

**The Druze in the Middle East: Their Faith,
Leadership, Identity, and Status**

Nissim Dana

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In *A History of the Druze*, Kais Firro suggests that the proliferation of works on the Druze over the last twenty years has resulted from this community's prominent role in the Lebanese civil war. While such circumstances are, of course, regrettable, any notice taken of this small, secretive, and often overlooked society is welcome. Nissim Dana, a lecturer in academic religions and cultures of peoples in the Middle East at Bar-Ilan University and former minister of religious affairs in Israel, would no doubt explain his interest and clear warmth for his subject in different terms, as the personal letter included from Labib Abu Rukn, judge of the Druze Court of Haifa, attests. It is this

affection, however, which may be at the heart of some of this extremely uneven investigation's shortcomings.

The author has chosen to divide his work into four parts, each dealing with the history, sociocultural make-up, sacred topography, and the laws governing the Druze in their respective states, most notably in Israel (to which a third of the text is devoted) – a most pronounced focus. The book is rounded out with an appendix of the “Arabic Original of the Laws of Personal Status in Lebanon and Israel” and an abbreviated version for Syria, which is a welcome addition for those who read Arabic.

The deification of a historically based instance of the human form is at the core of Druze cosmology, and “the belief in the revelation of God (*kashf*) is considered the most important fundamental principle of the Druze faith” (p. 15): a revelation in the form of the “6th Egyptian Fatimid Khalif, al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah,” which has not since been reproduced (p. 3). Initial proselytizing upon al-Hakim's disappearance was undertaken by Hamza ibn ‘Ali, who “is granted senior status as the connecting link between divinity and humanity...[he who is] the Wonder of the Revelation (*hujjat al-kashf*), the Messiah of Time (*masih al-zaman*), who has cancelled the religions, who battled Satan, and more” (p. 15). The preaching “focussed on the belief – to which al-Hakim gave his consent, at least silently – that he was the Creator himself, who was revealed to his believers in a human being” (p. 3).

The fundamental precepts of the faith, as detailed by the author in part 1, do not preclude a typological analysis of the Druze faith; rather, they are the basis of its uniqueness. In effect, God has made His revelation to the Druze and it is incumbent upon them to act as its vassal and guard its message while awaiting His (al-Hakim's) return. In this respect, a deep-seated aversion to proselytizing or missionary activity arose after the early community was established, with the result that the gates of faith are now considered closed to outsiders. Though much of its cosmology is at odds with Jewish, Christian, and Islamic orthodoxy, its tenets of the soul's transmigration (*tana-sukh al-arwah*), the End of Days, and the coming of God's judgment are familiar and thereby make it plain that its central organizing force is the proclamation of “oneness” (*din al-tawhid*) (p. 60).

The quotidian ecology and life cycle are thoroughly covered, giving the reader a sense of the rhythm of the community's life. The ceremonies and rituals that mark the members' births, marriages, and deaths, as well as the challenges that its distinctive identity faces from individualism and the powerful lures of assimilation, urbanization, and youthful “innovations,” are all described in depth. Dama's work is particularly useful in its overview of the

Druze's religio-cultural institutions and judiciary canon or epistles (*rasa'il*), most notably their codification of the faith's tenets and the commentaries on them. For this, the book may be commended.

The study of the cross-fertilization of monotheistic faiths is often a neglected approach to the study of religion. Dana's contribution sheds light on the Islamic, Christian, and Judaic echoes within the Druze faith. (He oddly omits any mention of the Ismailis or the Alawis.) However, the question as to whose faith the Druze most resembles seems, at times, to nag at the writer. Several times, he tries to pull the Druze away from Islam but is confronted and contradicted by the mingling that is so apparent in any lived faith in the region. Second, the question of Druze identity is an intricate one. While advancing an ethno-religious basis for it, often expressed elsewhere as "Druze particularism," Dana makes problematic statements. For example, while it is true that "no Druze concentration was established on a nationalist ideological basis; [and that] it merely formed owing to chance circumstances" (p. 107), this ignores their clear geographical concentration in Lebanon and Syria as well as their proximity to the Israeli Druze.

Moreover, to suggest that "Druze history is composed of a string of confrontations between Druze believers and those of the Muslim faith, who constitute the overwhelming population of the Arab nation" (p. 109) is contradicted by the author himself and ignores the entire nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Almost all confrontations have been with the Maronites (at times ambivalently Arab), Ottomans, and French colonialists. Dana's attempt to drag the Druze out of the Arab nation – which Firro adamantly refuses to do – overlooks one of its basic tenets: the Arabic language.

Historians of the Middle East will take serious exception to Dana's summary of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most notably as it applies to Syria and Lebanon. Though it is not the book's main focus, the blatant blunders (Lieutenant Carbillet, not Carbier; Israeli "compromise" in the Golan?!) and significant omissions seriously undermine the author's credibility. The author would have done well to revise or edit out this discountable part of the book. Those interested in a history of this unique people and their momentous role in the Levant would do well to look elsewhere. However, his account of the Druze's life cycle, community organization, and faith cannot be disregarded, as it provides an insightful commentary and overview of a particularist faith's orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

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