

Review

Hval i Djeva [The Praised and the Virgin]: Tom I: Vječnost u vjesničkim otkrivanjima [Vol. I: Eternity in Prophetic Revelation], 333pp.; Tom II: O trajanju i prekidu [Vol. II: On Continuity and Discontinuity], 251pp.; Tom III: Sabiranje rasutog [Vol. III: Reuniting the Scattered], 420pp.

Rusmir Mahmutćehajić. Dobra knjiga: Sarajevo, 2011.

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A book by Rusmir Mahmutćehajić is always an event. His books are normally relatively short and always make a clear argument, albeit an argument many are unwilling to hear. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, he goes straight to the heart of the matter—and his theme is always the same—how to live a good life and how to be a good person, under the troubling conditions of modernity. His answer is also consistent—it is by the embrace of plurality and difference in the service of this one goal, the ethically good life, an embrace that is informed by immersion in tradition and the wisdom of our elders and of those who have pondered the eternal questions before us (as represented by the *philosophia perennis* in the lineage of René Guénon). By contrast, he sees modernity as a series of reductive projects that apply unitary schemes of life to create different species of

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human, eradicating difference within the group by establishing absolute difference between groups. Surrender to modernity replaces tradition and rootedness and inherited wisdom with functional indoctrination. The former approach thus places the proper realization of the self (in line with what Kant would term the categorical imperatives, as taught by the intellectual traditions) above all other goals, while the latter values the self essentially as an instance of the group. The former is inherently ethical and intellectual, the latter inherently alienated and instrumentalized.

His most recent work, *Hval i Djeva [The Praised and the Virgin]*, is not short. It is in three volumes and covers just over one thousand pages. It is, however, less a new departure than a summing up, a “sabiranje rasutog [“reuniting the scattered”],” as the subtitle of the third volume puts it. Here is Mahmutćehajić’s mature, extended meditation on his theme, under the troubling conditions of contemporary Bosnia and from the troubling position of a contemporary European Muslim, viewed through the history of his country and the categories of the tradition to which he belongs, the Muslim branch of the *philosophia perennis*.

That he approaches his theme through the prisms of Bosnia and of the Muslim tradition is only natural. Bosnia is, after all, the context in which he and the majority of his readers must live their lives, while the Muslim tradition is the one in which he was brought up and which has informed his intellectual and religious development. He is always clear, however, that Bosnia is exemplary rather than exceptional. The current condition of Bosnia is simply a microcosm, a concentrated instance of the condition of Europe and of the world more generally. The problems present in Bosnia are more or less present in every country under the conditions of modernity, whether they are admitted or denied. Rather than archaic or pre-modern or closer to its traditions than other countries and so in some way more authentic, Bosnia is if anything all too typical and has seen too much modernity.

A Universal Particular, a particular that exemplifies the universal, as every particular must, but also a particular that points to what transcends it and gives it value, Bosnia is consequently not of value in itself or as a national ideal, but as a framework that allows or should allow or can be made to allow us to live a good life in a community of the just. This is what each country should be. All countries are equal before the Lord, but an individual cannot live in all countries, only in one, and so each country has a duty to

be a fit home for human beings. Nationalism obscures the goal of the good life, by covering over the notion of the community with the fetish of the nation.

In fact, Bosnia is a particularly good place from which to pursue a discussion of the ethically good life, precisely because that life must be pursued within a context of difference and of the mutual encounter of traditions, the coexistence and mutual enriching of different paths, of different forms of life, of different traditions and approaches to the Good. The apparently fractured nature of Bosnia, its lack of a simple nation, its lack of a simple national ideology to which individual identity and conscience may be sacrificed, is less a fault than an opportunity. It forces Bosnia to be a framework for plurality, for difference itself, and it challenges it to be an enabling rather than a constricting one. This is challenging and it reveals the authentic hope that underlies the fetish of the national—the need for a means to coexistence, a way of forming community, and a mechanism for solidarity and the pursuit of social virtues, justice, and fairness.

Mahmutćehajić is equally clear that while the Muslim tradition is right for him, it is only one of the many possible traditions or ways of reaching God, orienting the self, and living a good life (of self-realization, as he puts it). There may be many equally valid paths to our destination, but an individual cannot travel on them all, only on one. There is no exclusivity in his approach, but there is also no reduction of difference to indifference.

As a result, this book is not what some may fear and others hope when they pick up its three volumes. The central matter of the book is indeed the nature of religious faith, of the prophetic spirit, of suffering and of salvation as constituent elements of the good life. It is not, however, a devotional meditation or work of Islamic theology. It is a work of comparative theology from a Muslim perspective, as well as being a work of ethics and political theory. It is permeated, as are all of his writings, by awareness of contemporary philosophy and of developments in a wide range of academic disciplines, from the history and sociology of religions to anthropology to the history of Bosnia itself. Finally, it is a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God to humankind, from a corner of the globe where and at a time when such a justification is sorely needed.

The title of the book encapsulates this theodicy. *Hval i Djeva* [*The Praised and the Virgin*] refers to the *Prophet Muhammad and the Virgin Mary*. The coupling is highly significant. If the Prophet represents the Muslim tradition, the Virgin might be thought to represent the Christian. And so she does, but she is also integral to the Muslim tradition. As Mahmutćehajić makes clear, the Virgin is a major figure and a prophetess for

Muslims, just as Christ is a major figure and a prophet, as well as being the incarnation of the Word. In Bosnia, the Virgin is symbolic at one of the same time both of what the Muslim and Christian traditions have in common and what separates them. And it is this unity in difference that is the purpose of our existence in the world and so redemptive for us all.

Hval is a Bosnian version of the prophet Muhammad's name as it might be translated literally, the Praised. This is not just his name, but his nature. He is both praised and praising, as God found His creation good, praised it, and thus stimulated His creation to praise Him. For Mahmutćehajić, the true nature of reality and of creation is a cycle of praise that emanates from the Divine into the world and is refracted back from the world to God, with the Praised, who is also the Praising, standing in for all of creation, as praised and praising. Muhammad is thus the model of the fully developed self in right relationship with God and, as the Praised, he provided us with God's revelation in the form of the Qur'an or Recitation. This essentially static picture is rendered dynamic, even dramatic, by the narrative of the fall and of redemption that lies at the heart of Mahmutćehajić's theodicy. Adam's fall is continually being redeemed. Adam descended, and all humankind descended from perfection with him. But he reached the nadir and turned, at the point where the Inviolable Mosque now stands in Mecca. He repented and was allowed to return, finding his way back up from the lowest point in the valley to the Garden of Eden on the summit of the cosmic mount. This journey is, of course, a metaphor for our turning away from God, our denial of our relationship of dependency on the transcendent (something beyond the order of society), and the debt that we consequently owe to what transcends us. Having turned away, we wander in the wilderness. Once we turn back towards God, however, we can rediscover our divinely inspired true nature and begin to repay our debt to God by making of ourselves what we were always meant to be. By realizing that true nature in all its glory, we come back into right relations with God, back into the garden, the earthly symbol for which is the Further Mosque on Mount Zion, which the Praised visited on his night journey, as he rose up and came to a full understanding of the nature of his revelation. Human life is spent between these two mosques, these two places of annihilation of the self, the nadir to which we may reach in our despair and the height to which we may aspire in our purified state. The Recitation, or more widely Tradition, is the guidance sent down to us on our path.

As Mahmutćehajić makes clear in the first part of the first volume, however, Muhammad is only one of many prophets. Just as he received his revelation, they had theirs, which they passed on to their peoples. This section of the book sets out his Mahmutćehajić's theodicy in the form of a consideration of some of those prophets and their relationship to the Praised. What is of the utmost importance for Mahmutćehajić is that all these prophets had a fullness of prophecy. The Praised is, for him, truly the first amongst *equals*.

This part of the book closes with a consideration of the concept of the Debt, which is Mahmutćehajić's preferred term for what others call religion. It is part of his general approach to oppose the reification of religion. Here he is partly inspired by the influential work done some fifty years ago by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who deconstructed the western concept of religion, demonstrating its roots in a particular development of Christianity, and who outlined many of the problems associated with applying that ethno-centric concept to non-Christian traditions (and even within Christianity itself). In particular, Smith criticised the way in which religion was used to construct an identification between the tenets and beliefs of a given tradition, on the one hand, and the institutions and practices that had positioned themselves as its self-authorized carriers, on the other. In this way the beliefs are woven into an ideological structure which serves to support those institutions, rather than to provide the life guidance that is their primary purpose. Smith preferred to use the term faith in order to stress the properly subjective aspect. Mahmutćehajić also stresses the subjective, by placing the individual relationship with God at the very heart of his discussion. Using a technique of defamiliarization that is reminiscent both of the Russian formalists and of Heidegger, he says forget the idea of Islam as *a religion* and try to reach behind the accretions of centuries of calcified interpretation. Return to a direct reading of the Recitation. Do not accept the standardised and ideologically overdetermined interpretations of the key words in it. Find out what they would have meant to the Praised and to his audience. See what he was actually telling us to do and be, and you will be surprised. What Mahmutćehajić tells us we will find is that *Din* is not some abstract religion. It is the obligation or debt that we incur as individuals by the simple fact of having been created and brought into existence. This debt is not a debt of submissive obedience, however. It is simply our obligation to prosper, to be happy, to be what God created us to be, namely at peace with ourselves and in harmony with each other and the

cosmos and in right relations with God. Consequently, *Islam* is being-at-peace in right relations with God as Peace, and *Muslims* are people who have found peace in God.

On the assumption that Mahmutćehajić's philological arguments are sound, it seems to me that his Heideggerian reorientation has the potential to be of great significance both within the Muslim community and for non-Muslims. Although it involves a certain romanticism of and projection onto the original context within which the Qur'an was generated, it does provide a very welcome and necessary corrective to the Western stereotyping of Muslims that has become so important a factor of East-West relations in recent decades and that has unfortunately been internalized by many Muslims themselves. As a non-Muslim from a Western environment in which authentic encounters with anything Muslim were far and few between during the time I was growing up, I was educated with the standard Western representations of the Muslim and Islamic, albeit at a time before they had been so thoroughly overwritten with the images of hate and political violence. The standard translation or interpretation of *Islam* was and remains *submission*. While it is accepted that this means submission to God and the Transcendent and so the overcoming of the self, of personal vanities, and of personal interests, it had been developed by Western commentators into a principle of Muslim life and society that rendered Muslims naturally obedient, passive, fatalistic, submissive. They were presented as incapable of being free in the true Western sense of the word, incapable of true democracy, incapable of being responsible constituent members of a democracy, precisely because they lacked the principle of personal autonomy and personal responsibility. In a supreme irony, this most rational of religions was presented as fundamentally anti-rational and authority-based. In this Western view, it is the Muslim submissiveness to external authority, their heteronomy, and their abdication of their personal rational faculties that makes Muslims such natural fanatics and such good terrorists, whence the knee-jerk assumption that the killer in Norway was a Muslim and the distasteful nature of much of the commentary on the recent attack on the U.S. embassy in Sarajevo. For this view, Muslims are supposedly inhabited by an ideology of hate, which again is supposed to have a direct or natural relationship to the tenets of their religion, a hatred of the other, a desire to reduce all difference to Islam, etc.

The deconstruction of this complex of images must begin at the semantic level, and Mahmutćehajić's proposal that *Islam* should be translated as being-at-peace is a good start. This semantic change is not sufficient on its own, however. The accusation can still

be levelled against Muslims that their religion of peace is a reduction, a constriction at best, entropic at worst—a type of societal death through uniformity, a death of the individual and of all creative principle. Such things are said. After all, these terrorists are supposedly motivated by their hatred for “our way of life” and for “freedom.” The understanding of peace offered by Mahmutćehajić is, however, entirely different. It is peace as freedom, as love, and as creativity. It is not the peace of imperialism to which the unruly must be forced to submit, but the peace of the playful child, the innocent, the artist, and the wise. It would be well for the Christian or post-Christian to recognize how this reflects the internal debates and contradictions of our own tradition and the choices which we must continually renew. The role of peace in Christianity is equally complex, reflecting its bloody history as an instigator of violence in the name of peace as well as its glorious history as a promoter of social reconciliation and social justice. For each Bernard of Clairvaux, there is a St. Francis of Assisi, but each Francis has his own inner Bernard.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with the recognition that the message of peace, which Mahmutćehajić would claim is at the heart of all religion, is constantly being obscured in all the religious traditions and that constant struggle is required, for Christians as well as for Muslims, to prevent the hijacking of the authentic message of peace for inauthentic aims. By recognizing the central role that the peace of God plays in both the Christian and the Muslim tradition, Christians and Muslims can see the best of themselves reflected in each other, rather than the worst. This is a recurring experience for the non-Muslim reader of Mahmutćehajić's texts: the constant and intriguing balance between the familiar and the different and how they merge into each other. My academic training is in Classical Philology and the ideology of the Classicist is one of the principle supports of the West, of its claim to special status, of its exceptionalism as the heir to Greece. But the Muslim world was Greece's other heir and one with as much right as Western Europe to claim to have absorbed and developed the heritage of the classical world. The West has dealt with this by applying the stereotype of the Muslim as passive, as mere passive recipient and transmitter of Greek wisdom to the West, a conduit which added nothing creative to what it passed on. This ideological representation is no longer tenable and contemporary Western scholarship is becoming increasingly aware of this. Muslim thought was fully permeated by Greek philosophy, which it adopted and adapted with the same degree of creativity as the West. This is evident in Mahmutćehajić's underlying neo-Platonism and the neo-Platonic nature of his God and of his narrative of

the fall and redemption of humanity as both an individual and a cosmic, always on-going and ever repeating drama. In reality, the Muslim and the Christian worlds have always formed a single Oikumene, a single culture area, rather than opposed worlds.

In the second part of the first book, Mahmutćehajić turns to consider the relationship of the Praised and the Virgin announced in the title of the work, first indirectly through the figure of Hagar and then more directly. He does so in what a Christian cannot fail to recognise as a masterly typological narrative.

Hagar was Sarah's handmaiden, who bore the Prophet Abraham his first son, the child Ishmael, whose descendant Muhammad was. Abraham is the key common symbol to the three religions with which he is concerned in this book, the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims. He is the father of both the race of the Israelites and of the Ishmaelites or Agarians, the Jews and the Muslims. Mahmutćehajić traces not merely the similarities between the stories of Hagar and of Mary, but also how Hagar provides a model for each of us, as the innocent pariah who bears her sufferings in full faith that the Lord will deliver. Pregnant, she flees to the desert where she is addressed by the angel Gabriel, just as the Virgin will be, just as the Praised will be. She accepts the promise of God and her issue will produce a prophet who will bring forth the Word of God, just as the Virgin will. By placing the stories of Sarah, Hagar and the Virgin in context we see the homologies between the founding narratives of all three Abrahamic religions. From Sarah would come the prophets Israel and Moses and the revelation of the Jews in the Law. Muhammad's revelation was the Word in the form of a Book. The Virgin's was the Word in the form of her son, Christ or the Anointed. Leaving the Jewish revelation to one side, as its relevance to the Bosnian narrative is less direct, Mahmutćehajić pursues what he sees as a near complete homology between the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad and the revelation of the Christ to the Virgin, which is confirmed, for his tradition, by the belief that the Paraclete, whom the Christ announced, was in fact Muhammad, the Praised. I call the homology near complete, because Mahmutćehajić insists on the interplay of two aspects, the male and the female, the donative and the receptive, and he demonstrates that they depend on each other. If the Praised is male and the Virgin is female, they not merely reflect but complement and complete each other. Comparison with the Virgin reveals the receptive aspect of the Praised, as recipient of the revelation, while comparison with the Praised reveals the donative aspect of the Virgin as a prophet in her own right. This representation of the relationship of the Virgin and the Christ is not

one that Christian theology could adopt, but it certainly opens room for dialogue, for an exploration of common ground and a tracing of differences.

One particular difference that seems worth noting relates to the narrative of salvation. For Christians, this narrative conceals a tension between the individual and the collective destiny that has historically been resolved by such mechanisms as the harrowing of hell and purgatory. In my inadequate understanding, there exists a similar tension in Muslim eschatology. It seems to me that Mahmutćehajić has dealt with this by building a bridge between the view from eternity and the individual existential situation, which he refers to as the Hour, so that history is existence as a pattern of signs, of correspondences, and of types that is there for each of us as we negotiate our individual return to authenticity. Each of the prophets is thus a type of all the others, as they all are of the Praised, Muhammad. They are all reflections or representations or images of each other, but only in so far as they reflect the perfectibility that is within us all. Unlike Christian typology, this is not a narrative of foreshadowing and fulfilment. Mahmutćehajić, true to the neo-Platonic inspiration of his tradition, has de-temporalized existence to a certain extent. If the Praised is the Seal of the prophets, this is because he always was and always will be. He is not the culmination of an historical process, in the way that Christian philosophers sometimes like to claim that linear history is a Judaeo-Christian invention. For Muslims, he is the perfect epitome of the human aspect of an ontology. Presumably, given his commitment to interfaith dialogue, Mahmutćehajić would accept that Christ or the Messiah may serve equally as the culmination for Christian and Jewish ontologies. In fact, my suspicion is that, as an historical form, this approach to the Praised shares common roots with Christology in the Greek concept of divinisation and of the *theios aner*, but the *Muhammadology* it results in is very different from any orthodox Christology and serves to make clear certain of the differences between the two traditions.

Mahmutćehajić's *Muhammadology* is, moreover, admirably suited to his purpose, namely the explication of how the seeker may discover the good life and how to live it, and above all the explication of the guiding principle that the good life is the life lived with, for, and through the other, under God. In contrast to Martin Buber, who saw only the relationship between the individual and God, and much post-Traditional ethics (including the post-modern ethics of difference and the other) which sees only the relationship between the self and its other, Mahmutćehajić insists on the presence of not

just three but four parties. The self relates to the other not only through God, but through the best example of the Praised, just as we cannot relate properly to God without taking into account our relationships with each other (with all our others) and most particularly with the models, the prophets. For Mahmutćehajić, the self cannot relate even to itself without taking into account both God and its others and the perfect example of the Praised. He is aware of the problem that a simpler triadic structure would involve. How can we be sure of God, or rather that the God we relate to is not just our god, not just our own projection or representation? How can we be justified in our faith and so just towards the other and, ultimately towards ourselves? He offers a twofold answer: in our nature, which is perfectibility and is expressed fully and perfectly in the example of the prophets and particularly of the Praised, and in the tradition which introduces us to our models and so helps us to realise that perfectibility and our personal connection to God. The traditional and the personal are thus two sides of the same coin. That is why we are called upon to exercise humility but also flexibility in the face of our religious traditions. Mahmutćehajić's doctrine of "little knowledge" is precisely a counsel of humility and a warning against any claims of sufficient knowledge in the face of our traditions. It is not just his version of Cusanus' *docta ignorantia* and of the Plotinian negative theology introduced into Christianity by the Syrian monk, pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and into Western Christian philosophy by my own countryman, the Irish monk, John Scotus Eriugena, but also the lynchpin in his vision of how the social world is and should be ordered. His epistemological humility offers a fully-blown theory of ideology and how reifications and ideological formations have insinuated themselves into all the belief and value systems of the modern world and of how we may combat these processes. As we have seen, that means taking prophecy seriously. God is immediate and present, but also remote and beyond our comprehension. Any finite or determinate goal that we may be tempted to set up as in any way ultimate is an idol, and the role of the prophets and of revelation is to provide us with guidance on how to live that good life and to keep on what he terms the upright path. To a Catholic, or ex-Catholic, this reminds one of the Magisterium, the role of the tradition and teaching of the Church as the vehicle of our salvation. The bible is the revelation and salvation is through faith and works, but faith in what? What type of works? The tradition is there to teach us, but how we receive that teaching and what we do with it is our personal responsibility. We must be sufficiently humble to understand that tradition contains this guidance, if only we are open to it and

sufficiently aware of our innate dignity as human beings to realise that each of us is capable of responding to and interpreting that guidance correctly. We are not at its mercy. Each of us has the capacity to judge, in particular through the exercise of Intellect, of *Um*, the Bosnian word for which is *Um*. What is absolutely excluded, in the best tradition of the European Enlightenment (and I have often been surprised at how many echoes of Kantian and Hegelian positions there are to be found in Mahmutćehajić's texts) is any tolerance of enthusiasm, of *Schwarmerei*, and of fanatical excess—whether it be religious or political, of what are termed false prophets in the second volume. This is because, for Mahmutćehajić, the tradition is always in accordance with Reason, with Intellect, *Um* (and not its handmaiden *Raz-Um* [analytical reason]). One might perhaps say that the tradition and so prophecy are the incarnation of Intellect.

This leads us to one of the great and rewarding paradoxes of reading Mahmutćehajić's works: namely, that his respect for tradition can produce such radical revisions of received wisdom and of the petrified reifications of dogmatism, fundamentalism, nationalism, and the other ideological systems that have turned us from what he sees as the path of authentic humanity. His is a vision that sees our only chance of retaining properly human ways of life in a renewal of the wellsprings of true community, as encoded in the great cultural and religious traditions, the systems of values whose purpose was to provide an enabling environment for the pursuit of the good life—not the pleasant and comfortable life, but the ethically good life as a member of the community of the just. And to do this, we must cleave to the models that God has provided us. For Muslims, this is above all the Praised, the Prophet Muhammad, but also, he teaches us, the Virgin and the other prophets. For Christians, it is the Virgin, as much as it is Christ, but also the saints and the sages, the *dobri* [or good individuals] of all the ages. And in the end, it matters relatively little which model is chosen, because all the prophets and saints are reflections of each other and all are instances of the exemplification of human perfectibility. I think Mahmutćehajić would agree that insofar as each one of us does what is good and noble, in a way that even for a moment involves the subordination of our self to that of the Divine principle, then in that nobility we catch a glimpse of our model, we see that human perfection and in our desire to recognise it and, however fleeting, our desire to imitate it, to be good and noble ourselves, we acknowledge our debt to something that transcends us utterly, towards which we are in a relationship of utter dependence, as Schleiermacher called it, or that which Rudolf Otto

termed the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the Holy. Our perfectibility is present in each moment of goodness and each such moment leaves us dissatisfied with our falling short of the transcendent principle it allows us to sense. It is this transcendent principle that is common to all the traditions, in their different ways.

It is by always keeping reference to this transcendent principle in the forefront of our consciousness and by always being mindful of that principle as the ground of whatever other relationship we find ourselves in that we are protected from the risk of associating any other god with God, of establishing an idol that covers over and obscures the simultaneous presence and absence of the one true God. It is this indeterministic religious structure, with its denial that we can determine the divine on the basis of human attributes, that allows Mahmutćehajić to reveal the fundamental irreligion at the heart of all fundamentalism and of all attempts to capture religion and put it in the service of human individuals or a this-worldly apparatus that serves worldly interests and vanities. It is this that has let him reveal the essential similarities between all the various forms of modern (and post-modern) ideology, from the explicitly anti-Religious and God-denying Communism to the cynically God-abusing and idolatrous forms of Fascism, nationalism, and so-called religious fundamentalism (whether Islamic, Christian, Hindu, or whatever), and to explore how they took the best of us, our hopes and dreams, our striving for equality and fairness, our utopian impulses, and turned it into horror. For not least amongst the crimes of these modern systems of mass motivation and manipulation is how they have again and again systematically taken our dreams and made nightmares of them.

In the final volume, as in so many previous works, Mahmutćehajić has provided eloquent examples of how the dream of perfect community can, if based on the distortion of equality into identity, become a nightmare of both cultural and literal genocide, with the seekers of false heavens hell-bent on eradicating all traces of difference as deviance. In particular, he traces the dismantling of the particular sacred tradition to which he belongs over the past couple of centuries. He traces the ways in which the Muslim heritage of Bosnia has been systematically denigrated and degraded over the past three hundred years or so, as part of the region-wide programme of forcible ethnic redistribution into homogenized areas that has accompanied de-Ottomanisation, and its continuity with the longer trajectory of Bosnian history denied, as part of the more general denial of Bosnian history and its reduction to an annex to Croatian and/or Serbian history. Such an approach might risk sounding defensive, but it is not. His point is that

this process is not the result of some essential incompatibility between the cultures of the groups which have been brought into conflict relations. There is no fundamental clash of ultimate values. There has been a long and sustained clash of interests that have deployed ideologically distorted motivational complexes and programmes to entrench divisions and invoke material interests under the cover of spiritual values. It is in this context that Mahmutćehajić provides an explanation of how the Muslims of Bosnia can be considered Bosnian Muslims. He shows how the historical acceptance of the Muslim tradition by so many of the late mediaeval and early modern inhabitants of Bosnia could have been a natural progression, rather than a violent break, and how the merging of their symbolic world with that of the Muslim tradition may be traced throughout the products of Bosnian culture. His purpose is not to stake some claim for Bosnian Muslims to be the only real or true Bosnians, however. Bosnian identity is greater and considerably more complex than the supposedly constitutive identities of Croat, Serb, and Bosniak, or of Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim, even though it is all too often reduced to something less than any of them. None of them has a right to hegemonic identification with the adjective Bosnian. Nerzuk Ćurak has pointed out in one of his essays that there is a systematic misunderstanding of the concept of the nation (*nacija*) in Bosnia, a confusion between national and religious identity. It is commonplace in the historiographical literature that this confusion, which is Balkan-wide and not purely Bosnian, is an inheritance of the old Ottoman Millet system, while the argument has been put forward by some that nationalization of the confessional identities here is a largely 19th century phenomenon in response to the changing geo-political situation in the Balkans. Others argue for a longer historical trajectory. Whatever the case may be, national and ethnic identities are no more inherited in the genes than religious affiliations are. They are historically based social ascriptions, what the structuralist Marxists called interpellations. One is inducted into an identity by social forces along lines set by social institutions. Bosnia thus contains multiple, equally valid identities. None is more Bosnian than the others. They have all been allowed to develop within Bosnia and it is their coexistence that defines them, not some supposed essence that covers over and obscures our essential humanity. Today it is the institutions of post-Dayton Bosnia that determine the strength and supposedly mutually exclusive nature of the constitutive identities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, that divide people neatly into categories that we all know don't fit reality, that steadily ignore those with multiple affiliations and hybrid identities, forcing them to choose between

aspects of their history and sides of their family. Hybridity is the norm on which mono-ethnicity is imposed in a process of ideological closure and the problematic of identity in post-Ottoman, post-Austro-Hungarian, and post-Yugoslav Bosnia is not particularly unusual. There are no countries in which identities are not contested, strategic, malleable, and manipulated. The problems arise when one tries to force mere aspects or partial identities to be the measure of the individuals who bear them.

Theologians have long claimed that Hell is the absence of or distance from the Divine. But I think that it is right to point out that this absence of the divine reveals not just our pettiness, but is itself also the absence of difference. Cut off from any transcendent principle of the Good, we all become much the same, mean and unpleasant, ungenerous and self-centred, and we experience not just others but our own selves as a permanent irritant. By losing sight of what is greater than us, of love, we become monads of misanthropy. Conversely, by accepting our dependence on a transcendent principle, we can flower, develop in creativity, develop our individuality, and participate in creating the diversity that makes of the world a cosmic spectacle. As noted at the beginning, the major theme of all of Mahmutéhajić's works is unity and difference, or plurality, as he sometimes likes to put it. It unifies the religious and the Bosnian aspects of his writings. God is One, while the creation is the plural manifestation of that unity. Again, there may be many traditions, but one goal, many paths, but one destination. Naturally, this unitary pluralism, if I may so call it, is connected to his conception of the Deity and so of the Totality, the Whole, as in principle ungraspable by us, as something that transcends us and our knowledge. In the end, we take the Unity on faith and accept the differences as constitutive of it, but not as sufficient to account for it. As pointed out above, Mahmutéhajić is convinced that Bosnia is one name for this unity in difference, but it is up to Bosnians of all stripes and confessions to make it so.