, the ma’nā and the ism.

Chapter 6 deals with the Nuṣayrī liturgical calendar presented in al-Ṭabarānī’s 11th-century Majmūʿ al-a’yād. The variety of festivals—deriving from Persian origins, from Christianity, and from Islam (both Sunnī and Shi’ī)—is a mirror reflecting the syncretistic nature of the Nuṣayrī religion. Nuṣayrī allegorical and antinomian tendencies, a recurrent feature of heterodox sects, are clearly attested in this calendar, demonstrating the means employed by Nuṣayrī theologians in their endeavour to fuse their eclectic calendar into a new theological and liturgical system. This chapter focuses on the Muslim component—which forms the major part of the Nuṣayrī calendar—and its adaptation to the Nuṣayrī system.

The Druze-Nuṣayrī polemic contained in the Druze canon is the subject of chapter 7. This polemic focuses on cardinal questions of both religions, such as the antinomian stance toward Muslim religious commandments and concepts of divinity, and transmigration. An uncommon theme of this polemic is the religious significance of the physical union between man and woman. The chapter examines Nuṣayrī doctrine and praxis as reflected in the polemic, and further suggests a degree of social and religious contact between Nuṣayrīs and Druzes in the formative phase of the Druze religion.

The eighth and final chapter comprises the Arabic text and annotated translation of the only Nuṣayrī catechism known outside Nuṣayrī circles: kitāb ta’līm diyānat al-nuṣayrīyya (literally: Book of instruction in the Nuṣayrī religion). As with other esoteric religious groups, initiation into the mysteries of the religion seems to have played an important role in the process of shaping and maintaining the particular Nuṣayrī identity. This is evident from various works dealing with aspects of initiation as well as from contemporary Nuṣayrī practices. Nuṣayrī catechisms are reported to have been transcribed by sheikhs in preparation for initiation.

The catechism format suggests Western influence; for Christian catechisms circulated in 19th-century Syria. Yet notwithstanding its manifestly Christian literary form, the Nuṣayrī catechism indubitably contains doctrines and formulas found in early Nuṣayrī literature.

Despite some one hundred and fifty years of research into the Nuṣayrī religion, Nuṣayrī studies are still limited, since there are very few printed editions even of the manuscripts that are currently available. Additional manuscripts may yet be found outside of the Nuṣayrī
community. The Nuṣayrīs themselves still zealously protect their literary heritage, but there is hope that, like the gradual opening up currently taking place in Druze educated circles, the Nuṣayrīs will also eventually become less hermetically sealed to the outside world. It goes without saying that a more complete library of Nuṣayrī texts would broaden our so far limited and fragmented grasp of the Nuṣayrī religion and history, lending support to some of our currently held notions and no doubt refuting others.

IV

In conclusion, it is a great pleasure for us to acknowledge the help we have received from friends, colleagues, and institutions. We are immensely grateful to Etan Kohlberg and Sarah Stroumsa, who read a draft of this study and made insightful suggestions. Thanks are due also to Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Simon Hopkins, and Tzvi Langermann for their sound comments on sections of the work. In addition, we wish to express our heartfelt appreciation to Tarik Abu Rajab for his invaluable assistance in preparing the Nuṣayrī catechism for publication. A special debt of gratitude is owed to Evelyn Katrak for her rigorous editing of the manuscript.

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