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Research on Esoteric Muslim Sects by 19th-century European Scholars

Summary

The article is devoted to Muslim esoteric movements, sometimes interpreted as new syncretic religions: Nuṣayri and Druze faiths. Their origins are rooted in early Shi'ism in 9th and 11th centuries, but in 19th century they were practised in Syria and Lebanon. Druze and Nuṣayri beliefs incorporate elements from Abrahamic religions as well as Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Pythagoreanism and other philosophies. The believers created a distinct theology known to esoterically interpret religious scriptures and to highlight the role of the mind and truthfulness One. The followers of these religions kept their ceremonies and rites in a mystery. In 19th-century Levant Christian missions were conducted missionary and charitable activities; and the Christian element in Druze and Nuṣayri religions convinced European scholars and priests of the affinity with Christianity, what is not true. But these European scholars and scholars-amateurs preserved in their works a lot of important Nuṣayri and Druze texts, prayers and their own observations of the practice of everyday life.

Keywords: Esoteric (*bāṭin*), exoteric (*ẓāhir*), Druzes, Nuṣayris, 19th-century European Scholars, Shi'i Movement, Islam

Esoteric Muslim sects have invariably inspired the interest of European scholars because of the secrecy of their doctrines, of their syncretism, evident in themes found in them that may be traced back to other religions and sometimes prove difficult in interpretation, and due to numerous legends concerning some of these groups that have been in circulation in Europe since the Middle Ages. The most distinct example here is the falsified 'black legend' of the Nizāris, also known as the Assassins, with Marco Polo having contributed to spreading it. Travelling to China, he came into contact with

the Nizāris of Alamūt and described them as secret murderers who committed crimes under the influence of hashish.¹ This was not the only description of the group, for at the same time the Syrian Nizāris, who reached the apogee of their power in the mid-12th century, in the rule of Rašīd al-Dīn Sinān, called the ‘Old Man of the Mountain’ by the crusaders, maintained contacts with the latter. It was also the crusaders’ chroniclers that contributed to the making of this legend, and thus stories about a multi-tier training hierarchy, about the paradise, the leap of death, etc., began to function in European literature, including in later writings. These legends have been critically analysed by Jerzy Hauziński and Farhad Daftary², and yet they are so firmly established in literature that they still find their followers. The history of the Nizāris as recounted in European writings is characteristic of the manner of presentation of esoteric Muslim groups: it represents a mixture of true and false information, resulting on the one hand from an inadequate knowledge of the intricacies of the group’s doctrines (which is hardly surprising, as these are hermetic, closed doctrines), and on the other hand from enmity or political factors.

With the development of Oriental studies in the 19th century, there begins European research into the *bāṭinī* doctrines, i.e. secret, esoteric doctrines, in which European authors also use Muslim sources.³ The authors themselves are diverse; in addition to scholars: Orientalists and philologists, these are in part amateur Orientalists who spend some time in the Middle East, learn the language, travel across the region, and their testimonies often carry much weight.

This group includes diplomats and travellers as well as clerics, who started pouring in great numbers into the territories of present-day Syria and Lebanon together with the founding there of Christian missions of various kinds. Because of the themes associated with Christianity present in their doctrines, some of the Muslim *bāṭinī* groups (see below) began to attract a particular interest of Christian missionaries. They tried to get to know these sects as thoroughly as possible, and their accounts are often important, as they acquired valuable manuscripts in the course of their travels. Moreover, they had an opportunity to come into contact and talk to the Druze or Nuṣayris on numerous occasions, hence their accounts have a flavour of what is known as participant observation in anthropology. On the other hand, however, their presentation of the subject often turned out to be misleading because, lacking a precise knowledge of the context, they failed to grasp the intricacies of esoteric Muslim doctrines. They were wont to interpret the

¹ Marco Polo, *Opisanie świata. Przedmowa Umberto Eco* (“The Description of the World. An introduction by Umberto Eco”), W.A.B., Warszawa 2010, pp. 63–68. In this new edition, the story described by Polo was presented in the light of up-to-date research findings in footnotes to the relevant chapters, pp. 541–548.

² J. Hauziński, *Muzułmańska sekta asasynów w europejskim piśmiennictwie wieków średnich* (“The Muslim Assassin Sect in Mediaeval European Writings”), Poznań 1978; F. Daftary, *The Assassin Legends. Myths of the Isma‘ilis*, I.B. Tauris, 1995.

³ On esoteric Muslim doctrines, see: Katarzyna Pachniak, *Ezoteryczne odłamy islamu w muzułmańskiej literaturze herezjograficznej* (“Esoteric Islamic Sects in Heresiographical Muslim Literature”), Warszawa 2012.

themes present in them through the prism of their own religion, overestimating some of the facts while underestimating some other ones.

It would be difficult to enumerate all the works and research projects of this kind here, and this is not my purpose anyway. My main object is to draw attention to how writings of this type have influenced, sometimes quite unpredictably, research into esoteric movements, and what major difficulties this has led to. I will focus on the territories of present-day Syria and Lebanon, where three groups attracted the curiosity of European scholars: besides the above-mentioned Nizāris with their ‘black legend’, these are the Nuṣayris, today known as the Alawites, and the Druze. The Druze splintered from Fatimid Ismailism, but Ismāʿīlism itself, a most interesting doctrine that arouses great interest among scholars today, will not be taken account of in my discussion, since the Ismaili groups of greatest importance nowadays, playing a major role in today’s world, which in the course of their turbulent history have settled in India, are the descendants of the Persian Nizāris of the Alamūt castle as well as of the Ṭayyibites from Yemen.⁴

The Nuṣayris, on the other hand, are a syncretistic sect that arose in the circle surrounding the last imams of the Imami Shi’a, i.e. the twelve imams, most probably in the entourage of the tenth or eleventh imam, i.e. in the mid-9th century. The Nuṣayris relatively early settled in Syria and propagated their faith there; now their main centre is Latakia. Since the 1960s, this sect has enjoyed a special status in Syria, as it counts Syria’s ruling Asad family among its members.⁵ The Druze are a sect that arose in the early 11th century in Ismāʿīli Egypt in the community of the Ismaili missionaries, the *dāʿīs*.⁶ All these sects have complex, syncretistic doctrines, including, in addition to Muslim elements, mainly in Shi’a interpretation (though distant from classical Imamite Shi’ism on a number of points, rather in the form of the early Shi’ism of the Kaysānite and *gūlāt*

⁴ There is extensive literature on various aspects of Ismailism: its history, philosophy and theology, sects and contemporary history. For a detailed bibliography cf. Farhad Daftary, *Ismaili. Zarys historii*, transl. by K. Pachniak, Warszawa 2008.

⁵ On present-day Nuṣayris, cf. e.g.: Moshe Ma’oz, Anver Yaniv, *Syria under Assad*, St Martin’s, New York, 1986; Moshe Ma’oz, *Asad: the Sphinx of Damascus*, New York 1988; idem, *Syria under Hafiz al-Asad: New Domestic and Foreign Policies*, Jerusalem 1975; idem, *Alawi Officers in Syrian Politics, 1966–1974*, in: H.Z. Schriffirin (ed.), *The Military and State in Modern Asia*, Jerusalem 1976, pp. 277–297. Moreover: R. Strothmann, *Die Nusairi im heutigen Syrien*, “Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften im Göttingen” 1950, 4, pp. 29–64; Peter Gubser, *Minorities in Power: the Alawites in Syria*, in: R.D. McLaurin (ed.), *The Political Role of the Minority Groups in the Middle East*, pp. 17–48, New York 1979; Hanna Batatu, *Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria’s Ruling Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance*, “Middle East Journal” 1980, 35, pp. 331–344; Mahmud A. Faksh, *The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force*, “Middle Eastern Studies” 1984, 20, pp. 133–153. Nuṣayri generally, Y. Friedmann, *The Nuṣayrī-Alawīs. The Introduction to Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, Leiden 2010; Leon T. Goldsmith, *Cycle of Fear. Syria’s Alawites in War and Peace*, London 2015.

⁶ The *dāʿī* was a name given to missionaries, emissaries charged with propagating the *daʿwa*, or the Ismāʿīli mission, in the Islamic world. Traditionally, their main centre was Cairo. On the subject cf. e.g. P.E. Walker, *The Ismaʿīli Dawa in the Reign of the Fatimid Caliph al-Ḥākīm*, “Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt” 1993, 30, pp. 161–182.

circles⁷), also evident elements of Neoplatonism (in the Druze doctrine, in the form of the Ismā'īlī philosophy adopted earlier), as well as Gnosticism and the ancient religions of Iran. Even today, studying these doctrines presents difficulties, given the hermetic nature of the *bāṭinī* sects, the multiplicity of themes occurring in them and classification difficulties. No wonder, therefore, that these early, pioneering studies have now been verified on many accounts. This does not detract in any way from their importance, for, as mentioned above, some of the early works incorporated manuscripts obtained by the authors from the local people, and even if they were unable to interpret their contents correctly and failed to grasp all religious questions, these are still invaluable testimonies, indeed often the only ones, for research into a given doctrine as it was in the 19th century, in the rule of the Ottoman Turks.

Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), a French scholar of Jewish descent, who in the course of his education devoted himself to the study of Semitic, and not only Semitic, languages, as he was working on Sasanid inscriptions in Pahlavi, was undoubtedly one of the pioneers of research into esoteric Muslim communities. In 1795, he left the civil service and became a professor of the Arabic language in the newly founded School of Living Eastern Languages. His principal and most important work concerns his research on the Druze; he may without hesitation be called the father of research on this group. His two-volume, unfinished work *Exposé de la religion des druzes* was published in Paris in 1838. Even though it contains numerous inaccuracies, an equally comprehensive work on the subject has not been published to date, which best proves the complex character of the Druze doctrine.⁸ In his studies de Sacy relied mainly on manuscripts, which he managed to obtain both from the Middle East and from Western libraries. Nevertheless, he did not manage to fathom out the complex Druze system, or, most importantly, to present it in any broader historical perspective or against the background of other systems, which, however, should not be considered surprising in that day and age. In an introduction to his work, de Sacy writes that he had been working on it for 40 years, long postponing its publication in the hope of obtaining more Druze manuscripts. The author himself considered his work unfinished, expressing the hope that God would allow him to write one more, third volume, but unfortunately this never happened.

Based on original texts, de Sacy's reconstruction reveals quite a decent knowledge of Druze theories for that era. The scholar's interpretation, drawing upon historical Arab chronicles, among other sources, focuses first and foremost on the person of caliph Al-Ḥākim and the fact of his divinity. Coming from the Fatimid dynasty, this caliph ruled in the years 996–1021. His rule fell at the time when the fourth century was drawing to an end according to the Muslim calendar, and millenarian sentiments intensified in the Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* circle. Around 1015 there appeared those who began to preach the caliph's divinity. We do not have any precise reports about how actually those dissident

⁷ On *ḡulāt*, i.e. 'those who exaggerate [in matters of religion]', the early Shi'a circles, cf. K. Pachniak, *Ezoteryczne odłamy*, op. cit., pp. 107–183.

⁸ S. de Sacy, *Exposé de la religion des druzes, tiré des livres religieux de cette secte, et précédé d'une introduction et de la Vie du khalife Hakem-biamr-Allah*, Paris 1838.

missionaries interpreted the fact of his divinity: they believed the caliph to be an earthly epiphany of the Supreme God, rather. It is hard to state authoritatively what was the caliph's own attitude towards his divinity; the chronicles say that in some periods he accepted it and supported the dissidents, while at other times he rejected it. Perhaps at those times he tried to rehabilitate himself with an intensified religious ardour, which went as far as persecuting the Copts and the Jews.⁹ The caliph disappeared in 1021, most probably murdered as a result of palace intrigues, the Druze, however, used this fact to claim that the divine epiphany had gone into hiding.¹⁰

Given the lack of precise information on the doctrines of the *ḥaraka bāṭiniyya*, i.e. esoteric sects, de Sacy had certain difficulties with the interpretation of the question of the divinity of a living person; nevertheless, he had been the first Western scholar to cast light on Al-Ḥākim's deification by the Druze. The scholar's great merit is his incorporation of original manuscripts in his work; this is an important fact even today, given the hermetic and closed character of the doctrine, the contents of which are not intended for those who are not eligible, i.e. all those outside the Druze community. It is for this reason that all editions of the *Rasā'il*, i.e. the Druze canon written by Hamza and other Druze leaders, are extremely difficult to obtain in Syria.

What attracts the reader's attention in de Sacy's work from the point of view of present-day research, apart from the imprecise interpretation of the person of caliph Al-Ḥākim, regarded as a *mazhar*, i.e. God's epiphany and His earthly incarnation, is the isolation of this doctrine against the broader background of Muslim thought. Undoubtedly, the Druze movement is a syncretistic group. Nonetheless, it can hardly be regarded today as absolutely exceptional in the history of Islam, for all the elements found in it had functioned in varying proportions and arrangements in early Shi'a doctrines nearly from the very beginning: they had appeared in the Kaysanite and *ḡulāt* movements, in Shi'ism and Ismailism. The work of de Sacy, an intellectual, Semitist and scholar, is principally the result of his academic interests. It has also influenced Western culture: it was probably through his writings that Gérard de Nerval got inspired by Al-Ḥākim's life story and attached its version entitled *Histoire du Calife Hakem* as an addition to his work *Voyage en Orient*. In the same book, he also provided a mixture of true and false information concerning the Druze doctrine.¹¹

Of particular importance are those works devoted to Muslim esotericism which were written thanks to what is known as participant observation, often occasioned by some other activities that had aims very different from scholarship. After numerous Christian

⁹ For a reconstruction of these events cf. K. Pachniak, *Ezoteryczne odłamy*, op. cit, pp. 235–267.

¹⁰ Caliph Al-Ḥākim has become the subject of numerous articles and studies. The most recent and most reliable one is Paul. E. Walker, *Caliph of Cairo: Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996–1021)*, Cairo-New York 2009. On Druzes: K.M. Firro, *A History of the Druzes*, Leiden 1992; Nejlā M. Abu-Izzeddin, *The Druzes, A New Study of their History, Faith and Society*, Leiden 1993.

¹¹ M. Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient*, Paris 1851, vol. II. Information on the Druze especially pp. 53–58; on caliph Al-Ḥākim pp. 59–105. Also G. Riegert, *Sources et ressources d'une île. Syria dans "Le Voyage en Orient" de Gérard de Nerval*, "Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France," 1981, 6, pp. 919–933.

missions had been founded in Syria and Lebanon, the Nuṣayri movement began to arouse their intense interest. This group with a syncretistic doctrine, already mentioned above, provoked the curiosity of both scholars and Christian missionaries. In the Nuṣayri doctrine, Christian themes occurred, which Christian missionaries, only weakly acquainted with doctrinal issues (again as in the case of the Druze faith), used to interpret as a sign of Nuṣayrism's alleged affiliation with Christian groups. It was suggested that the Nuṣayris were one of the old Gnostic groups that had survived in those parts and should, as such, be afforded special care. This interpretation was not true, however, as the Nuṣayri doctrine had arisen in the early Shi'a community and inherits Gnostic themes in a form already adopted in the Kaysānite and *gulāt* circles. It is 'Alī who is the supreme God in Nuṣayrism, who manifests Himself in earthly time in the form of numerous epiphanies, making up a fairly complex and chaotic system. One of these epiphanies is 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, the fourth of the so-called Rightly-Guided Caliphs (ruled 656–661) and the Prophet Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law. He appears as an epiphany in his earthly form of the fourth caliph and the first Shi'a imam. God-'Alī also has a number of other epiphanies, in figures known to the mediaeval fathers of Nuṣayrism, such as ancient Persian rulers, which reflects Persian influences functioning already in early Shi'a circles, as well as the inclinations of one of Nuṣayrism's founders, Al-Ġunbulānī. Moreover, the *mazhars*, or epiphanies, include prominent figures of Shi'a life, Aristotle, Plato, as well as Jesus Christ. The presence of the last-mentioned should not come as a surprise, for He occupies an important place in Islam and is the object of special veneration in Nuṣayrism, though chiefly as one of the epiphanies of 'Alī.¹²

The fact that the Nuṣayris celebrate Christmas as one of their principal holidays is characteristic of their worship of Jesus. This misled Christian missionaries into alleging connections between Nuṣayrism and Christianity, even though actually the group's celebration of this festival has different causes. As evident from Aṭ-Ṭabarānī's 11th-century treatise on Nuṣayri festivals, the Nuṣayris had celebrated the birth of Jesus as one of the epiphanies of their God, 'Alī, from the early days of the existence of their doctrine.¹³ The frequent invoking of the theme of the crucifixion of Jesus in a docetic interpretation in Nuṣayri doctrine, and more broadly in the *ḥaraka bāṭiniyya* doctrines, plays a similar role. Docetism is one of early Christian conceptions questioning the salvation doctrine.

¹² Cf. e.g. K. Pachniak, *Doktryna nusajrycka w Syrii na podstawie traktatu Sulajmana al-Azaniego* „Kitab al-Bakura”, (The Nusayri Doctrine in Syria Based on the Treatise *Kitab al-Bakura* by Sulayman al-Azani), in: *Między Wschodem a Zachodem. Łódzkie Studia Wschodoznawcze* („Between the East and the West. Łódź Eastern Studies”), vol. III, I. Kończak and E. Linek (eds.), Łódź 2010, pp. 11–34; idem, *Ezoteryczne odlamy*, op. cit., pp. 193–207. Also M.M. Bar-Asher, A. Kofsky, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawī Religion. An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy*, Leiden 2002.

¹³ This festival is called *ḍikr laylat al-mīlād* (remembrance of Christmas), and the Nuṣayris celebrate it on the night of the 14th of the month of *kānūn al-awwal* (24 December); the author writes, however, that Jesus was born on the 15th day of that month of the chaste Virgin Mary. Aṭ-Ṭabarānī, *Kitāb Mağmū' al-A'yād*: R. Strothmann, *Festkalender der Nusairier: Grundlegendes Lehrbuch im syrischen Alawitenstaat*, “Der Islam” 1944, 27, pp. 1–160; 1946, 27, pp. 101–273. The holiday is discussed on the pages 175–177.

It was claimed that Christ was only apparently a man, that he did not actually have an earthly body, only a heavenly body. Thus, he did not die on the Cross, this was merely an appearance. Some of the people claimed that somebody else had been crucified in his stead. Gnostic currents in Islam often invoked this theme, claiming that only the *ġilāf*, or Jesus's earthly shell, had died. Missionaries treated these theses, too, as evidence that the Nuṣayris might be a group close to Christianity. Meanwhile, in the complex Nuṣayri doctrine, Jesus Christ was compared to Al-Ḥusayn, the son of 'Alī and the third Shi'a caliph, who had also been one of the Divine epiphanies. The real Al-Ḥusayn died a martyr's death at Karbala in 680, this being one of Shi'ism's crucial founding moments. He died at the hands of the army of the Sunni caliph Yazīd, which demonstrates that the *umma*, the Muslim community, had split already in Islam's earliest period. It was the Sunnis, the advocates of the view that the caliph did not have to be someone from the Prophet's family, that, rather, the best one from among the Muslim community should be elected, who took over power after the death of Muḥammad (who had not laid down succession rules or left a male descendant to live into adulthood). The Shi'a, or advocates of giving over power to a Prophet's relative, i.e. to 'Alī, found themselves in trouble following the battle of Karbala. Since he was treated as an infallible imam, a question needed to be answered why he had failed to prevent his own death and the deaths of his companions. In Nuṣayrism this question sounded even more forcefully, as it concerned the death of a Divine epiphany. Thus, the Nuṣayris claim, in the spirit of docetism, that it was not Al-Ḥusayn who was killed in the battle of Karbala, but only his earthly shell or another man.¹⁴

One of the missionaries who saw an opportunity of pursuing missionary work among the Nuṣayris was Samuel Lyde, a Church of England missionary, who lived side by side with the Nuṣayris in the years 1853–1859, and even founded a mission school in the Kalbiyya district. He had an opportunity to watch the life and customs of Nuṣayri groups, and in a book written later, under the telling title *The Asian Mysteries, Illustrated in the History, Religion and the Present State of the Nusayris of Syria*, he provided a description of Nuṣayri customs and lifestyle.¹⁵ Moreover, he tried to present a broader perspective and discuss the Nuṣayris against the backdrop of the history and the religious system of what he described as secret, heretic Islamic sects. Naturally, quite apart from the fact that the

¹⁴ The Nuṣayris celebrate the '*īd al-'āšūrā*' at that time. The character of this festival is very different from the '*īd al-'āšūrā*' as celebrated in mainstream Shi'ism: it is a day of jubilation and of praising God's unity, as they believe that Al-Ḥusayn did not die at Karbala, that only his would-be executioners were certain that they had murdered him. The Nuṣayris compare Al-Ḥusayn to Jesus Christ as follows: «...they declared "We have put to death the Messiah Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Apostle of God." They did not kill Him, nor did they crucify Him; but they thought they did...» (Q 4:157). Just as it was widespread belief among the Muslims that another man had been tortured to death instead of Jesus, so the Nuṣayris came to believe that a man similar to Al-Ḥusayn, called Ḥanzala Ibn Asad, was murdered in his stead. Aṭ-Ṭabarānī even attributed to Ġa'far aṣ-Ṣādiq a tradition: 'Al-Ḥusayn is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is Al-Ḥusayn'. Aṭ-Ṭabarānī, *ibid.*, pp. 107–108.

¹⁵ A. Lyde, *The Asian Mysteries, Illustrated in the History, Religion and the Present State of the Nusayris of Syria*, London 1860.

ideas of heterodoxy and orthodoxy are extremely complex in Islam¹⁶, this part contains a lot of errors and simplifications. The author relied on information that was very much outdated, for example taken from J. von Hammer-Purgstall's writings.¹⁷ Nevertheless, there are two factors that impart value to Lyde's work. Firstly, he presented the results of his observations quite accurately, most importantly providing a description of customs and ceremonies, including the Nuṣayri initiation doctrines and lifestyle. Secondly, his description is an important testimony to the conditions in which these communities lived in the mid-19th century, under the rule of the Ottoman Turks, which was fairly oppressive for this group. At that time, Syria was invaded by Ibrāhīm Pasha, the son of the regent of Egypt, Muḥammad 'Alī. Even though the Nuṣayris had an ambivalent attitude towards him, many refused to lend him their support. As a result, Ibrāhīm Pasha persecuted the Nuṣayris in their mountain sanctuaries, destroyed Nuṣayri settlements and humiliated their leaders, or sheikhs. Moreover, the Nuṣayris remained under the pressure of the Ottoman government, and eventually violence and robberies appeared in their community. Furthermore, there was infighting between various Nuṣayri groups. Lyde left a vivid description of a fight between the Kalbiyya and the Muhalliba groups, stressing the role of women, who circulated around the combatants like evil spirits, encouraging them to engage in brutal fighting. After the combat ended, children plundered the battlefield. This testimony, while it may not be objective in many respects, or else may be taken out of its proper context, is still important as a description of the community's living conditions at that time. Lyde also included in his work the contents of the Nuṣayri manuscript *Kitāb al-maṣā'ihā* that he managed to get hold of.¹⁸

Sometimes the curiosity and protection of Western missionaries had tragic consequences for the members of the Nuṣayri community. The most flagrant example of that is the fate of Sulaymān al-Āḍanī, a Nuṣayri who left the community in the mid-19th century and revealed its secrets, which is an extremely rare occurrence. He is the author of a treatise entitled *Kitāb al-bākūra as-Sulaymāniyya*, which has an interesting history. In the introduction to the edition that I own, and which like many other Alawi publications is illegal in Syria, Abū Mūsa al-Ḥarīrī writes that the first version of the treatise was published in Beirut in 1863. Its author, Sulaymān al-Āḍanī, was born in Latakia in 1834 into a Nuṣayri family. He lived in Latakia for about seven years, then he moved to Āḍana. At the age of eighteen, he was initiated into the Nuṣayri community.¹⁹ However, he left the community after some time and disclosed its secrets. His treatise very soon attracted the interest of 19th-century Orientalists, who began to study 'secret' Muslim doctrines at that time, for example of Edward E. Salisbury and Van Dyck, the author of a translation of the Bible into Arabic. The latter said that the book was the work

¹⁶ For a discussion of the subject see e.g. an interesting work by F.I. Khuri, *Imams and Emirs. State, Religion and Sect in Islam*, London 2006; cf. also K. Pachniak, *Ezoteryczne odłamy*, op. cit., pp. 17–27.

¹⁷ J. von Hammer-Purgstall, *Die Geschichte der Assassinen*, Stuttgart, Tübingen 1818, English translation O.C. Wood, *The History of the Assassins*, London 1835; new edition New York 1968.

¹⁸ S. Lyde, *Asian Mystery*, op. cit., pp. 233–285.

¹⁹ Al-Āḍanī, *Kitāb al-bākūra as-Sulaymāniyya*, no date of publication given, op. cit., p. 7.

of a Nuṣayri who had come to doubt his faith and converted first to Judaism, and later to Sunni Islam; afterwards, he became an Orthodox Christian, and eventually a Protestant. In the course of his military service, Al-Āḍanī was transferred from Āḍana to Damascus, then to Beirut, and finally he returned to Latakia. There he spent some time with R.J. Dodds from the Protestant church.²⁰ The credibility of the *Kitāb al-bākūra* was also confirmed by other Orientalists, such as R.J. Dodds and R. Dussaud in the work *Histoire et religion de nusairis*. The latter says that he is certain of the authenticity of the treatise and of the fact that its author was indeed a Nuṣayri who had renounced his religion and disclosed the secrets of his community, for which he died at the hand of the Nuṣayris.²¹

The treatise *Kitāb al-bākūra* consists of two basic parts. The first one is the *Kitāb al-maġmū'*, regarded as one of the most important Nuṣayri writings, the catechism (*dustūr*) of that religion, that the Nuṣayris should be guided by in their lives. It discusses the fundamentals of the faith, prayers and Nuṣayri teachings in the form that was binding in the 19th century and may still be in force today.²² The last and very interesting part of the *Kitāb al-bākūra* is the *Ar-Radd 'ala nuṣayriyya*, i.e. the interpretation of the doctrine he had renounced as presented by Al-Āḍanī himself. Because of the special character of the treatise, i.e. the fact that it was written by a Nuṣayri, it is regarded as a serious source of information on that secret doctrine and its functioning in the 19th century. Undoubtedly, as it is always the case with converts, one should consider the question of the veracity of the information presented. However, the information given by Al-Āḍanī finds confirmation, in general outlines, in other, much older Nuṣayri treatises.

In conclusion, one needs to mention the works by researchers such as B. Springett, who classified the Nuṣayri community as a secret society reminiscent of Freemasonry. In his work *Secret Sects of Syria and the Lebanon*, besides the Nuṣayris the author mentions, rather chaotically, Gnostics, the followers of Simon the Magician, the Basilians, mystics, dervishes and others among these doctrines, and precedes this enumeration with a chapter: *The Root Principles of all Freemasonry*.²³ Springett was himself a member of Freemasonry, thus it is little wonder that he interpreted certain kinds of behaviour in those terms he was familiar with. In support of his argument, he invoked a system of secret signs that helped the community members in mutual recognition.²⁴ Lyde expressed similar opinions, and F. Walpole, another traveller from the first half of the 19th century,

²⁰ E. Salisbury, *Notes on the Book of Sulaiman's First Ripe Fruit Disclosing the Mysteries of the Nosairian Religion*, "Journal of the American Oriental Society" 1864, 8, p. 228; Al-Āḍanī, *Kitāb al-bākūra*, op. cit., p. 4.

²¹ René Dussaud, *Histoire et religion des Nosairis*, Paris 1900, p. XIII–XIV, *Kitāb al-bākūra*, p. 4.

²² Other editions of the *Kitāb al-maġmū'* were included in R. Dussaud, *Histoire et religion*, op. cit., pp. 161–198. The Arabic text was also incorporated in: Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, *Al-'Alawīyyūn an-Nuṣayriyyūn*, Beirut 1980, pp. 234–255.

²³ B. Springett, *Secret Sects of Syria and the Lebanon*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1922.

²⁴ See, for example: B. Springett, *Some Early Masonic Ritual*, in: Transaction, vol. IV of Author's Lodge, nr 3456, 1928, <http://www.pglbeds.org/Documents/Springett%20B.%20%20Early%20Masonic%20Ritual.pdf> (12.08.2016).

also mentioned signs and special formulas.²⁵ He had also observed those special signs, without precisely defining their nature, however, but said that they were used rather infrequently and only known to the select few.

To sum up this brief overview, it should be emphasized that irrespective of the motivation driving some of the researchers, all of these were pioneering works in their day and age and remain, until this very day, a valuable source both as research material and as evidence of the lives of esoteric communities. They deserve our attention all the more because they are frequently ignored as outdated works in present-day Oriental studies. While this is indeed largely the case, at the same time they demonstrate the evolution of Oriental studies and the complex motivations behind the actions of Orientalists.

²⁵ F. Walpole, *The Ansayrii and the Assassins With Travels in the Further East in 1850–1851 including Visit to Nineveh*, London 1981, p. 235.