CHAPTER TWO

THE NUŞAYRĪ RELIGION

The Nuşayrī-ʿAlawī religious system is a crystallized mixture of ideas that was developed for two centuries in mystical circles of the Shīʿa. It was created in a region in which Islam and the Hellenistic and Persian cultures came into contact with each other. The understanding of their syncretistic theology demands an artificial organization of their traditions, since there is no systematic order in the majority of the sect’s religious writings. This organization is based on ideas repeated in the available Nuşayrī manuscripts, which basically consist of disparate collections of traditions. There are some exceptions, such as the important Majmūʿ al-aʿyād, in which the traditions are arranged by holidays. Most of the material from the Silsilat al-turāth al-ʿAlawī is edited in a disorganized manner. The sources included in the Silsila enable us to take a significant step towards a better understanding of the Nuşayrī religion and its sources.

Significant progress has been made in the research on Nuşayrī doctrines during the past decade. The most remarkable work in this field was made recently in Bar-Asher and Kofsky’s The Nuşayrī-ʿAlawī Religion. But their study represents merely a collection of articles, each one focusing on one specific manuscript. Despite the undoubted contribution of their work, it cannot be seen as exhaustive. The study does not cover the totality of the Nuşayrī writings, and in most cases it also lacks a broader religious context. The aim in this chapter is to complete the important work of Bar-Asher and Kofsky by presenting the Nuşayrī religion based on all the available sources of the sect, with the significant addition of the new sources of the Silsilat al-turāth al-ʿAlawī. In addition, an attempt is made to trace the components of the syncretistic beliefs of the sect, which can be found in some of the surrounding religions, mainly Islam, Judaism, Christianism, Greek philosophy and Zoroastrianism, as well as other mystic groups in the medieval Muslim world.
1. Western research on the Nuşayrî religion

Since the publications in Arabic concerning the Nuşayrîs represent negative and positive (or apologetic) propaganda rather than objective research, the focus here is on the evolution of the main Western works in this field.

The pioneers in the study of the Nuşayrî religion in the nineteenth century were scholars, members of the French Société Asiatique and of the American Oriental Society, diplomats who served under European representatives in the Middle East, and Christian missionaries. Earlier, some brief reports on the sect were written by adventurers and travelers who passed through Jabal Anšariyya. The first researchers of the sect published academic papers every time they discovered a new text of the sect. Their research was a combination of their discovery with their previous knowledge of Muslim heresiography. Most of the studies in this field were made by French researchers. Antoine Sylvestre de Sacy wrote a chapter concerning the Nuşayrîs, in his Exposé de la religion des Druzes, based on a polemical epistle written by the main Druze propagandist, Ḥamza ibn ʿAlī. The British Reverend Samuel Lyde based his work on Kitāb al-mashyakha, the original of which is lost today. René Dussaud relied mainly on Sulaymān al-Adhānī’s Bākūra. Sylvestre de Sacy and Lyde tended to view Nuşayrî syncretism as a combination of Greek and Persian influences. According to their hypothesis, the Muslims inherited the doctrines of the two conquered civilizations: the Hellenistic-Byzantine in the west and the Sassanid-Persian in the east.

However, Dussaud preferred to emphasize the influence of pagan societies that had been situated since antiquity in the region where the sect’s members were concentrated. Since there is a lack of information regarding the precise number of conversions to Christianity and Islam in the medieval period, the possibility of the existence of a

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1 De Sacy, Exposé de la religion des Druzes, II pp. 559–586.
4 Lyde, Asian Mystery, pp. 54, 76–77.