

Islam: Under the Veil of Reification “Fundamentalism is a form of idolatry”

A Conversation with the Philosopher, Academic, and Muslim Statesman, Rusmir Mahmutćehajić, Former Vice-President of Bosnia-Herzegovina

Interviewed by Mateus Soares de Azevedo¹



“The Islamic world has transformed itself during the last two centuries”, says Bosnian philosopher and public figure Rusmir Mahmutćehajić. “It has become more and more a victim of a reified vision of reality. Islam does not have the property of God.”

Reification is a comprehensive concept (more on this later), one that is present in the vocabulary of one of Bosnia’s most influential voices. Born in 1948, in the traditional town of Stolac, in Southern Bosnia, Rusmir Mahmutćehajić graduated from Sarajevo University as an electrical engineer, in 1973, and has been for many years professor there of both this discipline and of Islamic phenomenology. A prolific writer, he authored more than twenty books on philosophy, comparative religion, and the history of his country, several of which have been translated into English; these include *Bosnia the Good: Tolerance*

¹ Professor Mahmutćehajić was interviewed in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in September 2015 by Mateus Soares de Azevedo, with the assistance of Lara Biderman de Azevedo.

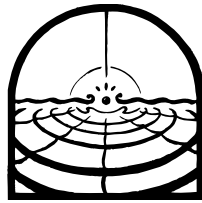
and Tradition (Central European University Press, 2000), *Sarajevo Essays: Politics, Ideology and Tradition* (SUNY, 2003), *Learning from Bosnia: Approaching Tradition* (Fordham University Press, 2005), *On Love: In the Muslim Tradition* (Fordham University Press, 2007), and *Maintaining the Sacred Center: The Bosnian City of Stolac* (World Wisdom, Indiana, 2011). He is also a regular contributor to traditionalist journals such as *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* and *Sophia*. Professor Mahmutćehajić served, without being attached to any political party, as a vice-president and energy minister of his country during the tragic Balkan war (1991-95). Today, having abandoned any direct political activism, he chairs the International Forum Bosnia, an institution founded after the war and dedicated to the promotion of, in general terms, the “transcendent unity of religions”.

A Slavic of Muslim religion, Mahmutćehajić does not fail to condemn the “reification” of religion and the disruptive role of fundamentalism. He believes that the unique plural character of Bosnia can be a model for the coexistence in contemporary Europe, which he envisions as embracing a tolerant and inclusive Islam, and he is focused on building a common space for the plurality of beliefs and opinions. Mahmutćehajić dreams and works towards the goal of returning Bosnia to a privileged space of diverse cultures whose inhabitants live together and reap the fruits of their rich exchange. Contrary to the events of neighboring countries that have adopted strong nationalist and exclusivist policies since the collapse of Yugoslavia, Mahmutćehajić defends a pluralistic and inclusive Bosnia, where Muslims (about half the population), Orthodox Serbs (30%), Catholic Croats (16%), Jews and other communities (4%) can live together harmoniously. In his view, Bosnia has been a locus of an autochthonous and original European Islamic tradition for several centuries, and he sees his country’s diversity as a font of vigor, not of frailty, of entente, not of collision, of creative interaction, not of bigotry.

The Reification of Religion

Reification is a term that is much present in the vocabulary of Professor Mahmutćehajić. It conveys for him a broad concept, taking different forms and metamorphosing according to the different intellectual environments in which it is used, ranging from philosophy to anthropology, literature, the arts, and politics. The term derives from

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