

ئەنداز نامە ANDAZ CHRONICLE

Discover the legacy
Shape the Future: A
Journey of Transformation

A journey through history and tradition.
From good thoughts to action – Zoroastrian richness in a
modern world.

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to a journal where ancient Zoroastrian wisdom meets modern life. Every two months, we explore its deep philosophy, rich culture, and living traditions – alongside a closer look at its historical influence on Kurdish society and beyond. From the meaning of sacred festivals to the challenge of ethical living in a complex world, we connect ancient insights to contemporary life across cultures. Published in Swedish, English, Kurdish, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, we create a space for dialogue, reflection, and shared understanding across a global community. Explore. Understand. Live the good life.

This Issue

The first question that needs to be answered is: *Why Zoroastrianism?* This is the central issue we aim to address in the first section through three articles:

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Religion, Worship, Sect, and Denomination

A Conceptual Framework and Its Application to Kurdish Religious History

Abstract

This article develops a conceptual analytical framework distinguishing four levels of religious phenomena: religion, worship, sect, and denomination. It adopts a synthetic approach that integrates sociological, anthropological, and symbolic perspectives in the study of religion. The article applies this framework to Kurdish religious history in order to propose a more precise classification of its religious formations by distinguishing comprehensive religious systems from doctrinal subdivisions, ethno-religious communities, and ritual practices.

The study concludes that the concept of religion, in its systemic and comprehensive sense, applies primarily to Zoroastrianism and Islam within the Kurdish historical context, whereas Yezidism, Yarsanism, and Kurdish Alevism are better understood as ethno-religious denominations characterized by distinctive symbolic and ritual structures. Meanwhile, Islamic legal and theological schools within Kurdish society represent sects, and local ritual traditions fall within the category of worship as the expressive dimension of religious life.

I. Theoretical Framework: Defining Religion in Modern Religious Studies

Defining religion remains one of the most complex issues in modern religious studies due to the plurality of theoretical approaches developed to interpret religious phenomena. Three major perspectives have played a central role in shaping the contemporary academic understanding of religion.

1. The Substantive Approach to Religion

The substantive approach focuses on religion's relationship to the sacred or the transcendent. One of the most influential formulations is that of Émile Durkheim, who defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that unite adherents into a moral community.

This definition highlights religion's social function as a framework for generating collective solidarity and structuring the relationship between the sacred and the social world.

2. The Functional Approach to Religion

Max Weber approached religion from a functional perspective, viewing it as a system that provides meaning to the world and shapes social action while influencing economic, ethical, and political structures.

From this perspective, religion constitutes one of the primary sources through which societies construct legitimacy and interpret existential reality.

3. The Symbolic-Interpretive Approach to Religion

Clifford Geertz conceptualized religion as a system of cultural symbols that establishes powerful and enduring moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and presenting them as factually realistic. This interpretation reveals the deep cultural dimension of religion as a system for the production of meaning.

4. Toward a Synthetic Definition of Religion

Based on these theoretical perspectives, religion may be defined as: a comprehensive system of beliefs, symbols, and normative structures grounded in a transcendent reference point that organizes the relationship between human beings, the cosmos, and society, while providing a coherent framework for meaning, identity, and social conduct.

This definition forms the conceptual foundation of the present study's distinction between religion, worship, sect, and denomination.

II. Conceptual Framework: Distinguishing Religion, Worship, Sect, and Denomination

Distinguishing between these four concepts is essential for understanding the complex structure of religious phenomena in historical societies.

1. Religion

Religion represents a comprehensive system that includes:

doctrine

law

ethics

ritual practice

cosmology

a theory of human destiny

It typically possesses the capacity to organize both individual and collective life within an integrated civilizational framework.

2. Worship

Worship refers to the ritual dimension of the relationship between human beings and the sacred. It includes:

prayer

invocation

sacrifice

pilgrimage

religious festivals

collective ceremonies

Worship does not constitute an independent religious system but rather represents the expressive dimension of religious life.

3. Sect

A sect is a doctrinal formation within a broader religious tradition that develops a distinctive interpretation of scripture, theology, or religious authority while remaining within the general framework of the parent religion.

Sects typically display:

- partial doctrinal differentiation
- affiliation with a broader religious tradition
- an identifiable intellectual or theological heritage
- the potential for expansion beyond a single ethnic group

4. Denomination (Ethno-Religious Community)

A denomination, as used in this study, refers to a relatively closed ethno-religious community characterized by a strong linkage between religious identity and collective belonging.

Such communities are typically marked by:

- hereditary membership
- limited social permeability
- restricted geographical distribution
- symbolic and ritual centrality
- strong connections to communal identity

The classification of a group as a denomination does not imply a normative judgment; rather, it reflects its structural position within the broader map of religious phenomena.

5. Structural Relationships Between the Four Concepts

The relationship between these four categories may be understood hierarchically:

- religion represents the broadest framework
- sect represents doctrinal differentiation within religion
- denomination represents an ethno-religious communal formation
- worship represents the ritual expression present across all levels

These concepts therefore function as complementary analytical categories rather than competing classifications.

III. Applying the Conceptual Framework to Kurdish Religious History

This analytical framework allows for a more precise classification of religious developments within Kurdish history.

1. Zoroastrianism as Religion

Zoroastrianism represents one of the clearest historical examples of a comprehensive religious system within the ancient Iranian cultural sphere.

It included:

- a moral cosmology
- sacred texts
- ritual structures
- a dualistic ethical worldview
- a significant role in shaping imperial political institutions

It therefore functioned as a major religious framework within the broader Iranian world, of which Kurdish populations historically formed a part.

2. Islam as Religion

Islam represents a comprehensive religious system consisting of:

scripture

theology

law

ethics

cosmology

Since the early Islamic period, Islam has served as the dominant religious framework of Kurdish society, particularly within the Shafi'i Sunni tradition.

3. Sects Within Kurdish Islam

Kurdish society historically included several sectarian formations within Islam, including:

the Shafi'i school

the Hanafi school

Shi'i communities

Sufi orders

These represent doctrinal and institutional variations within Islam rather than independent religions.

4. Ethno-Religious Denominations in Kurdish Society

Yezidism, Yarsanism, and Kurdish Alevism represent historically developed ethno-religious formations characterized by distinctive symbolic and ritual systems.

These communities typically display:

relative social closure

limited expansion beyond their communal boundaries

strong reliance on oral tradition

central ritual symbolism

historical formation within medieval Islamic contexts

From this perspective, they may be analytically understood as ethno-religious denominations rather than universal religious systems in the classical sense.

5. Worship as a Shared Religious Dimension in Kurdish History

The ritual dimension of Kurdish religious life appears in multiple forms, including:

pilgrimage to shrines

seasonal religious celebrations

collective ritual gatherings

devotional recitation practices

local ceremonial traditions

These practices represent the shared expressive dimension of religious experience across different religious formations.

IV. Methodological Note

This article employs the categories of religion, worship, sect, and denomination as analytical tools within the sociology of religion. These classifications are not intended as theological evaluations of legitimacy or spiritual value but rather as conceptual instruments for identifying structural differences between types of religious formations within Kurdish religious history.

Conclusion

Based on the conceptual distinction between religion, worship, sect, and denomination, several conclusions may be drawn:

Zoroastrianism and Islam represent comprehensive religious systems within Kurdish religious history.

Islamic legal and theological schools within Kurdish society represent sectarian formations within a broader religious framework.

Yezidism, Yarsanism, and Kurdish Alevism represent historically developed ethno-religious denominations characterized by distinctive symbolic and ritual structures. Local ritual traditions represent the dimension of worship as the shared expressive level across different religious formations.

This analytical framework contributes to a more precise understanding of religious diversity within Kurdish history and provides a structured approach to interpreting the layered nature of religious identity in the region.

2

Zoroastrianism in Relation to the Middle East Renewing Religious Discourse in the Middle East: The Humanistic Legacy of Zoroastrianism and the Foundations of the Civil State

Research Hypothesis

The Islamic world cannot adopt Zoroastrianism as an alternative religion to Islam. However, it can draw inspiration from what may be called the “Zoroastrian openness model” and benefit from some of its ethical and humanistic dimensions as part of the region’s shared civilizational memory. This may contribute to supporting efforts to renew religious discourse from within the local cultural context itself. In this framework, what may be termed the “Zoroastrian openness model” can be viewed as a civilizational reference grounded in **the centrality** of individual responsibility, **the strengthening** of the role of reason in understanding faith, **the possibility** of distinguishing between the spiritual sphere and political authority, **respect** for pluralism, and the **presence of relatively early** precedents for women’s participation in both religious and social spheres. These elements do not constitute an alternative model so much as they provide an ethical foundation that may contribute to developing a contemporary religious discourse more consistent with the requirements of the modern civil state.

A reading of the cultural reality of the Middle East shows that the limited acceptance of religious pluralism and minority rights is not linked solely to political factors but is also connected to long-standing historical cultural patterns that have shaped the relationship between religion, authority, and society. These patterns have also contributed to limiting the role of individual reason in the public sphere and to reinforcing tendencies toward excluding those who are different ethnically, religiously, or sectarianly.

This context has led to the emergence of several secular reform projects in forms detached from the local symbolic structure, which has limited their ability to achieve sustainable social transformation. Accordingly, the most realistic path today does not lie in excluding religion from the public sphere, but rather in renewing religious discourse from within it, in a way that balances the spiritual needs of societies with the promotion of rationality, individual responsibility, legal equality, and the concept of the civil state.

The Zoroastrian Legacy as Part of the Region's Civilizational Memory

Within this context, the Zoroastrian heritage may be approached as one of the components of the deep civilizational memory of the Middle East – not as an alternative doctrinal framework, but as a source of ethical and intellectual inspiration that reminds us that the values of pluralism, openness, and individual responsibility are not entirely imported concepts from outside the region, but rather possess historical roots within its own civilizational structure.

This perspective makes it possible to reconstruct religious reform discourse on the basis of civilizational continuity rather than cultural rupture, thereby enhancing its social acceptability.

Elements of Inspiration in the Humanistic Reading of Zoroastrianism

A humanistic reading of the Zoroastrian tradition offers several elements that may be beneficial in the context of renewing contemporary religious discourse, including:

- Emphasizing the centrality of free will and individual moral responsibility, as expressed in the well-known ethical principle: good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.
- Strengthening the relationship between faith and rational reflection, thereby opening broader space for religious interpretation and independent reasoning.
- The possibility of preserving religious identity without necessary institutional linkage to political authority.
- The relative absence of organized excommunication against religious others in the Zoroastrian experience compared to some later historical contexts in the region.
- The existence of relatively early historical precedents for women's participation in both religious and social spheres.

- The continuity of religious interpretation throughout history without complete rupture from foundational sources.

These elements should not be understood as ready-made models for implementation, but rather as ethical resources that may contribute to supporting contemporary religious reform efforts.

A Shared Ethical Foundation

From this perspective, Zoroastrianism may be understood as one of the early expressions of an ethical vision that emphasizes human responsibility in promoting good in the world, rather than engaging in struggles over possessing absolute truth or monopolizing its interpretation.

In some of its historical and intellectual readings, it may also be viewed as offering a relatively early conception linking the legitimacy of political authority to the principle of justice and moral order rather than to the monopoly of religious interpretation alone. This aligns with the concept of the civil state as an inclusive framework for citizens regardless of their religious beliefs, cultural affiliations, ethnic backgrounds, or gender identities.

Civilizational Continuity and the Possibility of Building a New Reformist Discourse
Reinterpreting Zoroastrian heritage as a shared civilizational component rather than an exclusive ethnic identity may contribute to building a foundation for cultural rapprochement among the peoples of the Middle East and to transforming religious and sectarian differences from sources of conflict into sources of civilizational enrichment.

Within this framework, the term “**Zoroastrian Muslims**” may be understood as a metaphorical expression referring to a reform-oriented intellectual tendency within the contemporary Islamic sphere that seeks to draw inspiration from the rational and humanistic dimensions of the region’s civilizational heritage, without implying the emergence of a new religious identity or an alternative doctrinal framework.

This tendency represents an attempt to reconnect Islamic reform discourse with its deep civilizational memory in a way that enhances its ability to engage positively with the values of pluralism, citizenship, and individual moral responsibility.

Conclusion

The Middle East does not need a new religion; **it needs a new spirit in understanding religion.**

Drawing inspiration from the rational and humanistic dimensions of the region’s civilizational heritage—including the Zoroastrian tradition—may help support efforts to renew religious discourse from within the local cultural context through:

- strengthening individual moral responsibility
- supporting a culture of pluralism and acceptance of difference
- contributing to reducing sectarian tensions
- consolidating the concept of the civil state

Such a path may help build a religious discourse better able to respond to the challenges of the modern era and more capable of playing a unifying ethical role in contemporary societies rather than serving as a source of division.

3

Zoroastrianism and Kurdish Identity: Folk Religion and Historical Consciousness

Introduction: A General Vision.

If folk religion forms the foundation and historical consciousness acts as the bridge, then what is the ultimate goal?

The goal is not to call on all Kurds to convert to Zoroastrianism, nor to revive an ancient priestly class, nor to construct new religious rituals imposed on everyone. Rather, the goal is to reach a Kurdistan in which cultural spirit is stronger than political borders, and in which shared consciousness is deeper than geographical and political divisions.

Zoroastrianism and Kurdish Cultural Heritage:

Zoroastrianism can be understood as one of the oldest religious and spiritual traditions that has left historical imprints on certain elements of Kurdish folklore and symbolic culture. Although the majority of Kurds today identify as Muslims, traces of earlier religious layers from the broader Iranian cultural sphere remain present in some traditions, ceremonies, and symbolic expressions.

These elements have not been preserved as a coherent religion or a living doctrinal system but have continued as cultural and popular expressions that have been reshaped and reinterpreted over time. In this sense, they can be understood as part of a deeper historical and cultural heritage that contributed to shaping Kurdish identity, symbols, and traditions.

These layers may also be viewed as a living historical memory within popular culture. They do not represent a contemporary religious system, but rather an intertwined legacy of symbols, narratives, and rituals that continue to influence expressions of identity, community life, and celebrations in parts of Kurdish society. In this sense, Zoroastrianism is not an alternative to existing identities, but rather a gateway to understanding the deep historical layers that contributed to shaping Kurdish culture and its collective memory.

Folk Religion

Folk religion is a system of religious beliefs and practices that develops organically within a human community and is transmitted through oral traditions, rituals, and

daily practices, rather than through formal religious institutions or centralized doctrinal texts.

Characteristics of Folk Religion:

1. Local and environment-related: Connected to place (mountains, rivers, nature) and the mythical memory of society.
2. Oral and non-institutional: Transmitted through stories, proverbs, songs, and rituals.
3. Linked to daily life: Concerned with immediate needs such as healing, livelihood, fertility, and protection.
4. Syncretic in nature: Combines official beliefs with older, popular, and magical layers.
5. Historical continuity: Preserves remnants of ancient beliefs that form the unwritten memory of peoples.

Zoroastrianism as Kurdish Folk Religion

Within this context, Zoroastrianism should not be understood solely as an organized religion, but as one of the ancient spiritual and cultural layers that influenced Kurdish folklore and traditions. Rather than existing today as a unified doctrinal system, its traces remain present in popular symbols, practices, and rituals.

In many regions of Kurdistan, elements associated with ancient Iranian beliefs can be observed, such as reverence for nature, the symbolism of fire, and the celebration of festivals such as Nowruz. Over time, these elements have been integrated into daily life and traditions, becoming part of a broader folk culture.

Describing Zoroastrianism as a Kurdish folk religion does not mean that all Kurds share the same religious beliefs. Rather, it indicates the existence of a shared cultural and historical heritage expressed through popular traditions. In this sense, these elements form part of collective cultural memory rather than a unified religious system.

Zoroastrianism and Shared Kurdish Consciousness

This vision begins from the need to strengthen a shared Kurdish consciousness and a deeper sense of belonging among Kurds across all parts of Kurdistan. Despite shared cultural roots, the current Kurdish reality is marked by fragmented narratives and divided identities across different political contexts.

This approach seeks to rediscover and reactivate the deep cultural and spiritual layers that historically contributed to the formation of Kurdish collective consciousness.

Within this framework, Zoroastrianism is not presented as an exclusive religious doctrine, but as a symbol of shared cultural and historical heritage. The emphasis is

placed on its dimension as a folk religion – living traditions, rituals, symbols, and narratives transmitted across generations.

The aim is not to replace existing religious identities, but to construct a shared cultural framework that strengthens cohesion, historical continuity, and collective identity.

The Kurdish Perspective

Reinterpreting the Kurdish people through the concept of folk religion and recovering their spiritual roots represents a fundamental step toward building a shared Kurdish consciousness and a unified sense of belonging among Kurds across the four parts of Kurdistan.

This process is not limited to cultural or religious dimensions, but also forms the basis for a shared vision of a free homeland, and a culture that embraces diversity and freedom while supporting collective responsibility in preserving identity and future development.

Zoroastrianism in the Classification of Religions

Religions today can be classified as follows:

- State religions, as in Iraq, Syria, and Britain.
- National religions, as in Israel.
- Folk religions, as in Kurdistan.

The Relationship Between Folk Religion, Shared Historical Consciousness, and National Consciousness

The Kurds are a people with shared cultural origins, yet they lack a unified historical and national consciousness, and therefore do not possess a single cohesive discourse. Kurdish discourse today is fragmented into Iraqi-Kurdish, Syrian-Kurdish, Iranian-Kurdish, and Turkish-Kurdish narratives.

From this arises the question: can reconstructing the folk religion of the Kurdish people contribute to the formation of a shared national consciousness?

At its core, this question addresses the dialectical relationship between religion, history, and the formation of collective identity.

First: The Role of Folk Religion in Building Shared Historical Consciousness

Folk religion (as opposed to official or elite religious discourse) is a set of beliefs, practices, rituals, and customs adopted by ordinary people. It plays a crucial role in shaping historical consciousness through the following mechanisms:

1. Providing a symbolic and mythological framework

It offers narratives of origins, miracles, heroes, and saints. Even if not historically factual in the academic sense, these narratives create a “sacred time” that connects

members of society across generations. A story of a battle, a saint's miracle, or a sacred journey becomes part of collective memory.

2. Embodying history in rituals and daily practices

Through festivals, religious seasons, commemorations, and pilgrimages, society reenacts and remembers historical or religious events. For example, the celebration of Kawa the Blacksmith during Nowruz, Ashura in Shiite culture, or Mawlid celebrations transforms historical events into lived, repeated experiences that reinforce belonging to a transgenerational community.

3. Shaping shared ethics and values

Folk religion instills values such as generosity, courage, patience, and sacrifice, presented as ancestral virtues. This creates a sense that present identity is a continuation of past morality, deepening attachment to it.

4. Creating shared language and symbols

It uses proverbs, stories, songs, and symbols (such as the sun or fire) that become tools of communication and collective memory. These symbols carry deep historical meanings in popular consciousness.

Conclusion: Folk religion does not merely record history; it revives it and makes it part of lived experience, thereby producing an emotional and shared historical consciousness beyond formal narratives.

Second: The Role of Shared Historical Consciousness in Building National Consciousness

National consciousness is the feeling of belonging to one nation with a distinct identity, shared destiny, and right to self-determination. Historical consciousness fuels this process through:

1. Constructing a "we" identity

Shared historical narratives define group boundaries and distinguish who belongs to the nation.

2. Creating continuity and shared destiny

Members of the nation feel part of a historical chain extending from past to future.

3. Providing legitimacy to identity and political existence

Historical continuity with past civilizations or states gives national identity legitimacy.

4. Transforming land into homeland

History turns geography into meaningful space filled with collective memory and sacred significance.

The Dialectical Relationship

Folk religion → builds shared historical consciousness → feeds national consciousness → which in turn reshapes folk religion.

1. Folk religion creates symbolic memory.
2. This memory becomes shared historical consciousness.
3. Modern nationalist projects use this consciousness to build identity.
4. National identity reuses and amplifies folk symbols, reinforcing historical consciousness again.

In short, folk religion is the symbolic and emotional reservoir of collective memory. Shared historical consciousness is the narrative structure that organizes it. National consciousness is the political and identity framework that transforms it into collective action and meaning, turning geography into homeland.

The Dialectical Cycle

Folk religion → builds historical consciousness → fuels national consciousness → reshapes folk religion.

It is a self-reinforcing, cyclical system.