Wissam H Halawi
Les Druzes en marge de l'islam : ésotérisme et normativité en milieu rural (XIVe-XVIe siècle)

Paris, Le Cerf (Islam, nouvelles approches), 2021, 728 p., ISBN : 9782204134927

Mots-clés : Druze, droit islamique, Liban, société rurale, Mamelouk, Ottoman

Keywords: Druze, Islamic law, Lebanon, rural society, Mamluk, Ottoman

This monumental, ground-breaking book offers nothing short of a complete revision of the pre-modern history of the Druze as a religious and social community. Its point of departure is a re-assessment of the figure of al-Amir al-Sayyid (d. 1479), traditionally credited with a renaissance of the Druze faith and its institutions. This traditional view of al-Sayyid is based on uncritical examination of the available published sources, and hampered by the secretive nature of Druze exegetical writings. The book under review tackles both problems with an unflinching critical and theoretical outlook and an ambitious program of manuscript classification. As a result, the historical figure of al-Sayyid is examined in the context of his own time and place, i.e., the rural Gharb (in modern Lebanon) under Mamluk rule, as well as subsequent mythical and saintly representations. Al-Sayyid, the book shows, eventually became the focal point for a set of novel social and legal institutions for which he was not necessarily responsible. In many ways, as the author suggests towards the end of book, the century following al-Sayyid's death represented the birth of Druze communities, as we understand them today.

The research here is grounded in a re-assessment and classification of the corpus of pre-modern Druze texts, in itself a major achievement in the field. Druze manuscripts pose nearly insurmountable difficulties, since copyists, as a matter of religious conviction, never mention their own name nor the date of the copy. The number of edited Druze texts can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and there is only one partial academic edition of the foundational Druze *Ḥikma* (by De Smet). In the course of the research for this book, Halawi identified forty Druze legal and historical pre-modern manuscripts. He then attempted to date them according to the types of paper and of script, and he offers here a full inventory (p. 85), a description of each of the manuscripts, and reproduction of select pages.

The book follows thematic rather than a chronological structure. The first part deals with the construction of al-Sayyid as a saintly figure, from his earliest biographies up to the present day. The second part examines the familial and religious context of the life of al-Sayyid, and especially his links with the maternal family, the lineage of the Banū Ḥusayn, which dominated the Gharb region in the Mamluk period. The third part examines the institutional transformations brought about by al-Sayyid and his disciples (his so-called 'spiritual sons'), in particular the village *majlis* as central to the transmission of knowledge and the formation of a body of distinctive Druze law.

The Druze faith emerged in the Fatimid period as an esoteric belief, with the Caliph al-Ḥākim viewed as a divine manifestation and his missionary Ḥamza as the Supreme Intellect. After a short period of *daʿwa*, from 1017 to 1042-3, no conversion into the Druze faith was allowed. Then the Druze largely disappear from sight; we know of the presence of Druze families in Greater Syria, but our sources do not allow us to identify with confidence Druze village communities before the fifteenth century. The manuscript trail is also curiously sparse, with one partial copy of the *Ḥikma* dating (probably) to the 13th century. As Halawi argues, this is probably not merely the fault of chance survival. The codification of the *Ḥikma* canon may have only come about in the 15th century, alongside the emergence of specifically Druze social institutions.

A central claim of the book is that the history of Druze social and legal institutions is inextricably linked with that of the Banū Buḥtur, the amirs of the Gharb region. The Banū Buḥtur emerged in the 14th and 15th centuries as a local rural nobility, with Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Ḥusayn (d. 1350) as the founder of the leading lineage. Buḥturī amirs held hereditary *iqṭāʿ* from the Mamluk state as well as other property, and dominated over village headmen and peasants. Their history and matrimonial practices are detailed in the local chronicle of Ṣāliḥ b. Yaḥyā (d. 1436), and their buildings in their chief-lieu of ʿBayy have been well preserved, including a palace (*bayt kabīr*) and a market. Overall, argues Halawi, the transformation of the Druze into a legal and social community was predicated on the rise of the local Buḥturī amirs, and cannot be understood without it.

Born Jamāl al-Dīn ʿAbdallāh, al-Sayyid was an amir without fortune, related to the leading branch of the Banū Ḥusayn through his mother. In his earliest biography, composed by Ibn Naṣr (d. 898/1492), al-Sayyid appears as an incarnation of Druze esotericism steeped in knowledge of the *Ḥikma*. Socially, he

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is depicted as a dissenting figure, who opposed the local lords and fought for the poor and peasants, not always successfully. A second biography, by Ibn Sibāṭ (d. after 926/1520), has al-Sayyid as an integral part of the elite, and shows him as expert on the Qur'an, Hadith and jurisprudence.

The figure of al-Sayyid then became associated with three key social institutions that allowed the Druze rural communities semi-autonomous existence at the margins of both Islam and state. First, Islamic inheritance laws (or perhaps local inheritance practices) were replaced by a unique mandatory *waqf* regime. The rules concerning the distribution of *waqf* property were fixed, and priority was given to those with the highest rank of initiation. A second major innovation was the village *majlis*, the locus of teaching of traditional and esoteric sciences, held one Friday every month and supported by the *waqf* foundations. The third major institution was the *sāyis*, the local magistrate who guaranteed the application of Druze law, based on his esoteric knowledge, standing in the community, and appeals for mediation. The *sāyis* had no official status in the Mamluk or Ottoman states, and for deterrence was obliged to rely on communal penalties, such as expulsion or excommunication. Halawi shows that the *sāyis* replaced earlier forms of rural arbitration, and al-Sayyid himself appeared to have acted as an arbiter, not only within Druze communities, but also for litigants from the wider Syrian countryside.

The emergence of the *sāyis* was associated with the emergence of a coherent body of Druze law, a Druze *madhhab* of sorts. In its earlier Fatimid phase, the Druze movement was fiercely antinomian and abolished all laws. In the 15th century, on the other hand, the esoteric archaic form of the Druze faith gave way to a legal system grounded in two major texts known as the *Sharḥyan* (*al-mīthāq* and *al-sharṭ*). The *Sharḥayn* are constructed as legal commentaries on two chapters of the Druze *Ḥikma* canon. While the organization of the *Sharḥayn* is idiosyncratic and follows bodily senses and organs, the two texts provide a corpus of substantive law that runs parallel to traditional *fiqh*, and shows evident influence of the Sunni schools of law and even engagement with the Qur'an.

The *Sharḥayn* are attributed to al-Sayyid, but as Halawi shows, they could not have been written by him. According to the early biographies, al-Sayyid's legal activity was limited to the prohibition of wine and to a ban on wailing, difficult challenges in villages that subsisted on cultivation of vineyards and the export of raisins to Egypt. Halawi argues that the rest of the legal material in the *Sharḥayn* must have been added later, and then attributed to al-Sayyid retrospectively. Halawi's reconstruction of Druze law through the available manuscripts shows some textual variability and divergence of opinion. Nonetheless, most of the legal content is cohesive, stable, and thus accessible to the village *sāyis*.

Regulation of marriage and divorce stands out as a key distinctive feature of Druze law. Marriage partners must come from within the Druze community, and marriage and divorce require the consent of the bride or wife. Halawi locates the origin of these distinctive laws in the specific context of late medieval rural society. The intercommunal marriage of the Druze developed, according to Halawi, out of the matrimonial practices within the leading Buḥturī household, which were previously called *sunnat al-bayt fī al-zawāj*. This elite endogamy was transferred into the Druze law, and converted into endogamy among the religious elite of the initiated, effectively limiting the choice in marriage to a limited number of families. Mutual consent to marriage and the absence of repudiation by the husband were grounded in the need of local rural elites to maintain social cohesion and their preference for mediation over unilateral actions.

While the fifteenth century saw the birth of Druze law and social institutions, a second phase of the popularisation of the Druze faith took place in the 17th century. This popularisation can be seen through the literary production of short prayers, exhortations, military poetry (*ʿaskariyyāt*) and mystical poems associated with al-Sayyid, all elements that were previously absent from the medieval Druze tradition. During the 17th century there is also a greater emphasis on the lineage of al-Sayyid, who, like all Buḥturid amirs, claimed to descend from the pre-Islamic Arab tribe of Tanūkh. Overall, this wider literary production of the 17th century was directed to all sectors of Druze society, regardless of levels of initiation.

The book ends with the observation that the familiar division between *juhhāl* and *ʿuqqāl*, the initiates and the non-initiates, only came into being in the early modern period. For al-Sayyid and his contemporaries, the Druze community was inclusive of all individuals born Druze, with the dividing line separating the disciples of al-Sayyid from the haughty people of bad morals, the *ashrār*. These *ashrār* were the members of the Banū Buḥtur who misinterpreted the texts, over-taxed the peasants, and were tempted by material wealth. As the institutionalisation of Druze communities gathered pace, however, this dichotomy of the pious and powerful gave way to a distinction between initiates and non-initiates, and

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the latter were no longer considered full members of the Unitarian Druze community.

Al-Sayyid's teachings were initially limited to the villages of the Gharb and the Shūf mountains. He himself travelled to Damascus and studied there with Sunni scholars, but then returned to the Buḥturid base of ʿBayy. Other village Druze communities existed elsewhere in Syria, yet they are not represented among his immediate disciples. Again, it was only in later generations that his saintly figure, and the institutions associated with his charisma, were transformed into the essence of Druze-ness everywhere in the rural areas of Greater Syria.

Les Druzes en marge de l'islam is a rich and expansive book, and this review only conveys some of its central themes. There is much more in there – facts, ideas, many tables and genealogical reconstructions, images and anthropological insights. It is also a very original contribution, both because of its utilization of a hitherto untouched manuscript corpus and because of its critical, analytical approach. The tone is sometimes almost provocative, as Halawi sweeps away nearly all traditional scholarship on the Druze. Altogether, this makes for a heavy tome, which – I suspect – might not be widely read. It certainly should be followed by a shorter and more accessible volume, a contribution that will bring Druze history from the margins to the attention of mainstream Islamic scholarship.

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