

Review

On the Other: A Muslim View

Rusmir Mahmutćehajić. Trans. Desmond Maurer. Fordham University Press: New York, 2011. 224pp.

Mile Babić*

The original Bosnian title of Rusmir Mahmutćehajić's book, *Malo znanja*, means "Little Knowledge" and comes from the Qur'an (17:85). It encapsulates the author's fundamental insight and the fundamental thesis of the book, a thesis that places him securely in a current of thinkers conscious of their own ignorance that runs from Socrates to Nicholas of Cusa, from Socrates' "I know that I know nothing" to Cusanus' *docta ingnorantia* (learned ignorance). It is not accidental that I mention no thinkers of the modern period, caught up as they were by modernity's will for power, carried off into the realms of absolute knowledge, as fatal for individual human lives as for all life on the planet we know as Earth. Socrates had already said that God alone is *wise*, that God alone enjoys absolute knowledge. In this, he was followed by the entire Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition down to Nicholas of Cusa.

Mahmutćehajić is convinced that absolute knowledge, whether claimed in the name of religion, nation, science, art, etc, leads mankind as a whole to catastrophe, global destruction, and self-destruction. He is constantly questioning himself and his knowledge and discovering his own ignorance. This is what makes him capable of true

* **Mile Babić** is a Bosnian Franciscan priest and a professor of theology. He has been teaching at the School of Franciscan Theological in Sarajevo since 1997. He works as an editor of the *Jukić Journal*, and he is a Head of the Department for Dialogue with Other Religions at the Franciscan Institute for the Culture of Peace.

understanding, for only those aware of their own ignorance are open to new insights, to the entirely new, the entirely other, open, that is, to the other and the absolutely Other.

Immanuel Kant spoke of mystagogues and enlighteners. Mystagogues claim an immediate intuitive relationship with the Mystery, with God, as their own private property, over which they keep a jealous watch. Mystagogues do not announce this Mystery in everyday language, for all to understand; they announce the Mystery to us through initiation and inspiration. The Mystagogue is a *philosophus per intuitionem* or *per inspirationem*. They consider themselves elite, superior to others, more distinguished. They need no school, work, or effort, reaching their goals through spiritual insight. They reach their goals through feeling, on the basis of feelings, and so receive everything without mediation.

Kant unmasks the arrogance of the mystagogue and reveals that they think they enjoy absolute knowledge only because they have made of God their own private property, supposing they know God better than God himself. In short, the mystagogues claim absolute knowledge in the name of faith and religion, while the enlighteners do so in the name of reason and science. Kant proposed an agreement between the mystagogues and the enlighteners, a dialogue between faith and reason, religion and science (I. Kant, *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie*).

In his work on the Apocalypse, Jacques Derrida has reinvigorated Kant's thought. Derrida points out that the world situation today is very similar to that of Kant's time. Today, he claims, there is literary mystagogy on the one hand, and philosophy on the other. Derrida proposes a reintegration of mystagogy and philosophy, as each of us is both mystagogue and enlightener. Derrida rejects both extremes, as he rejects absolute knowledge both in the name of faith and religion, in the name of an apocalyptic vision, and in the name of reason and science. He illustrates this through the example of nuclear war. After such a war, none would be left to make capital out of the victory. It would be absolute self-destruction, a war in the name of the great *Nothing, Void, or Nullity*. This is for Derrida the only solution is dialogue between those in love with life, however poorly they understand each other.

Mahmutćahajić is aware that the conflict between religion and science, the religious and secular, is so heightened today that there are two absolutist fundamentalisms, a religious and a secular fundamentalism which deny each other, with the paradoxical effect that they affirm and reinforce each other. Mahmutćahajić

demonstrates clearly that *Islam* is not absolute, religion is not absolute, only God is absolute. Those who treat their religion as absolute are the most evident and most radical deniers of God, who is One for all people on the Earth.

Religion is there that we may manifest our respect for and love of others through it, our respect and our love for the Creator of all things. Those who use religion today to express their hatred and contempt for others are the greatest enemies of religion, regardless of their declarations of belief. This means that a religion is destroyed from inside, not outside, not by others, but by ourselves. Those who raise their own religion above others, at the expense of other people and other religions, directly contradict the very essence of religion, as it is through religion we bear witness to our own humility before others and the absolute Other.

In this book, Mahmutćehajić discusses the essence of *Islam* in a new and original way. It is clear from his presentation that in *Islam* the believer has confidence in God as absolute Other, which confidence entails confidence in others. As a Muslim philosopher and theologian, Mahmutćehajić is at pains to demonstrate that Peace (*al-Salam*) is one of God's beautiful names, as for example in the following passage:

God is *al-Salam*. The whole human dilemma lies in voluntary return to Him. He who seeks *salam* and determines himself by it is *Muslim*. *Salam* is our highest goal. All the things of the world are signs through which Peace reveals Itself. Our knowledge of them is recognition of Peace in them and in ourselves. Our remembrance of God is primarily of Him as Peace. Peace is our relationship to ourselves, the world, and God. The relationship of the Muslim or seeker of peace with God as Peace is *Islam*. This is shown clearly by all the verses in the Recitation in which the concept is mentioned (91).

In the preface the author states “[i]dentity may be designated Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, but first and foremost, it is human” (xii). Thus, none of these identities negate our identity as individual human beings. The identifying subject is first and foremost a human being, with an individual point of view. The main question the author is trying to answer is how to approach another human being as a Muslim. The noun *Muslim* refers principally to the individual's relationship to God (the absolute Other) and only then to other people and to the world (1): “Viewed from a Muslim point of view, the self is related to everything through the One” (3). I and Thou are linked through the One, “[b]ut God is fundamentally and irredeemably other and different” (5). One become a Muslim by confessing and bearing witness to Divine Unity (8), and Unity is manifest through all

beings and things. Duality (plurality) presupposes and reveals Divine Unity, as differences in this world reveal God's Unity. The purpose of human existence is to discover Peace, for God is Peace. The discussion focuses on the people-of-peace (*Muslim*), being-at-peace (*Islam*), and Peace (*al-Salam*). Human existence is a journey towards Peace.

The other or stranger is a sign of God's presence, since God is the absolute Other: "That God is (the) other to all of existence allows the recognition and crossing of the boundaries that determine everything in existence" (15). Consciousness of the other or stranger entails consciousness of the boundaries, the differences between individuals and between groups, but also of the Unity manifest through differences which binds us all. Thus, we become conscious that our God and your God is One (Qur'an, 29:46).

Our highest capacity is self-knowledge, but we may know ourselves only if we also know the other. Human knowledge can never be absolute, for it is a little knowledge. Accepting our creaturehood, we also recognise that there is no God but God, "there is no real except the Real" (23). God is to be seen in every other face: "Humankind is the culmination of all creation. We gather in ourselves everything created before us" (25). We learn that there is nothing we have not received from the Creator and that we are indebted to Him Who gave us all that is (44): "Every human being is a relationship to peace" (34), while the highest human knowledge is consciousness of God's unknowability (40). The authentic human relation to God is the relation of confidence, because God is Faithful (42).

Beauty reveals God. We see our Creator's beauty in all the things of the world (48). When created humanity forgets its authentic nature and considers itself the culmination of development, we make gods or idols of ourselves (54). Each of us is made in God's image and the Creator is present in each of us and we are always related to our Creator (65). The highest degree of doing what is good is to be found in the prophets, the just, the martyrs, and the good (70). All of God's prophets have been people of peace, leading humanity to God as Peace. Peace (*al-Salam*) is one of God's beautiful names (92). Everything in existence reveals the names of God. There are many ways to God and it is only in and through our differences that we make our way to the One God, for only what differs may be united.

In this book (furnished with a glossary and bibliography), which comprises a preface, nineteen chapters ("I, Thou, and He"; "The One and the Many"; "The Stranger";

“Self-knowledge”; “The Sense-of-Self and the Debt”; “Being-at-Peace”; “Faith”; “Beauty”; “The Hour”; “Humanity”; “The Other and the Different”; “Intolerance I”; “Intolerance II”; “The Muslim”; “The Universality of Prophecy”; “The Nation of the Just”; “Dialogue”; “Finding Fault with Others and the Self”; “Free Will and the Covenant”) and an afterword, the author has provided a convincing presentation of the Muslim point of view, the Muslim way of looking at the other and reality as a whole, including Muslim ontology, gnoseology, moral theology, and ethics. The fundamental insight is that *Islam* in its authentic sense is our relationship as human beings with God, a relationship in which we seek peace (*Muslim*) and a God who is Peace (*al-Salam*). From this, we may conclude that Islamic theology is in fact an eirenology (Greek: *eiréne*, which means peace).

Mahmutćehajić does in Bosnian what Martin Heidegger did in German. He discovers new words, new aspects of the meanings of particular words, their embalmed roots, applying new methods and new insights. *On the Other* is both original and consistent in its vocabulary, terminology, methodology, and theology. It is a return to the *sources of Islam* and, like every return to the sources of Islam, a renewal of Islam, a new vision of Islam which includes a radical critique of all those who would turn Islam to ideology and idolatry.

Finally, I would like to single out some aspects of Mahmutćehajić's philosophy and theology that correspond to Franciscan theology. These are his insistence that human knowledge is small and that the main human virtue is humility. Only those who are conscious of their own ignorance are ready to learn and to change themselves and the world for the better, only they are fully open to new experiences, open to others and to the absolute Other. As the highest form of love, humility brings us into fullness of life. Human life can succeed in attaining fullness only in and through love, as self-humiliation.

The guiding thought of Mahmutćehajić's book is that God is one, or in his terms Divine Unity, which we Christians more usually speak of as Divine Oneness. Divine Oneness makes the world possible. The governing principle of this world is plurality, multiplicity, difference. Divine Oneness and the pluralism of this world are not mutually exclusive. They include and require each other. In effect this means: the more the religious differences in the world, the more God is manifest in it. The world's differences cannot exhaust God's oneness. To negate religious differences is to negate religious life

and deny God. To negate the world's religious pluralism is to negate God. All the religions and religious forms express faith, confidence, and love of God and our fellow humans. They are not imposed on others. Rather, confident in each other, they compete in good, to make a Land of Peace of this heavenly ball, of peace understood not just as the absence of war, but as the fullness of all good things, as full life for all.

Mahmutćehajić's book, *Malo znanja*, is a fitting companion to Cusanus' *De pace fidei* (*On the Peaceful Unity of Faith*) in the Christian tradition.