

Maintaining the Sacred Center: The Bosnian City of Stolac*, by Rusmir Mahmutćehajić, (translated from Bosniac by Desmond Maurer; with a preface by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and an introduction by Ivo Banac; Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2011), 312 pp., ISBN: 978-1-935493-91-4, \$24,95

Exploring a Sacred Landscape

Maintaining the Sacred Center explores the symbolism and “sacred geography” of the traditional Bosnian town of Stolac. The book lovingly recounts its beauty, the tragic story of its destruction, and the hope and possibilities engendered by its reconstruction and renewal.

Maintaining the Sacred Center is a lyrical work, and in many ways a personal one, deeply rooted in the author’s knowledge of Islamic mysticism, his first-hand knowledge of Stolac (his family’s home), and the historical realities of Bosnia. Focusing on the *čaršija* or town center, Rusmir Mahmutćehajić draws upon the language of symbolism and the perennial philosophy to illuminate Stolac as a sacred city and to throw light on human nature – our human relationships to society, to one another, to the natural world, and to the transcendental. In short, this is a book that has something to offer all readers with an interest in the deeper meanings of the sacred, and in what it means to truly be human.

Maintaining the Sacred Center is, in a sense, an extended exploration of the relationship between the inner self and the outer world, both of which, ultimately, form a greater unity. As many traditional philosophers have realized, the larger cosmos and human self are co-implicated in the quest for knowledge and understanding. As Mahmutćehajić writes, “We cannot orient ourselves as human beings, without taking into account existence as a whole and every aspect of our own selves” (p. xxii). In order to know ourselves, we must understand the world and the greater order from which we have emerged. In this sense, cosmology, anthropology, epistemology, and spirituality cannot be separated.

Traditionally, these relationships engaged the attention of the greatest scientists, who were also philosophers. But in recent times, the role of science has become limited to a far more narrow pursuit, based on the reductionistic premises of positivism: that only what can

be measured is real. At the same time, scientific positivism and instrumental reason – carrying with it the assumption that human beings exist with the primary purpose of manipulating the world and nature – has become enshrined as the primary valid way of envisioning the world. This has led to a kind of reductionism, and a severe flattening of our rich, multidimensional, and pluralistic human nature.

In short, for some centuries now, the human soul, and what is required for soulful living, have become increasingly marginalized. What we are left with is mere instrumental knowledge and techniques for the manipulation nature (and other people); and what is lost is a satisfying vision of human fulfillment. We are thus left with the situation, aptly described in one prophetic utterance: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18).

Maintaining the Sacred Center is a welcome contribution to the project of rediscovering meaning, depth, and spirituality in the fabric of what has become a disenchanting world and landscape. In this work, Dr. Mahmutćehajić turns to the deepest and most beautiful insights of the Islamic tradition, which teaches that all human beings are “created from one soul” (Q 7:189) and which instructs its followers to “make no distinction between any of His prophets” (Q 2:285). This is the generous, inclusive vision of Islam, overflowing with a divine mercy that sent no less than 124,000 prophets to humanity, so that “there does not exist a people or language which has not received its Book” (p. 61) – a generous vision that promises salvation to all people, to all “People of the Book,” who surrender their hearts to the divine. In this way, Mahmutćehajić embraces the prophetic tradition, which is central to the book’s methodology. As he writes, “the Stolac *čaršija* cannot be understood in whole or in part so long as one ignores prophecy and revelation as sources of knowledge. This neglect is a crucial element of all modern philosophy, which looks to modern science for the only undeniable source of knowledge” (pp. xxii-xxiii).

Given the fact that Mahmutćehajić is a professor of applied physics, the reader must assume that he doesn’t reject modern science entirely, but recognizes science’s limitation in providing a complete human model. Deeper forms of knowledge are needed, and “Only unity of knowledge and being can bring us satisfaction.

Only then can we become what we love. Only then is the goal of our journey within our grasp” (p. 27).

Reading the Book of Nature

Drawing on the traditional idea of humanity as microcosm – the embodiment of all the qualities in the greater cosmos – Mahmutćehajić explores the reciprocity that exists between our inner souls and the outer world. In the Islamic tradition, these qualities are the Most Beautiful Names – the divine attributes. “God made man in his own image” – Adam, the primordial archetype of humanity – “And he taught Adam all the Names” (Q 2:31). In other words, these divine qualities of creation were all inscribed within the archetype of humanity.

“Everything in the world or in ourselves is a sign,” Mahmutćehajić writes, and this provides a foundation for his entire work. Referring obliquely to the Qur’ānic verse “We will show them Our signs in the horizons [outer world] and within themselves” (Q 41:53), the author writes that the divine “names” were “scattered across the horizons, but they were also gathered within the human self before we came into existence” (p. 86). Because of this reciprocity between the inner and the outer, every aspect of the traditional town center in Stolac is both sacred and symbolic. On the one hand, the *čaršija* emerged as a sacred structure through divine inspiration and human activity, to outwardly mirror the divine qualities present in the human soul. On the other hand, it functioned as a sacred landscape to remind its inhabitants of their inner divine nature – the divine qualities, names, or attributes that exist within – the remembrance of which leads to human fulfillment.

Over the course of the last century, however, humanity’s inner knowledge of the divine has become progressively obscured, due to reductionistic ideologies that have rendered the world increasingly opaque and the reality of the sacred increasingly distant. This increasing forgetfulness, Mahmutćehajić argues, led to the gradual destruction of Stolac and its sacred edifices, which began slowly in the late 1800s and reached a crescendo in 1993 with the terrifying destruction of the city square, all the mosques in Stolac, two thousand homes, and the expulsion of the entire Muslim population during the war against Bosnia. This, Mahmutćehajić argues, is a painfully extreme example of what has happened to many other sacred cities

around the world, whose intrinsic nature has been forgotten under the spell of modern ideologies, allowing their outer manifestations to slip into oblivion, because they are no longer understood.

Worse than any such loss, however, is “failing to understand that what has been lost can be recovered” (p. xix). From this perspective, *Maintaining the Sacred Center* is devoted to re-discovering, or once again unveiling, the sacred meanings inherent in Stolac’s architecture and layout.

The focus of the book is the *čaršija*, the center where all things meet. “The cardinal points of the world meet in the human self,” writes Mahmutćehajić, while, in the outer world, “The equivalent in the traditional Bosnian town is the *čaršija*, the central public area where markets were held” (p. 3). The word *čaršija* itself refers to the four cardinal directions, and the *čaršija* was both the sacred and commercial center of the town – the center and the goal – a meeting point that brought people and their actions together, and sent them out into the world. For Mahmutćehajić, Stolac is nothing less than “an image of the human soul.”

Flanked by mountains in a beautiful valley, nineteen pathways led into the *čaršija*. And in nineteen beautiful chapters, Mahmutćehajić expounds the sacred symbolism of the town. These chapters explore such themes as The Garden, The *Miḥrāb*, Doors and Windows, The Valley and the Mount, and many more – too many to be discussed meaningfully in a short review.

The Path toward Recollection

In one of the most beautiful chapters, “The Labyrinth,” Mahmutćehajić refers to the labyrinthine structure of the *čaršija* and the spiritual journey it implies. The journey, of course, is to the sacred center, corresponding to the innermost center of the human being. Of the nineteen pathways leading into Stolac,¹ each pathway ultimately led to the Čaršija Mosque, and, within the mosque, to the heart-shaped *miḥrāb*, symbolizing compassion, spiritual orientation, and recollection. At the *miḥrāb*, duality is erased, and the worshipper’s intrinsic nature is made clear: “To journey is to seek hidden gold,

¹ Nineteen is the numerical equivalent of the Arabic phrase *al-Wāḥid*, “the One” or “Unity,” one of the divine names. The Čaršija Mosque also had nineteen pillars.

which is simply the light that lies hidden at the heart of our original nature” (p. 96). Moreover, the correspondence between inner and outer holds true:

The center of the valley is the *čaršija*; the center of the *čaršija* is the mosque; and the center of the mosque, the *mibrāb*. The center of the world is the human being; the center of the human being is the heart; and the center of the heart is Intellect or Spirit (p. 31).

Yet even if the center is forgotten, it still exists, like a sun hidden behind clouds: “The sacred center did not cease to be. It simply became concealed in the labyrinth of the world and the darkened self” (p. 112). Everything in the world and ourselves is a sign, but the *purpose* of those signs is to reawaken us, through recollection (Greek: *anamnēsis*), to our true and original nature, “our perfection,” which is not bound by time. (In this sense, Mahmutčehajić’s account mirrors Platonic understandings of the soul’s journey as one of recollection.)

This recollection leads to a kind of transformation or *metanoia*, especially in terms of perception. Through reaching the center again, a realization of Unity and Peace occurs. The divine names or qualities, scattered throughout the world, once again become gathered together in the human soul. And significantly, at this point, a transformation in perception takes place: paradise is restored, for the city is then restored “to its original nature as the garden” (p. 94). “The goal for us is to fulfill our authentic potential and return to the garden, in which the outer and inner were one” (p. 113). As the author writes in one beautiful passage,

When we lost paradise, its contents did not disappear, the beauty of its waters and springs and paths and trees. They merely became dispersed, occluded, and difficult to approach ... Our coming together and returning to our original perfection means bringing together the signs in the world and in ourselves so that we see the truth of creation within everything. This truth of creation connects everything that has been scattered (p. 88).

Expressed in technical terms, Mahmutčehajić presents the reader with “a realized eschatology”: the experience of paradise, or the kingdom of God, is not limited to the afterlife, but accessible here and now, given the appropriate knowledge and faculties of perception. As the philosopher Plotinus wrote, the once-legendary Golden Age is not something in the distant past, but present now, for those who

possess the eyes to see it.² And a similar point is made by Jesus in the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, 131: When a disciple asks Jesus “When will the kingdom come?” Jesus replies, “... the Father’s kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it.”

Wendell Berry once wrote that “There are no unsacred spaces. There are only sacred places and desecrated spaces.” In a postscript entitled “My Ruins,” Mahmutćehajić recounts in heartbreaking detail the destruction of Stolac, analyzing the various ideologies that led to its desecration in different periods, including the destruction of the Muslim graveyards between 1949 and 1960, where the author’s own relatives were laid to rest. He explains how the tombstones were shattered to provide materials for new building projects, and recounts other atrocities that befell the city, including its plunge into hell in 1993, when the *čaršija* was leveled and all Muslims were forced to leave the city. But, in Mahmutćehajić’s own words, “there is no loss we cannot recover, no suffering from which we cannot learn” (p. 93).

In some ways, this book might have also been entitled “Restoring the Sacred Center.” In 2003 the mosque and *čaršija* were declared national monuments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in 2004 reconstruction of the mosque was complete. Despite immense suffering, the sacred, and that which is divinely beautiful, can still shine through, should we have the eyes to see it. A poetic, learned, and lyrical work, *Maintaining the Sacred Center* provides us with a glimpse of paradise, seen despite suffering, and a foundation for seeing and reclaiming the sacred in the modern world.

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* The original edition of the book: *Stolačka Čaršija: U Vidiku perenijalne filozofije* [The Stolac *Čaršija*: In Light of the Perennial Philosophy] (Zagreb: Izdanja Antibarbarus, 2008).

² See Plotinus, *The Enneads* 5.1.4 (trans. Stephen MacKenna; Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992). Based on his pun, the Golden Age, as *Nous*, is ever-present.