Encyclopædia Iranica

NOṢAYRIS
Article by **Meir Michael Bar-Asher**

Published: July 20, 2003
Last Updated: December 7, 2012

NOṢAYRIS

NOṢAYRIS, followers of Nusayrism, a syncretistic religion with close affinity to Shiʿism, whose adherents live mostly in Syria and southeastern Turkey. In Syria, they constitute the country's largest minority, numbering more than one million (i.e., about 12 percent of the population). They live chiefly in the mountainous areas of Latakia (Lāḏeqiya), known as Jabal al-anṣāriya, today commonly called Jabal al-ʿAlawiyin "the Alawite Mountains," on the country's northwest coast, where they represent close to two-thirds of the populace.

The name of the sect's followers, Noṣayris, appears mainly in the non-Noṣayri sources. Its meaning has been subject to debate, as are the historical circumstances of the sect's emergence. Some scholars believe the name to be the diminutive of the word *naṣārā* (Christians), an allusion to similarities between Noṣayri doctrines and Christianity (Dussaud, p. 13; Bar-Asher, pp. 185–216). More likely, it seems, is the view that it is associated with the name of Abu Šoʿayb Moḥammad b. Noṣayr Namiri (or Nomayri), a disciple of ʿAli al-Hādi (d. 254/868) and Ḥasan al-ʿAskari (d. 260/873–4), the tenth and eleventh Imams of the Twelver Shiʿites. The latter is even said to have named Ebn Noṣayr as the prophet of a new religion, the nucleus of what was to become the Noṣayri religion (see, e.g., Nowbaḵti, p. 78). In the course of its history, the sect was known by other names too, the oldest of which is the "Namiriya," (or Nomayriya) after the *nesba* of Ebn Noṣayr. Whatever the case, the name preferred by the sect's followers is ʿAlawi, adopted at the beginning of the 20th century to underscore their links with the first Imam of the Shiʿites, ʿAli b. Abi Ṭāleb.

Despite the important role played by Ebn Noṣayr in the formative phase of Nuṣayrism, the real founder and promulgator of the Noṣayri faith seems to have been Abu ʿAbd-Allāh Ḥosayn b. Ḥamdān Ḵaṣibi (d. 345/956-57 or 358/969). Ḵaṣibi was first active in Iraq, then moved to Aleppo, where he befriended Sayf-al-Dawla, the Hamdanid ruler of the city, to whom he dedicated his *al-Hedāya al-kobrā*, comprising biographies of the Prophet, his daughter Faṭema, and the twelve Imams (Ṭawil, p. 259). The only writings by Ḵaṣibi that have come down to us in addition to his *Hedāya* arehis *diwān* of poetry and various unpublished fragments from his doctrinal treatises. Another prominent leader and prolific scholar in the formative period of Nusayrism was Abu Saʿid Maymun b. Qāsem Ṭabarāni (d. 426/1034-35). He played a prominent role in the relocation of the Noṣayri community from Aleppo to Syria's northern coast, which has since remained the physical and spiritual heartland of the Noṣayri sect (Ṭawil, pp. 262–65; Halm, 1982, pp. 297–98; idem, 1991, p. 159). Ṭabarāni is also reported to have led the struggle against the Esḥāqiya, the rival sect headed by Esmāʿil b. Ḵallād Baʿlabakki, known as Abu Dohayba (Ṭawil, pp. 262–64; Bar-Asher and Kofsky, pp. 17–19). Ṭabarāni is credited with numerous writings, most prominently his book on the Noṣayri festivals, *Ketāb sabil rāḥat al-arwāḥ*, better known as *Majmuʿ al-aʿyād*. Our knowledge of the history of the sect from the 11th century onward is meager. In the early years of the 12th century the Crusaders conquered part of the mountainous region of Latakia, but, following its capture by Ṣalāḥ-al-Din Ayyubi in 1188, the area became part of the Ayyubid sultanate. During the Mamluk period, both Rokn-al-Din Baybars (r 1260-77) and Sayf-al-Din Qalāwun (r. 1280-90), are reported to have made unsuccessful attempts to convert the Noṣayris to Sunni Islam, ordering them not to proselytize and to construct mosques in their villages. For most of the Ottoman period, the Noṣayris were recognized as a community distinct from Muslims with the right, therefore, to maintain an autonomous judicial apparatus. They lost this independent domain with the end of the Ottoman era, and thenceforth had to turn to Muslim tribunals.

Modern Western interest in the Noṣayri religion began in the middle of the 19th century, when European travelers, diplomats and missionaries in Syria encountered the Noṣayris, became aware of their distinctive religion and acquired some of their manuscripts. Notable among them was Joseph Catafago, chancellor and dragoman of the Prussian consulate-general in Syria, who published some short Noṣayri liturgical texts (Catafago, 1848). This was followed a dozen years later by the British missionary Samuel Lyde's pioneering monograph on the Noṣayris, *The Asian Mystery*.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the French scholar, René Dussaud, who was unacquainted with Lyde's work, published a new monograph, entitled *Histoire et religion des Noṣairîs* (Paris, 1900). Dussaud had the advantage of access to manuscripts that the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris had acquired since the publication of the earlier studies. For him and for later scholars, a major source was *al-Bākura al-solaymāniya*, a descriptive refutation of the Noṣayri religion by Solaymān Aḏani, a Noṣayri convert to Christianity. The Noṣayris again came to the fore during the period of the French mandate over Syria and Lebanon (from 1920). France promoted their integration into the ranks of the French army, and even granted them autonomy in the Alawite Mountains. Their presence in the French army prepared the ground for their later inclusion in the army of an independent Syria, and despite their inferior socio-economic status, a condition that still holds to this day, the Noṣayris are unique in the Near East, as the only minority to have succeeded in assuming political power.

The origins of the Noṣayri religion remain obscure. Some claim it began as a Shiʿite faction that emerged in Iraq during the 9th century (see, e.g., Halm, 1982, pp. 282–83). A counter-argument, current at the beginning of the 20th century, posits that the Noṣayris represent the pagan vestiges of an ancient cult of idol-worship. This cult was identified by Dussaud (pp. 17 ff.), among others, as being of Canaanite or Phoenician origin. According to this theory, the Noṣayris adopted motifs from the successive monotheistic religions that appeared in their region: first Christianity, followed by Islam. To support this theory, its advocates sought to identify the Noṣayris, on the basis of a resemblance in name or doctrine, with other religious groups. Among alternative opinions put forward on the subject is the suggestion that the Noṣayris were successors to the Nazarenes mentioned by Pliny the Elder in his *Historia Naturalis* (5.81; Dussaud, pp. 14 and 17, note 3). Henri Lammens (1901), on the other hand, regarded Nusayrism as a unique offshoot of ancient Christianity.

Doctrines. Like the rival Druze religion, Nusayrism is shrouded in mystery, its secrets being the exclusive prerogative of the initiated (*ḵāṣṣa*), while the uninitiated masses (*ʿāmma*) are kept strictly separate. Every follower has the right, on reaching adulthood (generally set at the age of 18), to join the ranks of the initiated, once they have vowed to observe the precepts of the religion and, above all, to safeguard its secrets. In essence, Nusayrism is an antinomian religion and the religious obligations of both the initiated and uninitiated are

limited to moral prescriptions of a general nature, as well as other moral directives that are not specific to Nusayrism. The faithful must also undertake certain religious practices such as pilgrimage (*ziārāt*) to the tombs of Noṣayri saints, one of the most famous being Ḵeżr (Dussaud, pp. 128–35; Franke, pp. 259–62).

The Noṣayris believe that the deity manifests itself in history in the form of a trinity. Influenced by the concept of cyclical revelation, which may have been borrowed from the Ismaʿilis, they also believe that this trinitarian revelation is not limited to a single episode, but is in fact a theophany that has recurred in the seven eras (called *akwār*, *adwār* or *qobab/qebāb*) in the course of history. According to the Noṣayri trinitarian doctrine, documented as early as the 10th century, two hypostases (*aqānim*) emanate from the supreme aspect of the deity. This supreme aspect is named *maʿnā* (connoting "meaning," or "essence") and is sometimes identified with God Himself. The first of the two hypostases is the *esm* (name) or *ḥejāb* (veil). These terms represent the two aspects of its dialectic nature: pointing to the divinity and thus revealing it to the initiated, while veiling it from the uninitiated. The second is the *bāb* (gate), meaning the gate through which the gnostic believer may contemplate the mystery of divinity, while aiming to attain a mystical union with the deity.

This trinity is believed to have been incarnated in historical or mythical persons. The plethora of beings playing a role in the Noṣayri divine realm include biblical figures alongside those from the Greek, Iranian, and Arab traditions. Complete lists of the triads in which the divinity was incarnated in the various cycles appear only in relatively late sources (see, e.g., Aḏani, pp. 61–62; Bar-Asher and Kofsky, pp. 172–83). These lists are reminiscent of the lists of Imams in the Ismaʿili and Druze cosmic cycles of revelation. There is general agreement regarding the identity of the first two persons in each triad, whereas the third is subject to variation. The pairs constituting the *maʿnā* and the *esm/ḥejāb* of the first six triads are: Abel and Adam, Seth and Noah, Joseph and Jacob, Joshua and Moses, Asaph and Solomon, Peter and Jesus. The reason for this inverse order of presentation, son before father or pupil before teacher, becomes clear through comparison with the seventh and final triad. In the seventh and last cycle, "the Moḥammadan cycle" (*al-qobba al-moḥammadiya*) that opens the Muslim era, the trinity was incarnated in three central figures of early Islam: ʿAli as the *maʿnā,* Moḥammad as the *esm*, and Salmān Fāresi as the *bāb*. Giving ʿAli primacy over Moḥammad, a feature shared by various extremists (*ḡolāt*) sects, seems to have set a precedent for

the inversion of the first two persons representing the *maʿnā* and the *esm* in the other triads. The various figures representing the *bāb* in the six cycles before the Muslim era include both unknown names, like Yāʾel b. Fāten, and Dān b. Osbāʾot (the latter presumably a corruption of the Hebrew *Adonāy Ṣebāʾot*), and more familiar ones, such as the archangel Gabriel or Ḥām b. Kuš (see Bar-Asher and Kofsky, p. 179 **)**.There are, however, also other series of *bāb*s. In the following passage, taken from one of the sect's sacred texts, the *Ketāb al-majmuʿ* (a short collection of prayers consisting of sixteen chapters, tr. in Dussaud, pp. 161–98, and in Salisbury, pp. 234–64), the belief in the trinity is summarized as follows: "I testify that my sovereign … ʿAli who produced the lord Muḥammad out of the light of his essence, and called him his Name, his soul, his throne, and his seat, and his attributes … I testify that the lord Muḥammad has created Salmān out of the light of his light, and appointed him to be his *bāb*, and the bearer of his Book" (*ašhado be-anna mawlāya … ʿAli eḵtaraʿa al-sayyed Moḥammad men nur ḏātehi wa-sammāho esmaho wa-nafsaho wa ʿaršaho wa korsiyaho wa ṣefātehi … wa ašhado be-anna al-sayyed Moḥammad ḵalaqa Salmān men nur nurehi wa-jaʿalaho bābaho wa ḥāmela ketābehi*; Salisbury's tr. with slight modifications, pp. 245–46; Dussaud, p. 168).

Together with this tendency to identify the *maʿnā*, incarnated in ʿAli, with the divinity, there is also another approach within the Noṣayri religion, one that differentiates between the divinity and the trinity emanating from it, which is thus not identical to it (see e.g., Bar-Asher and Kofsky, pp. 35–38). Moreover, in addition to its incarnation in a series of triads throughout history, the divinity also materializes in the first eleven Imams of Twelver Shiʿism, beginning with ʿAli and ending with Ḥasan al-ʿAskari.

Dussaud (p. 67) has noted that, in contrast to the Christian concept of trinity, the Noṣayri trinitarian doctrine is characterized by the hierarchical relations of its three hypostases. In a passage of his *Majmuʿ al-aʿyād* (pp. 54–55), dealing with the Noṣayri interpretation of the festival of Ḡadir Ḵomm, Ṭabarāni clearly delineates the relations within the trinity, saying that the day of Ḡadir Ḵomm is a day "on which the *maʿnā* revealed itself in its essence, while its *esm*, Moḥammad, was revealed with him, summoning him and pointing to him, and its *bāb*, Salmān [is revealed] with it, summoning it, directing the [people] of the world toward it, testifying for them and against them; the Great World [of emanation] (*al-ʿālam al-kabir al-nurāni*), the five thousand luminary creatures, are present and revealed together with the *maʿnā,* the *esm* and the *bāb*."

From the trinity there emanated a series of further entities, at the head of

which are the five *yatim*s (the five incomparables), who were also identified with prominent companions of Moḥammad, namely, Abu Ḏarr Ḡefāri, Meqdād b. Aswad Kendi, ʿAbd-Allāh b. Rawāḥa Anṣāri, ʿOṯmān b. Maẓʿun Najāši, and Qanbar b. Kādān Dawsi. The *yatim*s are regarded both as creators of this world and as rulers of heaven and its constellations (Dussaud, pp. 68ff, 168, 188; Salisbury, p. 246; Moosa, pp. 357–61). A characteristic of Noṣayri metaphysical doctrine that should be mentioned is the internal dynamic of the divine beings. Each of the entities has a potentiality which enables it to rise to the one above it, thus to metamorphose from *yatim* to *bāb*, from *bāb* to *esm*, etc.

The mystery of the Noṣayri trinity, known by the acrostic *serr ʿA[yn] M[im] S[in]* (the Mystery of ʿAli, Moḥammad, and Salmān), is central to one of the sect's religious rites, the *qoddās* (mass), in which only initiated men take part; women are excluded from all religious rituals, because they are considered to have been born from the sins of devils (*men ḏonub al-abālesa ḵalaqa al-nesā'*; Aḏani, pp. 59–63). There are several kinds of *qoddās*, performed on various occasions throughout the Noṣayri calendar; the common feature of all theseceremonies is, as in the Christian mass, the rites of bread and wine (the latter usually named *ʿabd-al-nur* "the servant of light"). The rite of wine is invested with particular importance, because ʿAli is believed to have been incarnated in wine (see, e.g., Bar-Asher, pp. 212–14; Bar Asher and Kofsky, pp. 194–96).

Under the influence of gnostic concepts, Noṣayris claim to have come into being before the creation of the world. A gnostic myth depicting the Genesis and Fall of the souls of Noṣayri believers is found in the proto-Noṣayri text *Ketāb al-haft wa'l-aẓella*, attributed to Mofażżal b. ʿOmar Joʿfi, a prominent disciple of Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq. A more detailed version of the myth appears in Aḏani's *Bākura* (pp. 59–63). According to this myth, the Noṣayris were the lights which, before the creation of the world, surrounded God and sang His praises. After a series of transgressions, the gravest of which was the sin of pride and rebellion against the divine word, the Noṣayris fell to the material world, where they were metamorphosed into living beings, vegetables, and minerals; only by means of mystical exertion can they correct their lapses and rejoin their divine origin (Bar-Asher and Kofsky, pp. 75–83).

The syncretistic nature of the Noṣayri religion is also evident in its calendar, which is replete with festivals from diverse origins, including Christian, Persian, and Muslim (both Sunnite and Shiʿite). From the Persian religion the Noṣayris took the festival of *nowruz*, the Persian New Year, and the *mehragān*.

according to Noṣayri tradition, these mark the revelation of the deity, incarnated in ʿAli, among the Persians in primordial and historical eras. From Christianity they adopted, *inter alia*, Epiphany, called *ʿId al-ḡeṭās* (feast of the baptism), and Christmas; from Islam they took *ʿId al-feṭr* (feast of the breaking of the fast), even though they do not fast preceding it, and *ʿid al-aẓḥā* (feast of the sacrifice), traditionally celebrated at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca, even though pilgrimage is not, in the Noṣayri view, obligatory. Finally, from Shiʿite Islam they borrowed *ʿId al-ḡadir* (the day that for Shiʿites marks ʿAli's divine nomination as Moḥammad's heir), though for Noṣayris this marks the anniversary of Moḥammad's proclamation of the actual deity of ʿAli, and *ʿĀšurāʾ* (q.v.; the day on which Shiʿites commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn b. ʿAli at Karbalāʾ in 680), which for Noṣayris, who dismiss Imam Ḥosayn's death as mere docetism, commemorates his occultation. This broad range of holy days demonstrates the sect's adaptability, oppressed as it was for the greater part of its history. It should be remembered, moreover, that these festivals were entirely emptied of their original content, and are marked by the Noṣayris in accordance with their own religion, in a manner that bears little resemblance, in either form or substance, to the religions and cultures from which they originally sprang. Being regarded in the Muslim world as heretics (see e.g., Ebn Taymiya's *fatwā* against them, in Guyard, pp. 185–86, 192, 194) has not prevented the Noṣayris from seeing themselves as people whose belief in the unity of God is impeccable, hence the name *mowaḥḥeda* or *mowaḥḥedun* (unitarians or monotheists) that they have adopted for themselves. Among contemporary Noṣayris in Syria there are two distinct trends: the more conservative members of the community, living mainly in the Alawite Mountains, adhere steadfastly to the traditional creeds and rituals of the sect, while others are becoming assimilated into Twelver Shiʿism (whose adherents are known in Syria as Jaʿfari), and in fact identify themselves as Shiʿites. This is taking place mainly in cities where they have come under the influence of Shiʿite communities (see Mervin, p. 288).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"A Catechism of the Nuṣayri Religion," in *The Nuṣayri-ʿAlawi Religion: An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy*, Leiden, 2002, pp. 163–221.

Solaymān Aḏani, *al-Bākura al-solaymāniya fi kašf asrār al-diāna al-noṣayriya*, Beirut, 1864.

Meir M. Bar-Asher, "Sur les éléments chrétiens de la religion Nuṣayrite-ʿAlawite," *JA* 289, 2001, pp. 185–216.

Meir M. Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Nuṣayri-ʿAlawi Religion: An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy*, Leiden, 2002.

Joseph Catafago, "Die drei Messen der Nussairier," *ZDMG* 2, 1848, pp. 388–94.

Idem, "Notice sur les Ansériens," *JA*, 4th series, 11, 1848, pp. 149–68.

René Dussaud, *Histoire et religion des Noṣairîs*, Paris, 1900.

Patrick Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam*, Beirut, 2000, pp. 259–62.

Stanislas Guyard, "Le Fetwa d'Ibn Taymiyah sur les Noṣairis," *JA* 8, 1871, pp. 162–78.

Heinz Halm, "Nuṣayriyya," *EI*2 VIII, pp. 145-48.

Idem, *Die islamische Gnosis: Die extreme Schia und die ʿAlawiten*, Zurich and Munich, 1982.

Idem, *Die Schia*, Dadrmstadt, 1988; tr. Janet Watson as *Shiism*, Edinburgh, 1991.

Abu Musā Ḥariri, *al-ʿAlawiyun al-Noṣayriyun: baḥṯ fi'l-ʿaqida wa'l-taʾriḵ*, Beirut, 1984.

Dib ʿAli Ḥasan, *Aʿlām men al-maḏhab al-Jaʿfari al-ʿAlawi*, Damascus, 1998.

Clement Huart "La poésie religieuse des Noṣairīs," *JA*, 7th Ser., 14, 1879, pp.

190-261.

Mofażżal b. ʿOmar Joʿfi (attributed to), *Ketāb al-haft wa'l-aẓella*, eds. ʿĀref Tāmer and E. ʿAbdoh Ḵalifa, Beirut, 1960.

Abu ʿAbd-Allāh Ḵaṣibi, *al-Hedāya al-kobrā*,Beirut, 1986.

Idem, *Diwān al-Ḵaṣibi*, ed. S. Ḥabib, Beirut, 2001.

Henri Lammens, "Les Nosairis furent-ils chrétiens? A propos d'un livre récent," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 6, 1901, pp. 33–50.

Samuel Lyde, *The Asian Mystery Illustrated in the History, Religion, and Present State of the Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria*, London, 1860.

Louis Massignon, "Esquisse d'une bibliographie Nusayrie," in *Mélanges syriens offerts à Monsieur René Dussaud*, 2 vols., Paris, 1939, II, pp. 913-22.

Sabrina Mervin, "Quelques jalons pour une histoire du rapprochements (*taqrīb*) des alaouites vers le chiisme," in Rainer Brunner et al., eds., *Islamstudien ohne Ende: Festschrift für Werner Ende zum 65. Geburtstag*, Würzburg, 2002, pp. 281–88.

Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiʿites: The Ghulat Sects*, Syracuse, 1988.

Abu Moḥammad Ḥasan b. ʿIsā Nowbaḵti, *Feraq al-šiʿa*, ed. H. Ritter, Istanbul, 1931.

Tord Olsson, "The Gnosis of Mountaineers and Townspeople: The Religion of the Syrian Alawites, or the Nuṣayris," in Tord Olsson, Elizabeth Özdalga, and Catherina Raudvere, eds., *Alevi Identity: Cultural Religious and Social Perspectives*, Istanbul, 1998, pp. 167–83.

E. Salisbury, "«The Book of Sulaimân's First Ripe Fruit Disclosing the Mysteries of the Nusairian Religion" by Sulaimân Effendi of Adhanah»," *JAOS* 8, 1864, pp. 227–308.

Rudolf Strothmann, "Die Nuṣayri im heutigen Syrien," *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, Göttingen, 1950, pp. 29–64.

Idem, "Die Nuṣairi nach Ms. arab. Berlin 4291," *Documenta Islamica Inedita*, Berlin, 1952, pp. 173–87.

Idem, “Seelenwanderung bei den Nuṣairi,” *Oriens* 12, 1959, pp. 89–114.

Abu Saʿid Maymun b. Qāsem Ṭabarāni, *Ketāb al-dalāʾel fi maʿrefat al-masāʾel*,Ms. Or. 304, Staats–und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky, fols. 141a–207b.

Idem, *Ketāb sabil rāḥat al-arwāḥ wa dalil al-sorur wa’l-afrāḥ elā fāleq al-aṣbāḥ al-maʿruf be-majmuʿ al-aʿyād*, ed. Rudolf Strothmann as *Festkalender der Nusairier grundlegendes Lehrbuch im syrischen Alawitenstaat*, 3 vols., Berlin, 1946.

Moḥammad-Amin Ḡāleb Ṭawil, *Taʾriḵ al-ʿAlawiyin*, Beirut, n.d., pp. 262–65.

Jacques Weulersse, *Le pays des Alaouites*, 2 vols., Tours, 1940.

Philipp Wolff, “Auszüge aus dem Katechismus der Nosairier,” *ZDMG* 3, 1849, pp. 302–9.