



Druze Studies Journal

Book Forum:

“Reincarnation and Identity: A Multidisciplinary Exploration of Druze Narratives- Book Forum: Fartacek, Gebhard, ed. *Druze Reincarnation Narratives: Previous Life Memories, Discourses, and the Construction of Identities*. Bern: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2021. eBook. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50328?show=full>

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Abstract

The book *Druze Reincarnation Narratives: Previous Life Memories Discourses and the Construction of Identities*, edited by Gebhard Fartacek, offers an interdisciplinary exploration of the Druze belief in reincarnation (*taqammus*) and the phenomenon of *Nutq*, where individuals recall previous lives. Scholars in anthropology, religious studies, and related fields contribute to understanding how these beliefs shape Druze social structures, personal identities, and community cohesion. The forum includes reviews by Maha Natoor, Dmitry Sevruck, and Jens Kreinath. Natoor appreciates the book's accessibility and balanced presentation of Druze reincarnation narratives while raising ethical concerns about anonymity and the use of religious texts. Sevruck commends the clear scientific language and interdisciplinary approach, emphasizing the book's contributions to Druze history and culture and suggesting further exploration of the psychological mechanisms behind reincarnation beliefs. Kreinath praises the detailed ethnographic insights and methodological rigor, noting researchers' challenges in engaging with the Druze community. He also critiques that some contributions focus on broader social, cultural, and political contexts rather than directly addressing reincarnation. Overall, the book provides valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of the Druze in preserving their unique religious identity amidst broader societal changes.

Keywords: *Druze; Reincarnation; Taqammus; Nutq; Identity construction; Ethnography.*

DEBATE

Exploring Druze Beliefs in Reincarnation and *Nutq* Narratives, by Maha Nattoor

The Druze live primarily in the Middle East and maintain religious homogeneity. Conversion is not allowed, and endogamy, that is, marriage within the same group according to tradition or law, is practiced. Their faith is monotheistic, with a principal belief in reincarnation—*taqammuṣ*. A phenomenon related to this belief is called *Nutq*, where individuals remember and speak about their previous lives.

This book is about the Druze in the Middle East, focusing on their belief in reincarnation and narratives of *Nutq*. Scholars from various disciplines have contributed to it, seeking to explore its various facets thoroughly. The book is clear, accessible, and understandable to readers who may not be familiar with the Druze community or the *Nutq* phenomenon. Each chapter offers a unique contribution.

Gebhard Fartacek, a social anthropologist, examines narratives of *Nutq*, providing detailed examples. He delves into the main themes in these narratives and draws conclusions from their analysis, particularly in the context of stories where individuals identify their previous incarnations. This chapter offers an in-depth exploration of the different narrative types, relying on two types of knowledge: "semantic knowledge and narrative-episodic knowledge" (Fartacek 2021, 16). The author also discusses the effects of these stories on individuals, family dynamics, and community relations.

Lorenz Nigst, research associate at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilizations, authored two chapters: He explores the concept of divine justice, presenting the idea that human actions influence the future incarnations of the soul. He draws a distinction between the belief in reincarnation as found in religious texts and the more popular belief in the phenomenon of *Nutq* and explores the consequences of the "return" of the deceased in their new form, both for the individual and the community. The chapter addresses the dual social positions occupied by individuals with *Nutq*.

In his second chapter, Nigst discusses the Druze's religious text, which neither non-Druze nor secular Druze can access. This chapter provides a unique perspective on reincarnation and *Nutq*, shedding light on the attitudes of religious Druze leaders towards these topics. Through analyzing their statements in the media, the author explores how they navigate between engaging in broader discussions about the *Nutq* phenomenon and relating to personal experiences while

conveying messages to the Druze community and beyond. Thus, they talk about the subject ambiguously or "leave it in abeyance."

Similar to Nigst, Eléonore Armanet, a socio-cultural anthropologist, deals with questions of subjectivity in a context where the fundamental concept is the repeated recurrence of souls within the group. She reflects on her position in relation to the research field, a significant discussion for those studying minority groups and sensitive religious issues. Furthermore, she provides a brief overview of existing literature on reincarnation among the Druze in both psychological and anthropological contexts, highlighting the Eurocentric perspective, which prioritizes the European perspective in politics, culture, and history, that often approaches these subjects. Armanet underscores the Druze's spiritual kinship, which transcends location, time, or family affiliation, and how language and rhetoric reflect this closeness.

Nour Farra Haddad, a social anthropologist, explores Druze holy places in Lebanon and their significance, with a focus on tombs of prophets. She discusses the principles of the Druze faith, its diverse sources, the central prophets, and their connection to the belief in reincarnation. This chapter takes readers on a historical journey, tracing the origins of Druze's belief in reincarnation to ancient Greece. The author discusses various pilgrimage practices, and their meanings are discussed, pointing to the significance of material culture in these rituals. These sites offer a space for Druze to seek support and blessing from their prophets in times of distress.

Salma Samaha, landscape ecologist and cultural geographer, explores the subject of Druze cemeteries in Syria and Lebanon, a topic rarely studied. She demonstrates how, compared to Syria, coexistence with Christians in Lebanon has influenced burial practices and led to shared burial spaces despite differences in the perception of death. Further research into the burial practices of Druze living beyond the Middle East could offer valuable insights into the fascinating intersection of beliefs, practices, landscape, and social influences.

Tobias Lang, a doctoral candidate in Political Science at the University of Vienna, comprehensively describes the demographic, political history, and changes that have occurred among the Druze in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. He offers a rich portrayal of these communities, describing their political positions, key figures, and the complex relationships between the state and the Druze minority in each region. He emphasizes the challenges within these communities and how the Druze minority continuously works to preserve itself.

In his concluding remarks, Fartacek focuses on the "concrete" *Nutq* cases that arise in the context of the belief in reincarnation. These cases not only reinforce this belief but also demonstrate the Druze community's unity and capacity to overcome the many challenges they face, including political and geographical divisions.

This book is thought-provoking, especially for me as a Druze researcher. I want to share two of the dilemmas that have arisen for me. The first challenge concerns preserving anonymity within a small community that widely shared *Nutq* stories. To safeguard the anonymity of the participants, is it sufficient to alter their names while retaining the main elements of their stories? Could these stories inadvertently expose interviewees who prefer to remain anonymous, especially when dealing with sensitive or conflictual cases?

Secondly, given the community's restriction on outsiders' access to the Druze scriptures, should researchers use religious texts to understand *Nutq*? Although these texts might be available, a question emerges when researchers establish personal connections with members of the community they are studying, who trust them and share their stories. In this case, to what extent is a researcher obliged to respect the group's rules, such as the non-disclosure of religious texts? Different answers may emerge, but these questions deserve consideration.

In conclusion, this book is rich and detailed and is a significant source for those interested in learning about the Druze belief in reincarnation and the *Nutq* phenomenon.

Unveiled: Understanding Druze Reincarnation Narratives through Interdisciplinary Perspectives of *Taqammuş*, by Dmitry Sevruck

As its title suggests, the book *Druze Reincarnation Narratives: Previous Life Memories, Discourses, and the Construction of Identities* deals with the concept of *taqammuş* (transmigration of souls) and its role, first of all, in the social life of the Druze community in Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan.

Editor of the volume and author of the most significant contribution is Gebhard Fartacek, an Orientalist, ethnologist, and anthropologist from the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Two articles were contributed by the cultural and social anthropologist Lorenz Nigst (Aga Khan University in London), whose research interests are focused on the Arab Middle East. Another Austrian author is the political scientist Tobias Lang. He is especially interested in positioning the Druze communities in the political systems of their respective states. French socio-cul-

tural anthropologist Eléonore Armanet, who primarily focuses on the intersections of body, gender, and the sacred, has summarized in her texts the results of her field research in the Upper Galilee (Israel). A pilgrimages and religious tourism specialist, Nour Farra Haddad (Lebanon), contributed a chapter about an important Druze sanctuary. The essay of Salma Samaha, a landscape ecologist and cultural geographer from Lebanon, is a comparativist study of the Druze and Christian funerary practices in Lebanon and Syria. Each contributor discusses the Druze belief in the transmigration of souls and does it through the prism of his/her own discipline.

Complementing one another, the authors create a complex picture of the phenomenon known in the Druze religious tradition as *taqammuş*. In preliminary remarks to his own contribution, Gebhard Fartacek articulates his main aim as well as his methodological approach (Fartacek 2021, 15): *“The research design for this project adopts a constructivist research approach. This means that the collection and analysis of the data are not focused on the question of whether people have in fact been “genuinely” reincarnated (from an objective point of view). Instead, the research explores the role played by conceptions of the transmigration of souls and rebirth in the daily lives of the Druze population and the extent to which such conceptions appear viable within Druze communities”*. The researcher can extend this approach to other chapters in the volume, albeit with some reservations. Each text deals with the influence of the *taqammuş*-concept on one or another aspect of the life of the Druze community: ethics and construction of specific forms of kinship (Fartacek, Armanet), personal constructions of identity and its connection with the cosmological principles as a part of shared identity (Nigst), a holistic perspective of the reincarnation belief (Armanet), *taqammuş* as one of the means to display the political solidarity among the Druze (Lang). Lebanese researchers (Haddad, Samaha) place the concept of *taqammuş* in the broader context of the Druze conceptions of death and life. The declared constructivist approach, however, is not an obstacle for the authors to take a critical attitude toward some of the episodes they describe (e.g., Case D in Fartacek 2021, 32). Another advantage of the book under review is its lack of apologetics, something scholars of different disciplines sometimes find difficult to avoid.

Each chapter can undoubtedly be characterized as a serious and noteworthy study that contributes to a better understanding of the Druze community's history, culture, and religious beliefs. Most authors (Fartacek, Nigst, and Armanet) reveal and analyze the functioning of intrafamily and community ties, which emerge from reincarnation narratives and are strengthened through rituals (Haddad, Sa-

maha). Tobias Lang, sometimes turning to history, carefully analyzes the situation of the Druze in three countries with completely different political systems – Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. The audiovisual materials collected and published by some authors (Fartacek, Haddad, and Samaha) could become valuable objects for additional research. First, this concerns the unique interviews with so-called *naṭiqs* (speakers of their previous lives) from the cases described and analyzed by Gebhard Fartacek. At the same time, the researcher does not pursue the goal of discovering the mechanisms of the emergence and constant reproduction of such beliefs. Nevertheless, it could be an exciting task to understand these psychological phenomena.

The chapters in the volume, written in clear scientific language, stand out for their well-thought-out structure and argumentation, making them worth reading. Their potential audience could be anyone interested in the cultures and religions of the modern Middle East. However, the book is addressed to ethnologists, anthropologists, orientalists, and religious scholars. An outside academic look at the community will likely interest the Druze themselves. The book may also interest sociologists and psychologists who are trying to comprehend the mechanisms of the emergence and self-reproduction of specific religious ideas and who require authentic material for this purpose.

On the Significance of Religious Secrecy and Reincarnation Beliefs among Religious Minorities in the Eastern Mediterranean, by Jens Kreinath

With *Druze Reincarnation Narratives*, Gebhard Fartacek edited a very fine piece of ethnographic research dedicated to a unique tradition of sharing reincarnation accounts unknown in mainstream research on the Eastern Mediterranean. This volume is one of only a handful of publications on this topic, making it significant for understanding the esoteric traditions of the autochthonous Druze community. It is the first of its kind to present a thorough, comprehensive, and contextual account of reincarnation narratives among the Druze. It draws on reincarnation narratives as an integral part of their ethnoreligious identity and secretive traditions of religious practice, with the ethnographic material being collected at the places of their residence, which are scattered across the broader region of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.

In this volume, Fartacek assembled some highly informative and ethnographically grounded contributions by known scholars in the field. All contributions,

while displaying different theoretical orientations, utilizing varied methodological approaches, and having distinct focal points of research, relate in varying degrees of elaboration to the main trajectory of this volume as outlined in the lead three chapters written by the editor, his main collaborator, Lorenz Nigst, and by Eléonore Armanet. Following the detailed and meticulous lines of documentation, as outlined in the introduction and lead chapter by Fartacek, the reader can sense the practical difficulties in establishing contact and maintaining rapport with members of the secretive ethnoreligious community of the Druze. The lead researchers brought to light highly personal and often very sensitive accounts of individuals who communicated their unique, often compelling, and quite mind-boggling first-hand accounts of their reincarnation.

The reliability of the collected data is assured by providing highly reflexive and contextual data about who was present during the interviews and how the narratives were recorded. The meticulous outlines of all methodical procedures indicate the process of collecting these narratives. Most importantly, the reader of these accounts gains a sufficient understanding of how the interlocutors were willing to tell stories about their reincarnation experiences and how they decided to search for the families they were members of in their previous lives. To provide further relevancy to the research conducted in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, the final contribution put into perspective the social and political context in which these interviews were conducted: at remote locations and disconnected areas spread across the borders of these antagonized countries that are rattled by decades of war, conflict, and famine. Additionally, the highest degree of professionalism and research ethics, in which the case studies are subsequently analyzed and placed within the broader scheme of research on ethnoreligious minorities in the Eastern Mediterranean, is outstanding and speaks to the quality and significance of the information presented in this volume. However, it is essential to note that not all contributions address the topic; instead, they aim to provide some social, cultural, and political context that features the research of the first three contributions. Thus, only these, along with the final comment by Fartacek, can come into the focus of this review, as only they deal directly with reincarnation narratives within the Druze community. Most notably, this review aims to evaluate the significance of the ethnographic research in this volume and explore ways in which these findings resonate with existing research or can be applied to similar traditions of reincarnation narratives among Arab Alawites in Hatay.

In his lead chapter, “Ethnographic Insights: Narratives, Dealing with Previous Life Memories among the Druze,” Fartacek presents excerpts from ten meticulously documented reincarnation narratives with an empirically grounded research framework. Although the Druze religious doctrine holds that all humans are reincarnated as humans, people who can remember the details of their past lives are extremely rare, as this volume indirectly seems to suggest. Fartacek conducted interviews with men and women from all social and economic strata as well as from different educational backgrounds. In his heuristic analysis of diverse reincarnation narratives, Fartacek emphasizes that reincarnation cases occur more frequently in specific families and regions. He further suggests that these case narratives have varying effects on the kinship relationships established among the families where reincarnation occurs. In comparing the reincarnation narratives with a focus on the similarities in the recurring themes and structural features of these narratives regarding the different effects on the formation of new family ties, Fartacek identifies the fateful causes of death, the content and nature of antecedent life memories while featuring the moments of recognizing or encountering people significant in the previous life.

Fartacek establishes the general plot structure and framework for analyzing the featured reincarnation cases. These include different forms of proof, such as being able to detail the circumstances of death, navigating environments for the past life, demonstrating certain linguistic skills, exposing specific birthmarks, or portraying distinct phobias. Four interconnected features comprise this: the abrupt and often violent manner of death, the presence of specific memories with an identifiable moment of discovery, a usually unambiguous manner of death, and the significance of the story for the here and now, where the speaker’s present identity and the general situation of the involved community are inseparable. However, as Fartacek emphasizes, the reincarnated person needs to supply unquestionable evidence to the family from which he or she claims to have descended through rebirth. More important are the reactions and the differing degrees of acceptance, considering the proof demanded by every party involved. As Fartacek convincingly demonstrates, people with specific memories searching for proof of their claims to be someone from a different generation or family often encounter highly delicate and uncomfortable situations. The reactions of the identified families can vary from instantly formed kinship relationships to chaotic forms of alienation, which, according to Fartacek, represents the moral of the story as “a departure point for further reflections in which semantic knowledge is shared” (Fartacek

2021, 56). Such findings reveal the core value of the reincarnation narratives Fartacek and Nigst collected jointly.

The belief in reincarnation is still alive and primarily transmitted orally in often remote parts of Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. It is also shared among other ethnoreligious communities of the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the Arab Alawite/Nusayri, Anatolian Alevi, Ali-Haqq, and Yezidi. These groups are at the margins of mainstream Islam and are often identified as the extreme Shi'a. However, research on these communities is less comprehensive. In contrast to the other ethnoreligious communities, the Arab Alawite/Nusayri share similar traditions of reincarnation narratives. Unlike the Druze, the Alawite reincarnation belief details the possibility of humans reincarnating as non-human entities such as animals and plants, despite the lack of narratives to explain such traditions. Research on these two ethnoreligious communities indicates that people who seem to have been reincarnated can usually clearly remember the details of their previous lives. Even though such detailed narratives among the Druze and Alawite are very rare, the persons who remember such details were usually victims of an assassination or accident.

The Arab Alawites, mainly residing in southern Turkey, have reported various reincarnation narratives, among which Stephan Procházka and Leila Prager have most recently and thoroughly documented. However, the research on the other dimensions in the religious cosmology of Arab Alawites, which relate to forms of reincarnation as common among the Druze, is limited. Unfortunately, there are only a few full narrative accounts of reincarnation experiences among Alawites in Hatay. These few accounts given by people who were able to recount sufficient details resemble the narratives collected in Fartacek's volume. Comparing the structural and thematic features of Druze reincarnation narratives with those among the Alawites reveals significant differences in these traditions' social, cultural, and political significance. As for the Alawites, reincarnation is a general feature of the common belief system and is not confined to their religious secrecy tradition. In this regard, reincarnation primarily exists as a folk belief unrelated to or directly impacting their religious secrecy traditions. These traditions mainly stem from the secretive practice of their religious rituals, which they strictly maintain despite centuries of ritual seclusion. In addition, the reincarnation narratives among Alawites are more generic and not tied to specific family constellations or the formation of new ones, as suggested by the accounts collected in Fartacek's volume. Other than in the cases Fartacek and Nigst collected, the Alawite/Nusayri reincarnation narra-

tives in Hatay are often tied to celebrity assassination stories, like John F. Kennedy or Lady Diana. Thus, Alawite's reincarnation narratives may tend to feature figures who are famous in pop culture.

More importantly, Druze reincarnation narratives clearly impact the reconfiguration of their community and family relations that may occur through the sharing of reincarnation narratives with the specific families involved or implicated in these narratives. In a way, Druze reincarnation narratives are delicate as they tend to irritate and interfere with private, if not intimate, family relations in cases where someone claims to be the reincarnation of a deceased person of a foreign family and thus creates new family ties through such narratives if the reincarnated person is able to provide proof about the names of other family members or if they are able to reveal personal secrets that only could have been known by the deceased person. This is only very rarely the case among the Arab Alawites in Hatay. However, the scale of these real-life effects or consequences of such reincarnation narratives as they relate to the Arab Alawites is not known yet. There might be more similarities and differences, but it would be challenging to determine further specifics about the Druze and Alawite traditions of reincarnation without further ethnographic research.

One other aspect that would require a broader approach to reincarnation is encapsulated in the concept of metempsychosis, the transmigration of the soul after death, which is an integral belief for several other ethnoreligious communities and traditions in the region, like the Anatolian Alevi, Ali-Haqq, and Yezidi. However, research on reincarnation narratives and their relation to the cosmologies and worldviews about the reincarnation of souls remains limited. With the research template and the case studies that Fartacek provided in this volume, future research on Alawite reincarnation narratives would profit tremendously from the findings presented in this volume.

Other important inquiry features integral to Alawite and Druze reincarnation narratives also relate to the themes covered in the three last contributions to the volume. Nevertheless, they are not sufficiently addressed in the respective chapters and raise questions for future research. One relates to the question of the physical or virtual presence or embodiment of the saints or prophets in different tombs or cenotaphs, which should have been discussed in the contribution by Nour Haddad. Numerous saints are venerated at different locations, and each saint is present at the sites of his or her veneration. In the contribution by Salma Samaha, the necessary nexus between the specific architectural features of the mor-

tuary dwellings and their relationships to reincarnation beliefs remains somewhat elusive and should have been further elaborated on regarding the relevance of material structures for studying religious cosmologies and the different forms of embodiment of religious beliefs in durable traits like mortuary dwellings. Finally, the last research-based contribution to this volume focused mainly on studying the Druze as “a political entity” without any effort to enhance the study of the role of Druze reincarnation beliefs or narratives in the political sphere. There is some evidence that Druze reincarnation beliefs influenced their willingness to sacrifice themselves during the civil war in Lebanon. In addition, there may be specific reasons why Druze individuals are specifically well suited to serve in Israel’s military and police forces.

In conclusion, *Druze Reincarnation Narratives* presents an intriguing array of cases and contexts that can only further and enhance existing and ongoing research on a form of religious cosmology that is only in its nascent stages and for which Fartacek’s volume provides a bold opening.

RESPONSE

Looking back at *Druze Reincarnation Narratives*. Reflections on methodology and avenues for further research, by Gebhard Fartacek

As the editor of 'Druze Reincarnation Narratives: Previous Life Memories, Discourses, and the Construction of Identities', published by Peter Lang in 2021, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all three reviewers for their thoughtful and remarkably insightful comments. While each review reflects the perspective of a different discipline, all three authors get to the core of the issues dealt with in the book and make perceptive comments that reflect their profound engagement with the material. Their analysis draws attention to highly relevant questions and reaches plausible and compelling conclusions.

In her summary, Maha Nator highlights fundamental challenges in ethnographic data collection methodology and raises two specific questions I would like to address here. Please interpret my comments as heuristic approaches, not as definitive answers.

One of these challenges is maintaining the anonymity of interviewees; while I did change the names in my book contribution, interviewees are nevertheless easily identifiable within and beyond their small communities by specific details from their narratives. One can take this criticism further, as this lack of true anonymity

is not only an issue for the interviewees themselves but also for all other people who are mentioned (sometimes very critically) by the interviewees in their stories.

Indeed, one cannot dismiss this point lightly, especially in the case of the relatively small localities in Upper Galilee. However, I consciously withheld a considerable amount of information that interviewees shared with me about themselves and others in cases where such disclosures might have caused interpersonal conflict. I sought a compromise here, as my personal standpoint as a social anthropologist is that describing the localities and social settings in which *nutq* cases emerge has value and that something would be lost from the ethnography if these stories were wrested out of their contexts and “washed clean.” Detailed contextualization also has value—as Jens Kreinath underscores—for readers seeking to understand and appraise the research results. Looking beyond the specifics of this publication and taking a more comprehensive view, I find that the increasing pressure on scholars worldwide to publish their research results in English and open-access formats is influencing this particular problem. While we must broadly welcome the trend towards making research understandable and freely accessible as a contribution to democratization, publishing research in a global lingua franca and open-access formats creates some specific challenges for ethnological field research. Twenty or thirty years ago, problems concerning confidentiality were largely theoretical. When they did arise on a practical level, they did so mainly in the political sphere: intelligence services have always been able to read ethnographic research, and ethnographers have always had to think carefully about what material to omit to protect informants. However, when it comes to interpersonal relationships and the potential for conflicts between specific individuals and families in the area studied, there is a significant difference between ethnographic research results, which are essentially available only in selected specialized libraries, and those that are freely accessible from virtually any living room sofa. I believe that the possible ramifications for research participants when publications based on ethnographic field research are available in open-access formats are a fundamental problem that our discipline at large, not only by individual scholars, needs to address in a more targeted way—to clarify what is appropriate for specific regions.

Natoor’s second question relates to whether it is really necessary to consider religious texts to understand *nutq*. After all, this is a sensitive matter, as Druze doctrine states that these texts are reserved for the initiates only. While it would, of course, be possible to trace the phenomenon of *nutq* using only the toolbox of ethnology (including interviews and participant observation) and without drawing

on religious texts, social anthropology focused on the Middle East has a long tradition of cooperation between anthropology and the philological and text-based disciplines. Several significant reasons support this approach. First and foremost, given the generally inadequate state of research in most social anthropology topics in the Middle East, forgoing opportunities to integrate relevant expertise from Arabic and Islamic studies would be unwise. Furthermore, the area has a tradition of writing that dates back thousands of years, which, although admittedly restricted to limited strata of the population for most of this time, nevertheless exerted a decisive influence on local cultures (that can be understood in terms of Robert Redfield's model of little and great traditions). Lived religion and scriptural tradition are mutually interdependent, and many systems theory connections unfold in the interaction between these two poles. This means that something would be missing if research into the phenomenon of *nutq* and the constructions of identity linked to it were to refrain entirely from considering relevant religious texts. It is clear that anthropologists must respect the rules of the communities in which they conduct research and give this due consideration in their publications. In light of this ethical obligation, I note that the book did not reproduce restricted texts and that the description of these texts does not appear to have the potential to cause any serious offense. However, I acknowledge that divergent views of this may exist among the Druze.

The two points raised by Nator lead to the implicit question of the book's target audience. Jens Kreinath voices similar doubts—in an insightful and broadly favorable review—when he suggests that it is not entirely clear how the book's final three contributions contribute to the overall discussion of reincarnation narratives. As the volume's editor, I am willing to acknowledge this point of criticism as justified to some degree. However, I would also like to defend the decision to include these studies and reiterate that I greatly appreciate the work of all three authors. While none of them are “reincarnation researchers” as such, their contributions nevertheless represent ambitious attempts to apply their own specific research expertise to conceptions of reincarnation in a targeted fashion. In my view, these articles provide a substantial degree of contextualization relevant to addressing current gaps in the state of research and future research questions.

Anthologies evolve over time, and changes in circumstances and editorial decisions can affect the final outcome. A case in point: Tobias Lang originally conceived his contribution to the Druze's situation in multiple nation-states as an introductory article, but his in-depth and meticulous comprehensive investigation

ultimately exceeded its scope. In contrast to widespread depictions of the Druze as a single cohesive group, his contribution sheds light on disparities between Druze communities, contradictory patterns in embedding the Druze into nation-states, and recent problems and challenges facing the Druze as an ethnic group.

This leads me to the issue of possible future research questions, which Dmitry Sevruk outlined in his remarks. I do not feel competent to speculate on the origins and evolution of the Druze belief in reincarnation, as tracing their history would require the expertise of other disciplines. However, the mechanisms by which these beliefs are maintained and reproduced can be treated similarly to other localized cultural conceptions and practices that continue to be upheld or redefined. In contrast, they continue to fulfill the specific needs of the people concerned and are deemed necessary for coping with life. As I sought to outline in my conclusion to the book, I highlighted the unifying potential of Druze ideas of reincarnation and *mutq* cases. These play a crucial role in addressing the intra-Druze disparities mentioned above and their suitability as an “exclusive” marker of ethnic identity in a monotheistic environment. Nevertheless, I fully agree with Sevruk that a more systematic approach to this question is necessary. A thorough examination of the epistemological foundations of reincarnation beliefs in the Middle East, including the relevance of the Neoplatonic emanation theory, deserves particular scrutiny. Building on this, I would also be highly interested in pursuing a systematic comparison with Alawite conceptions of reincarnation, as suggested by Kreinath. However, my prior field research visits to the area around Safita suggest that regional differences may influence the Alawites, similar to the Druze. Last but not least, I could see myself looking more closely at future research work on the (optional) forms of kinship constituted via *mutq* and attempting a social anthropological typology in the mode of kinship studies. This would, however, require a multi-sited participant observation over extended periods, which is currently only feasible in a minimal way given the ongoing armed conflicts in the Middle East.

As I believe that research ambitions of this nature can only be realized in teams, I would be very pleased if cooperative research projects proved possible in the future. With that aim in mind, I would like to thank the initiators of the Druze Studies Project at the University of Kansas, who have created an extremely valuable potential for networking and fruitful cooperation in establishing this new journal.

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