

THE MEANING OF THE *MIHRĀB*
– From the Perspective of Perennial Philosophy –

Rusmir Mahmutćehajić
International Forum Bosnia, Sarajevo-Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract

This paper presents research findings on the meaning of the *mihrāb* from the metaphysical, cosmological, anthropological and psychological perspectives of the Muslim intellectual heritage. The aim is to broaden the scholarly approach to the *mihrāb* as a key symbol of the Muslim heritage and thereby to facilitate a more holistic understanding of its meaning in the history of the world's art and architecture. This paper applies the findings of new research, the articulation of key questions concerning the *mihrāb* in history, architecture and art, and philological and theological considerations of its place in Muslim heritage. These conclusions are then examined in light of the perennial philosophy typical of modern studies of traditional intellectuality, both specifically Muslim and in general. The structure of the study is hierarchical, from general anthropo-theological premises to specific kinds of symbolic forms. *Mihrābs* from the Bosnian tradition are considered as the initial pragmatic material and the final illustrative material for the conclusions drawn.

Key Words: Perennial philosophy, Muslim tradition, sacred art, mosque, *mihrāb*

Foreword

The *mihrāb* is the key symbol of Muslim material culture. Although primarily the heart of the mosque, it is present, visibly or im-

plicity, in every public and private space where Muslims do or can live. Its material articulation may take an almost infinite number of different forms, from very simple to extremely complex architectural and artistic structures and from the vaguest of hints to identifiable natural forms. The range of forms taken by the *miḥrāb* as a feature of Muslim culture has in the past generally been studied, analyzed and presented in terms of the history of architecture and art.

In studies of this broad phenomenological spectrum of *miḥrāb* forms, it is not uncommon to disregard the distinctive features that it has assimilated as a perennial component of Muslim culture, at various times and places, in clusters of similar but mutually contradictory cultural components. This situation has given rise to a paradox: the place and purpose of the *miḥrāb* is always the same, but extremely diverse architectural and artistic forms have been bestowed upon it. Thus, there is no clear answer to the question of how that single, unambiguous role, on the one hand, and the variety of forms, on the other, can fit into a unified cognitive or intellectual context.

The *miḥrāb* is the central feature of Muslim culture, in which we are perpetually striving towards a common center; that is to say, towards perfect humanity as each individual's principle and potential. Therefore, one may rightly ask what the *miḥrāb* means from the perspective of traditional Muslim teachings in their metaphysical, cosmological, anthropological and psychological expressions.

In the traditional Muslim doctrine, our entire debt to God (*dīn al-lāb*) is presented as being-in-Peace (*islām*), faith (*īmān*), doing-what-is-good (*iḥsān*) and the Hour (*sā'ā*). These three terms, *islām*, *īmān* and *iḥsān*, constitute our relationship with God; through them, we receive God's revelation of Himself through three of His names or attributes – the All-peaceful (*al-Salām*), the All-faithful (*al-Mu'min*) and the possessor of the most beautiful names (*wa-li-llābi l-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), and they actualize themselves in the original, all-encompassing nature of our inner selves. In this relationship, God is the original giver (and, hence, creditor), while the world and we are recipients, and thus His debtors.

Because the world has no free will, it receives everything as a debt from God that constitutes its perfect nature, manifested as absolute submission or being completely at Peace. This being-in-peace is concentrated in human nature, but with the admixture of free will as a

condition of the possibility that God's free will may be manifested in the human self. Our relationship with God is thus one of faithful and All-faithful, of the realizer of the most beautiful names and He Who is their original and absolute possessor.

If we are to realize our original nature, the pledge we have received of the knowledge of all names and of fidelity, and thus find ourselves in perfection as our reason and purpose, then we are expected, by following the finest example prescribed for us, to ascend to the height of our original sublimity. This is designated by the *miḥrāb*, which symbolically links the visible world with its invisible principle, body with spirit, quantity with quality, multiplicity with the one.

As a result, the *miḥrāb* is the symbolic point of convergence of the diversity of existence and the synthesis of all our rational possibilities. It has been conceived, delineated and built for one person, which is to say for each of us in the plenitude of all our potential, for it is indivisible from the whole that is made up of all individuals. In other words, the *miḥrāb* represents the individual in the collectivity and the collectivity in the individual; synchrony in diachrony and diachrony in synchrony; transcendence in immanence and immanence in transcendence.

In the modern age, symbolic forms of traditional culture have been forcibly introduced into ideological teleology and thereby wrenched from their traditional ontology. Their different forms at various times and in different places, in diverse cultural and **civilizational** circumstances, become incomprehensible and are thus subjected to ideological deconstruction and destruction by the militant advocates of a fundamentalist attitude to traditional intellectuality. We lack a clearly articulated language to counter this, the clear meaning and unambiguous symbols of the *miḥrāb* as cohesive components of the Muslim intellectual tradition. This paper seeks to remedy this lack.

1. Anthro-po-theological Premises

When we say "I am," we testify that we are alive, possessed of will and power, knowing, speaking, hearing and seeing, all in a finite manner; for at the same time, we are inevitably faced with being dead, without will, powerless, unknowing, unspeaking, unhearing and unseeing. Our being is received and, hence, contingent.

We sense in the depths of our saying “I am” that we derive from the absolute “**I Am**.” The absolute is what bestows whatsoever includes the expression “I am.” We are constantly on the boundary across which the absolute “**I Am**” manifests itself to us in the expression “I am.” Our yearning to escape from contingency and finitude entails the testimony that there is no “I am” but “**I Am**.” The former is the image or manifestation of the latter.

That latter “**I Am**” is absolute, and we are thus in a relationship with Him through life, will, power, knowledge, speech, listening and seeing. Nowhere and at no time can we attain plenitude by saying, “I am.” The distinction between our “I” and the “**I**” of the Other is what separates us from the plenitude that is our greatest wish. Only plenitude can save us from the limitations of life, will, power, knowledge, speech, listening and seeing.

For this reason, we are constantly at war with limitations. Our goal is to cross the boundary that keeps us within the confines of contingency, and being in space and time is a struggle against contingency that cannot be won as long as the “I” and “**I**” are separated. The absolute “**I**” is Peace, Knowing, Loving and Beautiful, but in the contingent “I,” these attributes of the absolute “**I**” are manifested without limitation. The absolute “**I**” is present in the principle of all time and space, but it can never be wholly encompassed by them.

Because the “**I**” manifests itself by Its own will in the world of contingency, It too needs to connect with the contingent “I.” This is the relationship between the differentiated “**I**” and Itself. It descends into the contingent world so that the world may ascend to It. The ascent of the world from its uttermost contingency is the knowledge of the “**I**” as Peace, as the Known, the Beloved and the Beautiful. The relationship between “I” and “**I**” is love, or the yearning for absolute union.

Those who are perfectly in love with the Beloved see Him in all things, for the totality of the contingent world manifests Him as the All-Praised. The entire world proclaims the Praised (the literal meaning of the name Muḥammad), so that the perfect messenger is the recipient of that praise and which he then directs back towards God. As such, he is Praised and Praiser. The revelation, “God and His angels bless the Prophet. O believers, do you also bless him, and pray

him peace”¹ tells us that he is constantly in a place of war, in which, as a warrior, he strives to pass through the contingent world and the contingent self to the absolute.

The connection made when we bless him can always be severed. This connection is being-in-peace, knowledge and love and manifests in the relationship between the “I am” and the “**I Am.**” All too often, the connection is proffered in their place, however, and the illusion develops that life, will, power, knowledge, speech, listening and seeing are not merely contingent or received. Acceptance of the tenet that there is no “I am” but the “**I Am**” requires that every state of “I am” and all things in existence be understood as opportunities of self-abnegation in favor of union with the “**I Am.**” The totality of existence is thus a place of nullity, and the **I** is the annihilator of every illusion and all contingency. Thus, being in the nullity of the world forms part of a great war for redemption and return to the Abode of Peace.

The Praised is the finest example of being on the battlefield of existence. However close we may draw to the boundary beyond which is a higher level of our inner self, the Praised precedes us as our guide, as the well-known prayer suggests: “Call down blessing on him with that *ṣalāt* with which Thou didst call down blessing on him in the *miḥrāb* of Thy transcendent holiness and the Ipseity of Thine intimacy.”²

Whatever our state, we are in the depths or the shadows. Ascending towards the heights or the light is contingent on our relationship with God. We carry trust within us, at the center of our inner self, as the treasury of all we need to realize that connection. To ascend is to overcome all obstacles; it is war with whatever stands in our way, both on the outer horizons and within ourselves. Our goal is Peace, but Peace manifests Itself to us in the shadows of existence.

¹ Q 33:56.

² Arabic original see in Abū l-‘Abbās Sayyid Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Tijānī, *al-Ṣalāt al-ghaybiyya fī l-ḥaḳīqat al-Aḥmadiyya* (Marakesh: al-Zāwiyyat al-Kubrā li-Sayyidi Muḥammad al-Kabīr al-Tijānī, 2009); our quotation of English translation is in Constance E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996), 157.

The position of those who discover in their hearts the pledge of fidelity as the land of faith³ and the possibility of turning to God is described in the revelation of these words: "O believers, remember God oft, and give Him glory at the dawn and in the evening. It is He who blesses you, and His angels, to bring you forth from the shadows into the light. He is Ever-merciful to the believers. Their greeting, on the day when they shall meet Him, will be 'Peace!' And He has prepared for them a generous wage."⁴

In these verses, God is addressing the believers, which in principle means everyone. The pledge of trust or belief in God was offered to us, and we accepted it. It is as the All-faithful that He addresses us as the faithful, in our original attunement, calling upon us to remember and glorify Him in the twilight of dawn, in which light will triumph, and of dusk, when it will vanish into the night. This alternation between darkness and light, light and darkness, is a reminder of the One Who is made manifest by duality. We are oriented towards the One from the world of duality, as a place of war in which we are encouraged and guided by Peace. Becoming aware of being in the *mihrab* of the world is the condition of our connection with Peace as the original reality of the world and of our inner self.

To pray behind the Praised is to become part of the universal praise through which the people of this world are united with the principle of the next world. The totality of existence thus reveals itself as praise of God Who reveals Himself to Himself. The center of this revelation is the Messenger as the perfect image of the All-Praised. Al-Suyūṭī says of this:

God Most High informed his worshippers of the rank which His Prophet holds with Him in the **heavenly host**, by praising Him in the presence of the **angels** of access, and by the *ṣalāt* of those angels for Him. Then he commanded *ṣalāt* and a greeting of peace from the people of the world below, so that the people of **both worlds**, above and below, might unite in His **praise**.⁵

³ See Q 95:3.

⁴ Q 33:41-44.

⁵ Arabic original see in Abū l-Faḍl Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-Ḥirz al-manī‘ min al-qawl al-badī‘ fī l-ṣalāt ‘alā l-Ḥabīb al-sbaḥī‘* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘at al-‘Āmira al-Sharqiyya, 1323 H.), 12; our quotation of English translation is in Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, 156.

God encompasses all things with His knowledge and mercy, which means both the lowest and the highest. Nothing can sink so far into the depths or the darkness as to be beyond His knowledge and mercy. Prayer begins by standing, or being, on the heights, and it reaches its limits in the depths, i.e., in prostration. God is with those who pray as they stand and as they prostrate themselves. The Praised is the perfect, most sublime presence of God with those who pray.

God's absolute nearness is in every part of the prayer. He is with us wherever we are;⁶ He answers the call of the caller.⁷ Prayer (*ṣalāt*) thus has various meanings. 'Alī al-Makkī says:

Opinions differ as to the significance of *ṣalāt*. It is said that from God its meaning is mercy and complaisance, and from angels and men petition and asking forgiveness. And it is said that God's *ṣalāt* is His mercy and the *ṣalāt* of the angels' prayer for blessing. And it is said that the *ṣalāt* of God is His mercy combined with magnifying and that of the angels is asking for forgiveness, and that of men, humbly beseeching and petition. And it is said that God's *ṣalāt* for His prophets is praise and magnifying while His *ṣalāt* for others is His mercy. Ibn al-'Arabī said: *Ṣalāt* from God is mercy, and from human beings and others, angels and jinn, it is bowing and prostration and petition and praise, and from birds and owls it is praise. Each creature knows his own *ṣalāt* and *tasbiḥ*... and al-Ḥalīmī set forth the meaning of God's *ṣalāt* for His prophet as His magnifying of him."⁸

Earth and the heavens and all that lies between them, as well as all that lies beyond their bounds, glorify their Creator by praising Him, while through His creation He reveals Himself as the All-Praised. He glorifies Himself in praise through His creation. Glorifying in praise is the purpose of the creation of all things. The way in which the totality of existence does so as a whole and as each individual phenomenon was received by existence as a gift or debt from the Creator, Who expects us to repay the debt by glorifying Him in praise.

⁶ See Q 57:4.

⁷ Q 2:186.

⁸ Arabic original see in 'Alī al-Makkī ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad, *Faṭḥ al-Karīm al-Kbāliq fī ḥall alfāz al-Durr al-fā'iq fī l-ṣalāt 'alā asbraf al-kbalā'iq (Ṣ) li-l-Shaykh Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2010), 15; our quotation of English translation is in Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, 156-157.

We are the sum of all praise and thus the abundance or treasury of what God lays upon us as a debt, as He says in the Recitation [the literal meaning of the Arabic word *Qurʾān*]: “Surely We have given thee abundance; so pray unto thy Lord and sacrifice. Surely he that hates thee, he is the one cut off.”⁹ Our openness to Him is being praised, for there is nothing in existence that has not received its being from God as the All-Praised; thus, each of us is a praiser, for we repay our debt to God by praising Him. Praise is our connection as praiser and praised with God as the All-Praised. We cannot be open to acknowledging and repaying the debt to God without His help. This is why God says through the Praised, “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. When comes the help of God, and the opening, and thou seest men entering God’s depth in throngs, then proclaim the praise of thy Lord, and seek His forgiveness; for He turns again unto men.”¹⁰

God calls upon us to turn to Him in prayer, which includes glorifying Him by praising Him as our Lord. Furthermore, God confirms that He too turns towards us. Our human turning towards God is merely a sign, therefore, by which He glorifies Himself in praise. There is none equal to him,¹¹ nor any like him,¹² but by means of Himself and His creation, He teaches us the turning and the prayer in which are His glorification and praise. The perfect example of this glorification in praise is the Praised as His Messenger.

The Praised is the first of the people-of-peace and the perfect epitome of praise. God and the angels turn to him for blessing and pray for him. The way in which they turn to him and bless him is different from every other and cannot be compared to anything else, for God is not equal or like to anything. But God and the angels’ turning in their prayer to the Messenger is the reason for our turning towards the Praised as the connection with God. In this turning as believers, as those who know God through the Praised as receiver and requiter of divine praise and who love Him as such, we connect with our supreme potential. God says of this, “Muḥammad is the Messenger of God, and those who are with him are hard against the concealers, merciful one to another. Thou seest them bowing, prostrating, seek-

⁹ Q 108:1-3.

¹⁰ Q 110:1-3.

¹¹ See Q 112:4.

¹² Q 42:11.

ing bounty from God and good pleasure. Their mark is on their faces, the trace of prostration.”¹³

The connection with the Praised in prayer is the condition for the discovery of the world as a mosque. Indeed, the Praised is in every prayer, and glorification by praising God as the All-Praised is through him. When we pray, we wage war against everything that stands in the way of our realization through the testimony that there is no god but God and that the Praised is His servant and messenger. We thus enter into the mosque of existence with the intention of passing through the place of war, through the *miḥrāb*, into the Abode of Peace.

Turning towards God, indicated by the direction of the House (*qibla*), entering the place of war (*miḥrāb*), all the positions, movements and words of the prayer and, particularly, calling for blessings on the Messenger, have their own thanksgiving and blessings. As Constance E. Padwick concludes, “In his **calling** down of **blessing** on the **Prophet** the worshipper **believes** that he is, by the utterance of a few **words**, not only **entering** into communion with an activity of heaven but is setting in motion a correspondent heavenly activity.”¹⁴

When we pray, we enter the mosque of existence, for there is nothing that does not bow down to God. Of our own will, we thus manifest ourselves as the will of God, and everything that is in the heavens, on earth and between them reveals that will. We submit to or connect with it through being-in-peace, thus becoming part of existence as descent (or receiving) and ascent (or giving). Our sacrifices, prayers, life and death belong to God, who has no equal. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī says of these acts of sacrifice and prayer, “It means that these acts of adoration, service and worship and attention do not come from us and we are not free to perform them. The truth is that ‘blessings’ and ‘prayers’ and ‘greetings’ belong to God, they are not ours, they are wholly His and belong to Him.”¹⁵

¹³ Q 48:29.

¹⁴ Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, xxv.

¹⁵ Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī, *Discourses of Rūmī (Fibi mā fibi)* (trans. Arthur J. Arberry; London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 57.

2. The *Miḥrāb* as Symbolic Epitome

Physically and symbolically, the *miḥrāb* is the center or principal element of every mosque. It usually consists of a niche in the wall of the mosque facing towards the Kaʿba in Bekka. It is the place for the leader of the congregational prayer, and it may be large or small and of various designs and decorations. For most people who have received a modern education and have a modern view of things, this is all there is to say about the *miḥrāb*.

The form, purpose and meaning of the *miḥrāb* as a recess in the *miḥrāb* wall facing the Kaʿba in the Bekka valley cannot be understood without ontology, cosmology, anthropology and psychology as essential elements of the sacred teachings. They have always involved three things: testifying to the oneness of God as the principle of all things; testifying to the apostolate of the Messenger as the absolute through which descent from the One to multiplicity and re-ascent to Him are manifested; and testifying to return to the One by following in the Messenger's footsteps. The messenger, in this case, is the sum or supreme sign of all those messengers who swore to God in pre-existence that they would accept the Messenger as the supreme human potential.

Testifying to the return to God includes consenting to His judgment of everyone for every atom of good and every atom of evil we have committed. Testifying to the oneness of God, the apostolate of the Praised and return to Him is independent of both place and time. It is inseparable from human nature. The *miḥrāb* may therefore be seen as a sign of this perennial human orientation towards the supreme potential. Titus Burckhardt concludes, "The prayer niche, or *miḥrāb*, is indisputably a creation of sacred art, and has become in practice a regular element in the liturgy, though not an indispensable one."¹⁶

The meaning of the *miḥrāb* is inseparable from the perennial philosophy or sacred doctrine. Because it is a creation of sacred art in the full meaning of the term, anything said of it is incomplete if it does not take into account the principle that sacred art is inseparable from

¹⁶ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976), 86.

sacred teachings.¹⁷ Though it is ordinarily represented as an integral part of the mosque, the various forms, purposes and meanings of the *miḥrāb* are present beyond the mosque – in houses, in public institutions, on graves and in paintings, in caves and on rocks,¹⁸ or wherever we have transformed a place into a mosque or acknowledged it as such with our presence and by our decision and orientation.¹⁹

¹⁷ The noun *miḥrāb* (pl. *maḥārib*) is widely regarded as deriving from the root *ḥ-r-b*, giving the verb *ḥariba*. The first form of the verb means “to be enraged,” “to be furious;” the second form means “to provoke,” “anger” or “annoy” (someone); the third form means “to fight,” “to combat;” the sixth form means “to fight” (one another), “to be engaged in war.” These meanings have prompted several scholars to search for the non-Arabic sources of the word, probably due to the inability to see a clear connection between those meanings and the sacred teachings to which the *miḥrāb* belongs. This quest has given rise to much speculation and many assumptions concerning the origin of the noun in other Semitic languages and in Persian. See: George C. Miles, “Miḥrāb and ‘Anaza: A Study in Early Islamic Iconography”, in George C. Miles (ed.), *Archeologia Orientalia: In Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1952), 156-171; Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, “The Light of Heaven and Earth: From the Chahār-tāq to the Miḥrāb”, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 4 (1990), 95-131; Nuha N. N. Khoury, *The Miḥrāb Concept: Palatial Themes in Early Islamic Religious Architecture* (PhD dissertation; Harvard: Harvard University, 1992), 143-153.

¹⁸ For more on the various forms, purposes and meanings of the *miḥrāb*, see Miles, “Miḥrāb and ‘Anaza”, 52; Géza Fehérvári, “Tombstone or Miḥrāb: A Speculation”, in Richard Ettinghausen (ed.), *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), 241-254; Alexandre Papadopoulou (ed.), *Le Miḥrāb dans l’architecture et la religion musulmanes* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 88; Melikian-Chirvani, “The Light of Heaven and Earth”; Khoury, *The Miḥrāb Concept*, id., “The Miḥrāb Image: Commemorative Themes in Medieval Islamic Architecture”, *Muqarnas* 9 (1992), 11-28; id., “The Dome of the Rock, the Ka’ba, and Ghumdan: Arab Myths and Umayyad Monuments”, *Muqarnas* 10 (1993), 57-65; id., “The Miḥrāb: From Text to Form”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30/1 (1998), 1-27.

¹⁹ The *miḥrāb* is present not only in the mosques, tekkes and homes of Bosnia, but also in nature, whether in existing forms or artificially indicated in valleys and caves, or on hillsides and peaks. As demonstrated by these remarks, the *miḥrāb* may be associated with the name of the summit of Mt. Horeb, as mentioned in the Torah. It is interesting that at one of the important old sites associated with ritual gatherings of Bosnian Muslims, thought to go deep into Bosnia’s past, the top of the hill is known as Ratiš [*rat* = war]. See: Rusmir Djedović, “Dovište na Ratišu kod Srebrenika”, in Salih Kulenović, Rusmir Djedović and Enes Mutapčić (eds.), *Srebrenik: historijsko-etnografske skice* (Srebrenik: Centar za kulturu i

Before defining the semantic field of the word *mibrāb*, we must draw attention to some of the more significant meanings of the word *mosque*. Both denote a place – the first, a place of war (*ḥarb*), and the second a place of prostration (*sajda*, giving the Arabic word *masjid*, giving the English word *mosque*). The *mibrāb* is part of the mosque, but in such a way as to comprise within itself everything encompassed by the mosque in which it is located. Prostration is the relationship between all things and God. There is nothing that does not prostrate itself before Him in its realization. The whole world can thus be said to be a place of prostration, a mosque.

The totality of the worlds – the heavens and earth and all that lies between them – is a mosque. When we want to transform this into a compressed form corresponding to our nature as the sum of all things, we commission or build a mosque in which every sign of masonry and decoration, every ritual and speech, should denote the mosque of all things, all horizons and the entire self. This means that the mosque represents both arcs – the arc of descent or of the manifestation of the One in multiplicity, and the arc of ascent or the return of all multiplicity to the One.

The purpose of the mosque, both as the totality of all things and as the image of their sum, is to enable us to see the truth of the creation of all things through the signs on the outer horizons. These signs constantly present themselves to us as the link to the Signified, but they also conceal Him. Parting the veils over the signs (which is to say over the inner self of the observer) or waging war against the concealer, illusion, is our way of finding ourselves or of returning to the original testimony of the oneness of God. The *mibrāb* or place of war is thus the center of both the world and humanity. Through it, we pass through manifestation to the Manifested, through surrender to Peace, and through love to the Beloved.

informisanje, 2007), 69-76. The *mibrāb* and the *Mušḥaf* are the two most important articles of Muslim culture, the one immovable, the other portable. Wherever there is no more Muslim presence, *mibrābs* and *Mušḥafs* have been destroyed. An anonymous Sarajevo poet wrote of the horrors of the devastation of Sarajevo in 1697 by Austrian troops led by Prince Eugene of Savoy: "Hundreds of thousands of *Mušḥafs*, countless books were burnt as were mosques; *mibrābs* were pulled down." Mehmed Handžić, "Sarajevo u turskoj pjesmi", in Esad Duraković (ed.), *Mehmed Handžić: Izabrana djela* (Sarajevo: Ogledalo, 1999), 482.

The *miḥrāb* symbolizes the ascent from one level of existence to another, drawing closer to the Real and distancing ourselves from illusion. Titus Burckhardt says, "Its very shape, with its vault corresponding to heaven and its piedroit to the earth, makes the niche a consistent image of the 'cave of the world.' The cave of the world is the 'place of appearance' (*mazḥar*) of the Divinity, whether it be a case of the outward world as a whole or the inner world, the sacred cave of the heart."²⁰

As the perfect recipient and bestower of praise, as the man who is praised in relation to God as the All-Praised, the Messenger is a mercy to the worlds, a lamp that shines, and the finest example to all people. To bear witness to him means to follow him. We follow him because we love God, and the consequence of our following the Messenger is God's love of the follower. When we testify to the apostolate of the Praised, we are turned or oriented towards the Face of God. The world as a whole is a mosque, and turning to follow the Praised places us in the *miḥrāb* of the mosque of existence. The Praised is that *miḥrāb*, and, when it is built into the *miḥrāb* wall, the *miḥrāb* is the symbol of the presence of the Praised.

The act of worship by which we seek to confirm and resolve duality as the way unity is manifested can be performed anywhere. The entire world is thus a mosque or place of prostration. Passing from duality to unity is impossible without the act of worship or waging war. Entering the mosque, or the feat of annihilating all that appears to be god other than God, entails facing the outward center of the world as the sign of the uncreated center of humanity. The ritual of annihilating all illusions means resisting their constant entrance into the world and concealing That Which we remember.

Whenever we turn to the One, whenever we answer His call, we enter the *miḥrāb*. The finest example of entering and standing, bowing and prostrating, sitting and speaking, is the Praised, the lamp that shines from every *miḥrāb*. The light in that lamp is none other than God, for He sends down His Word through the Praised, as He says:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star) kindled from a Blessed Tree, and olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil wellnigh would shine,

²⁰ Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 86.

even if no fire touched it, Light upon Light; (God guides to His Light whom He will.) (And God strikes similitudes for men, and God has knowledge of everything.)²¹

The light in the lamp or the perfect human heart needs no fire; it is the Spirit that God breathed into the human heart. His presence in the world is signified by the light that is inseparable from fire. Entering and being in the *miḥrāb* is an act of simultaneous acceptance and denial of that inseparability. The quest for the Light of the Praised as the supreme human potential entails passing through the fire of existence, separating his light from all things as the sign of its uncreated plenitude.

One could say that we humans, our immediate environment and the world as a whole are three forms of the mosque of existence. When we err, each of these three forms of the mosque of existence is out of joint; but when we repent, turning away from error and redeeming ourselves for what we have done, we purify ourselves and re-enter the mosque of our inner self, our place in the world and the whole of existence. The act of entering the mosque is a renewal of the whole world, its redemption from sin. The worshipper or guest of the mosque realizes this ascent from sin into order and peace in the *miḥrāb*, or place of war.

Thus, the *miḥrāb* is purpose, form and meaning in one. This is not an immutable state of unity; it changes from one individual and one generation to another. In the dictionary of Qurʾānic terms and semantic structures compiled by al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī in the 12th century, for example, the *miḥrāb* is the appropriate definition for a place of worship, the place where “war (*muḥāraba*) is waged against evil and profane desires.”²²

Nuha Khoury refers to this classic interpretation, observing,

²¹ Q 24:35.

²² Abū l-Qāsim Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn Mufaḍḍal al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qurʾān* (ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kilānī; Cairo: Sharikat Maktabat wa-Maṭbaʿat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awladihī, 1961), 160-161. Al-Iṣfahānī gives yet another meaning for the word *miḥrāb* as a place where the worshipper is “distanced” (*yakūn* “*ḥārib*”) from worldly preoccupations. See: Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl Ibn Sīda, *al-Muḥkam wa-l-muḥiṭ al-ʿaḥṣam fī l-lughā* (ed. ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān; Cairo: n.p., 1958).

This pietistic interpretation relates *miḥrāb* to an action derived from the basic noun (*ḥarb*) and assumes a familial relationship between *ḥarb* (war) and *miḥrāb* (place of war). More recently, scholarship has attempted to understand *miḥrāb* through another presumed relative, *ḥarba* (spear). In this case, the evidence of the dictionary placement and word derivation is supplemented by that of historical reports mentioning the Prophet's use of a spear as a marking device during prayers at the *muṣallā* of Medina. *Miḥrāb* then becomes "the place of the spear" and, by analogy to the Prophet's actions, "the place of prayer" – one of the functional definitions for the Islamic niche *miḥrāb*.²³

There is nothing unusual in calling the central place in the life of peace a "place of war." Many scholars have sought to associate this with the place, purpose and meaning the term has acquired over its long existence. The noun *miḥrāb* embraces place, purpose and meaning: an imperial throne, a refuge, a hermit's cell, a grave, humility, fire and light, a place of war, the place of the spear and so on. These terms are covered by the semantic field that corresponds to the sacred teachings, ritual and sacred art, to the virtues of which the Praised is the enduring principle.

We are perpetually in the duality of the self and the world, of the uttermost depths and the most sublime heights of existence. Knowing the boundary of this differentiation enables us to ascend from a lower to a higher level, but the difference between the manifestations of the One on either side of the boundary remains insurmountable. The resolution of this duality lies in the return, the evanescence of everything except the Face of God. Evanescence is, in fact, seeing the Face everywhere and in all things.

There is no state in which we are not diverted from reality towards illusion, from the higher to the lower, from remembrance to forgetting, and from testimony to denial. In each of these states, our soul is at war against Satan, the diverter, and strives to turn to the One. This is a war where the goal is Peace. Nothing we achieve in this world is worth anything in comparison with the stage through which we pass on our journey of ascent to the One. The Praised says of this, "Satan reaches everywhere in the human body as blood reaches in it."²⁴

²³ Khoury, "The Miḥrāb: From Text to Form", 4.

²⁴ Al-Bukhārī, "Adab", 21; "I'tikāf", 11.

To turn to God as Peace means to wage war against the diverter who is openly hostile towards us.²⁵ There is no discord in the creation of the heavens and earth.²⁶ The state of the self that dictates action based on ignorance obscures the world, and the order of the world is seen as disorder. Admitting ignorance and refraining from action based on what we do not know, along with loving what we know with certainty, is belief. Through belief, the discovery of order after chaos, resurrection after death, awakening from sleep, or remembering what we have forgotten takes place in the self.

The path to liberation from illusion is the discovery of order or being-in-peace as the relationship of all things to God as Peace. On this path, everything in existence nullifies itself to reveal at every instant that there is no reality but Reality. Within us, this is concentrated in free will, or the relationship of the faithful to the All-faithful through trust. The Praised says that for him, the whole world was made a mosque,²⁷ and he says of himself and his followers, “We have been made to excel (other) people in three (things): our rows have been made like the rows of the angels and the whole earth has been made

²⁵ See Q 12:5.

²⁶ Q 67:3-4.

²⁷ See al-Bukhārī, “Ṣalāt”, 56. The Bosnian *krstjani*, followers of the medieval Bosnian Church, also believed the whole world to be a place of prayer. They did not recognize separate buildings as exclusive places of prayer, as many contemporary records relate. In his will of January 5, 1466, Gost Radin writes, “... whoever kneels on the earth for my soul every feast day and on holy Sundays and holy Fridays and utters the Lord’s Prayer, that the Lord God forgive us our trespasses and have mercy upon us on the Day of Judgment, for ever and ever.” See: Franjo Šanjek, *Bosansko-humski krstjani u povijesnim vrelima (13.-15.st.)* (Zagreb: Barbat, 2003), 364. Holy Friday may be interpreted in a variety of ways, but it is impossible to exclude Friday as the common heritage of the Bosnian Christians and Muslims. In this regard, it is noteworthy that in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Spanish ecclesiastical authorities, seeking to eradicate from society anything and everything Muslim, required Christians to report anything they saw as “Muslim”: “They must tell inquisitors about people who observed Friday as a holy day and who changed into clean clothing on this day, who ate meat on Fridays and other days prohibited by the Church, and who ceremonially slaughtered the animals they ate.” Mary Elizabeth Perry, *The Handless Maiden: Moriscos and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 52.

a mosque for us, and its dust has been made a purifier for us in case water is not available.”²⁸

The Praised is therefore a perpetual warrior (*muḥārib*).²⁹ His presence, confirmed by the testimony that there is no god but God and that the Praised is His messenger, makes every place into a mosque, a place of prostration, with a place of war (*miḥrāb*) at the center. Every *miḥrāb* denotes the constant presence of the Praised as our leader on the path toward realization of the human self. The moment the Praised is excluded as a constant presence in the *miḥrāb*, his place is taken by someone or something else and testimony to the oneness of God and the apostolate of the Praised is in disorder. Anyone who takes his place as the finest example is a diverter.

As the finest example of a warrior against the diverter, the Praised is also marked out by his leadership of those who bear witness to him and follow him in turning to God. This is the war waged against everything that diverts us from this turning. When praying in front of his witnesses and followers, the Praised placed a spear (*ʿanaza, ḥarba*) before him in the ground,³⁰ thus revealing himself to be the finest example of being in the mosque and in the place of war and so ascent on the upright path. Those who love God follow the Praised in their belief that God loves them.

The Praised is the finest example of ascent and return to the original human condition. Adam lost that state and fell to the uttermost depths, where he was given doctrine, ritual and virtue as the prerequisites for redemption and return. The Messenger is the guide on that path. The two Houses, one in the Valley and the other on the Mount, are the signs of that return, of which the Messenger’s companion Abū Dharr says,

I asked the beloved Prophet Muḥammad which was the first mosque on Earth. “The Sacred House of Prayer [*al-Masjid al-Ḥarām*, the Kaʿba]” he said. “And then which?” I asked. “The Farthest House of Prayer [*al-Masjid al-Aqṣā*],” he said. I further asked, “What was the time span between the two?” “Forty years,” the Prophet replied. And

²⁸ Muslim, “Masājid”, 3-4.

²⁹ The noun *muḥārib* is derived from the third form of the verb *ḥariba* as an active participle.

³⁰ See al-Bukhārī, “Ṣalāt”, 92.

he added: "The earth is a mosque for you, so wherever you are at the time of prayer, pray there."³¹

As this account relates, Adam experienced being both at the most sublime height and in the utmost depths through a descent or fall that, through God's mercy, was also offered to him as the path of ascent, on condition that he acknowledged and bore witness to the Praised as the finest example. God shows us the ascent in the journey of the Praised from the Sacred or Inviolable Mosque to the Farthest Mosque.³² There can be no ascent without being in the mosque of the world, in which the Praised is perpetually in the *miḥrāb*. Following him means ascending towards him or entering the *miḥrāb* that denotes him.

3. From Flux to Peace

Every mosque, and consequently every *miḥrāb*, is both like and unlike every other. Until the modern age, there was no copying of existing mosques (and hence of *miḥrābs*) because every human self is unique and unrepeatably everywhere and at every moment. In modern times, it began to seem that each person was not the whole of humanity and that the whole of humanity was not each of us. In fact, every individual is ineradicable and unrepeatably. Each one of us is indeed the revelation of God, but in opposition to Him. No human knowledge is anything but a sign of God's omniscience. In our little knowledge, we are constantly in a state of forgetfulness and, hence, of opposition to God. The possibility of remembering presents itself to us as the remembrance of God.

The *miḥrāb* is for just one person and consequently is in the mosque merely as a sign that we are perpetually before God but with the ever-present possibility of turning away from Him. Neither of these possibilities is the repetition of some earlier state. It is made known that the Living God is constantly engaged in some affair. As a sign of the totality of existence, the *miḥrāb* is a niche that receives us by enfolding us before and behind, to the right and left, from above and below.

³¹ Al-Bukhārī, "Anbiyā", 40.

³² See Q 17:1.

Standing, we sense the niche of the *miḥrāb* as our interiority, which shows us differentiation into receiving and giving, into debt and claim, into masculine and feminine. To discover our whole self means to eliminate difference or differentiation, to unify ourselves, or to return to God as the revealer of the Word in our command to say, “He is God, One, God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one.”³³

When revealing to the Praised that there is nothing that does not bow down before Him, God is indicating that the whole world is a place of prostration, mere flatlands. Our potential to perceive this and to prostrate ourselves as a testimony of what we see points to the world as a mosque. The horizontality of the world is thus offered to us as the start of the ascent. With our experience of the fall, we renew our awareness of the ascent or return. Wherever we may set off on the surface of the earth, the ultimate horizon eludes us. There is no house we can enter as the home we seek; whatever door we enter through, it cannot denote that which would wholly satisfy our love. A journey on the flatlands of the earth is thus merely a reminder of the ascending or upright path.

We are expected to wage war against everything that diverts us from the attraction of the Beloved. The invincible world manifests itself to us as the passage to the House of the Beloved. Our every state in the world of duality is thus cause for waging war, and every place is a place of war (*miḥrāb*). Wherever we turn, there is the face of the Beloved. He is closer to us than our jugular vein. His signs are all around us and also within us. All our earthly courses, on the seas and the rivers, the hills and the valleys, will therefore point to the Ka’ba as the sign of the heart, as the House towards which we travel, towards the plain from which the ascending path of return to the most sublime heights begins.

The Ka’ba is the sign of both the house and the grave as well as of the heart as the uncreated, uncreatable center of all things, in which horizontality and verticality are united. None of us lacks two absolute certainties – the first as our “now” and the second as our death. Our “now” is surrounded by pain and suffering of which death is the culmination, and both are created. But everything in existence has its opposite. “Now” is in a duality with Eternity, and death is in a duality

³³ Q 112:1-4.

with life. “Now” and death are thus merely signs of their opposites, eternity and life. We can therefore say that our orientation towards the grave and the house are merely signs of the path to bliss and eternity. Every meaning of the grave and the house and all the rituals performed in them are endeavors to overcome the obstacles as we pass through them.

We seek to pass from the mosque of the world through the *mibrāb* to a state without war, to the House of Peace in which God speaks to our soul as to His guest: “O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord, well-pleased, well-pleasing! Enter thou among My servants! Enter thou My Paradise!”³⁴ Wherever we are, we are at the center of all existence. The whole of the outward world – forward and back, right and left, up and down – extends from and of us. Our position on the surface of the earth means being reduced to horizontality. The labyrinth of our existence is this reduction to the surface of matter and time, where we are suspended between the possibility of ascending to a higher level or sinking still deeper into matter and time. The ascending path from the earth to the heavens and from matter to Spirit leads through the door of redemption, or the return to the fairest uprightness.

Everything we devise and build it there to guide our passage through the labyrinth of the world on the upward path that leads from the depths to our redemption. The *čaršija* (bazaar) is thus the sign of all human construction; in it, all the roads on the earth’s surface are arranged to bear witness to the four quarters and the center from which all things come and to which they return. In this image, the city is the sum of all that is in our being situated between earth and heaven.

The center of the *čaršija*, the point of intersection of two roads making us aware of the four directions, is a reference to the human heart as the center of all things. We discover the heart so that we can testify within it to Light and Spirit. The *čaršija* thus becomes a sign of the contact between Spirit and matter, between Light and darkness, a gateway towards which we set off in our war against everything that is contrary to Peace, to the All-faithful, to the Beautiful.

The *čaršija* is thus the word for the center of a traditional town, literally denoting four sides. However they may be interpreted – as the

³⁴ Q 89:27-30.

four corners of the world, as the four sides of an invisible square, or as the four arms of a cross – they include the most important center. Before accepting Christianity, the Roman Empire was ruled by a tetrarchy of two emperors and their junior colleagues, each with one half of the empire, while the center belonged to each and to none. The center was empty, and the *polis* was created from that void.

With the recognition of Christ, the center of the Roman Empire came to belong to the Pantocrator, the Ruler of the World. No one could occupy it except Christ, the Word in whom God revealed Himself in the void and in the world. The pagan Roman rule of the tetrarchy was replaced by the Christian rule of five – Christopolis, in which the emperor and the patriarch were the representatives of Christ Pantocrator, and the patriarchs in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Rome.

Standing before God is being in the *miḥrāb*. In standing, we confirm our differentiation between one side of the self facing the dark and one facing Peace. Perfect Peace is His Will. The very potential of the will of the self means opposition to the Will of the Self. To be in the *miḥrāb* is thus to testify that there is no self but the Self, no will but the Will. Standing and confirming it by bowing, prostrating, sitting and standing up means being-in-peace and opening up to the intimacy between Mary and the Christ, the Anointed, and Muḥammad with the Recitation. These four signs attest to the revelation of the One in the human heart.

The horizontal surface of the *miḥrāb* is a semicircle, with the other half formed by the worshippers. All four directions – right and left, forward and back – are thus united in a single point as the source and outflow of space as a whole. This point is the sign of our center of heart as the uncreated and uncreatable principle in which knowledge and being are one. The ritual prayer is a journey or return to that union. The center of the *miḥrāb* circle denotes the contact with the vertical axis or the steps on the upright path on which we stand erect or return from the depths to the most sublime heights.

The meaning of the *miḥrāb* is complex, but it cannot be isolated from its form and purpose. One may therefore speak of the multitude of semantic levels of the word *miḥrāb*, of which some of the most important levels will be discussed here.

God's oneness is revealed in the multitude of signs of the world and of humanity. Its revelation is as if the boundary between the visible and the unseen were opened to allow phenomena to descend into the world. The niche corresponds to the opening.

At the first level, the revelation of God in the multitude of signs is illumination, or the light of the Praised. God is Light, and illumination is His revelation or creation. The first revelation or creation is the Light of the Praised, who is thus the first of the people of peace, for there is no distance between him as the first recipient of the Light and the Light Itself. He is on the most sublime heights, and every descent to the uttermost depths will thus bear his seal, the testimony to God as bestower and the Messenger as recipient. Without that seal or stamp of original perfection, every one of us would be left without the possibility of regaining the return or the ultimate judgment with mercy.

Illumination is the relationship between God as Light and ourselves as recipients or illumined. As the first recipient of the Illumination, the Praised is a lamp that shines. There is nothing that God does not illumine by means of the Praised as a shining lamp. This is the point of the testimony that there is no light but the Light and that the Praised is the first to be illumined and thus the first bestower of received Light.

God's power governs both the descent and the ascent of all things. His Throne encompasses the heavens and the earth, and the first before the Throne when the sending-down begins is the Messenger, who is also the first in the return and the intercession before that same Throne.

God creates the Word by sending It down, and the Word returns from its differentiated manifestation to its original oneness. The tree is thus the symbol of a fine word, beginning as it does from a seed or fruit, in which it is concentrated in its supreme potential.

In line with these semantic levels, the *mibrāb* is the sign of the oneness of God, of his Throne as the principle of all order in the worlds, of the apostolate of the Praised, of God as Light and the Praised as His Illumination, and of the Word sent down by God through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth into the heart of the Praised, who is the finest example. Following the Praised is thus inseparable from loving God and the expectation of God's love for us.

Entering the *miḥrāb* means testifying to the oneness of God, to the desired standing before His Throne, to the apostolate of the Praised as the finest example, and to the return to perfect creaturehood and oneness as its principle. We thereby turn from darkness to light, from death to life, seeking and discovering the reason and purpose of our being in the world.

We are between death and life at every moment. “Now” and death are absolute certainties in our inner self. Our “now” is bounded by the past and the future and, being so bounded, constitutes our consciousness. If “now” is certain, consciousness places us in a relationship with that certainty and thus with death. If the mercy and knowledge of the Living encompasses all things, it follows that He also encompasses death, but it never encompasses Him.

The differentiation of the manifestation of the One into hell and heaven and the placing of a clear boundary between them means the death of death. There is nothing worse than hell, so its encompassing by mercy and life is the same as its disappearance in them. The Praised says of this differentiation and of the death of death:

On the Day of Resurrection Death will be brought forward in the shape of a black and white ram. Then a call maker will call, “O people of Paradise!” Thereupon they will stretch their necks and look carefully. The caller will say, “Do you know this?” They will say, “Yes, this is Death.” By then all of them will have seen it. Then it will be announced again, “O people of Hell!” They will stretch their necks and look carefully. The caller will say, “Do you know this?” They will say, “Yes, this is Death.” And by then all of them will have seen it. Then it (that ram) will be slaughtered and the caller will say, “O people of Paradise! Eternity for you and no death. O people of Hell! Eternity for you and no death.”³⁵

The same tradition relates that the Praised ended his account of the differentiation of the people by saying, “And warn them of the Day of distress when the case has been decided, while they are in a state of carelessness and they do not believe.”³⁶

The heaven-hell duality is in every inner self as the two tendencies in differentiation – downwards, towards multiplicity and death, or

³⁵ Al-Bukhārī, “Tafsīr”, 201.

³⁶ Q 19:39.

upwards, towards unity and life – that are never wholly distinct. The first is directed towards nullity; as such, it cannot be realized in plenitude, for death is merely the absence or obscuring of life. The second is towards the Living, to Whom all things return, when in the return to Him death brings about its own death. Death is dispersal into multiplicity, and life is concentration in the One; this is our human existence in the world of multiplicity, differentiation and comparison. Doctrine, ritual and virtue simultaneously acknowledge and transcend it. Through them, we orient ourselves on the scale of existence from depth to height, dark to light, hell to heaven.

Doctrine, ritual and virtue (or knowledge, the way and will) orient or turn the self towards its supreme potential, towards the Hidden One Who manifests Himself in human language through the prayer, “Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succor. Guide us in the upright path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray.”³⁷ One could say, therefore, that in doctrine, ritual and virtue, the world is both acknowledged and denied – acknowledged because the One manifests Himself in it, and denied because the revelation and the Revealed remain in some mysterious way both united and differentiated.

The world into which we come at birth, or even at conception, enters our consciousness by shifting the boundaries of the self in relation to the extent of differentiated signs in interiority and exteriority. The signs are more or less clear in this differentiation, but never so much as to escape from the shadows. Their lack of clarity increases or decreases in the incessant stream of consciousness. The endeavor to direct this stream towards clarity entails the question of the Ultimate manifested by the signs. The consequence of this is acknowledging the Ultimate as the Revealer of doctrine, ritual and virtue, through which the things of this world can be articulated and then connected with the principle they reveal.

It seems to us that the world has been created and made visible independently of our inner self, entirely exterior to us. But the whole world is summed up in our inner self. This is the sequence from the whole of multiplicity to the One, or union in the self. The revelation of the Book as the complete discourse on humanity and the world

³⁷ Q 1:5-7.

includes both directions – descent or concentration, and then differentiation into speech. Differentiation also includes summing the phonemes or letters into the Word or into sustainable clusters of meaning, as the beginning of the *ṣūra* “The Cow” suggests:

Alif Lām Mīm. That is the Book, wherein is no doubt, a guidance to the consciousness who believe in the Unseen, and perform the prayer, and expend of that. We have provided them; who believe in what has been sent down to thee and what has been sent down before thee, and have faith in the Hereafter; those are upon guidance from their Lord, those are the ones who prosper.³⁸

If seen as a verbal expression, this begins with three phonemes in the form of the names corresponding to their letters. Speech is thus connected to its distinct components. To understand the entirety manifested in multiplicity, we differentiate and connect. The book is the whole of the world sent down into human oneness. It cannot be embodied in listening and remembering, and in speaking and reading, without the human self, without its center in which the world is concentrated after being differentiated to be made manifest again. This manifestation in the world and the Book does not eliminate the unseen.

Not only does it not eliminate the unseen, it actually emphasizes it as the defining factor of humanity and its orientation or guidance towards the mutuality of the knowing and the Known, the loving and the Beloved, which is the relationship between the faithful and the All-faithful. None of these relationships eliminates doubt, though the purpose of this orientation is to weaken and eradicate it. The boundary between the participants in this separateness is constantly changing, but it can neither be removed nor accepted. The invisible remains ever-present. The relationship with the world and the Book requires the way and guidance as ritual or prayer in which the self is framed by two wills, its own or inner will and Divine or outward will. The incorporation of the self into that context may be confirmed only by virtue – by being of those who “expend of that wherewith We have provided them.”

Acceptance of the Book and belief in the unseen requires ritual or the way as well as confirmation in virtue or in expending that which has been received. Do we have anything that has not been given to

³⁸ Q 2:1-5.

us? The obvious answer is no, so expenditure includes the Book, consciousness, belief in the Unseen and prayer. Expenditure transforms the self-satisfied self into the humble, generous self. Its acceptance of what is given, which may seem to belong to it, does not in principle exclude the same givenness that is beyond its finitude in time and space. What is more, the visible world confirms the Unseen, but strictly and decisively.

4. Ritual as Symbol in Motion

Everything that is in the outer horizons or the inner self has the Absolute as its purpose. But the world and the self are perpetually detached from it. Their detachment does not mean that they are not constantly connected with it. God is simultaneously near and remote, similar and incomparable. The world and the self are oriented or directed towards the absolute. Acknowledging and transcending the boundaries has no purpose without knowledge of a higher world, beyond and after the visible world. Knowledge is always slight, but yet sufficient for testifying to the Signified and the bond of love with Him.

The passage from the Recitation quoted above begins with the three letters or phonemes and then refers to the Book. This demonstrates the mutuality of the minutest particles that can be arrived at by differentiation from the whole, which encompasses or concentrates all individualities. Being perpetually between the intangible or material values of the miniscule and the whole that encompasses all things, we can never have absolute knowledge. It is from that perfect knowledge that we are required, as conscious beings, to perform the ritual of prayer.

Through the ritual, we become part of an order that we cannot encompass with our knowledge. We pray at the prescribed times and in the proper manner, even if not always entirely sincerely or without doubts. We can never have full knowledge of what we are doing. It may thus seem to us that little knowledge is a reason to choose doubt and insincerity as the opposite of sincerity. In such a mindset, ritual and sincerity seem irreconcilable. When the quantitative world is seen as the only world, sincerity entails the rejection of a ritual that has been established without the agreement of its participants.

Doubt forms part of this assumption, but it is either disregarded or indirectly represented as sincerity. Every agreement between people introduces judgments on the basis of little knowledge. When we enter into such an agreement on the basis of little knowledge, we acknowledge our limitations and our potential to locate ourselves within them by trying to transcend them in our relationship to the Unseen, which is acknowledged as such. This means that the self is imbued with the conviction that the visible world derives from another world or from its higher meaning.

This kind of prayer cannot be reduced to mere supplication; it is a ritual that was ordained and prescribed as a way of inclusion in the world order. The place and the direction, the time and the duration, the movements and speech are ordained, as is the way we enter and leave it and the conditions for doing so. This is neither a response to an unexpected or wished-for manifestation nor the reflection of a certain state in the self. Sunrise, noon, the midway point to sunset, sunset and the onset of night are comparable in their constant, undeferrable repetition. There is both emergence and disappearance in all five. Earth and the heavens are reassembled in them after being separated, and in this way, their giving and receiving takes place as the way of confirming their one principle.

The ritual prayers are located in the cosmic entity so that the given order may arise and vanish. No achievement in that order can be secured. The repetition of the five daily prayers seems to be like the footprints of a traveler who is looking ahead, with his own footprints in the darkness or erased. The repetition of the prayers with intent, preparation, entry, performance and exit includes the renewal of the tension between ritual and sincerity.

One may become so accustomed to the repetition that the tension almost completely disappears. This does not mean that the inviolability and permanence of repetition eliminates the tension between the state in which we are and the aspiration to “embellishment” in which we serve God as though we saw Him. Habitude and ease in maintaining the rhythm of the prayer constitute only one of the states of the worshipper, explained by the Bosnian recommendation that if you pray all five prayers at the prescribed times for forty days, every day, you will continue for the rest of your life.

Becoming accustomed in this way, which is desirable, also has its dangers. As long as there is prayer, there is the *miḥrāb*. Prayer is not

an end in itself but is part of the journey to God. Whenever one senses delight in it, prayer should be turned against this, for God alone is the goal of the journey. Does not the Praised say that praying for show with some observer other than God in mind is the greatest danger in this world?³⁹

The repetition of the prayer is a turning away from the past to the “now” as reality, a “now” that includes in itself both past and future. The differentiation into hell and heaven of which the Praised speaks manifests itself as past and present. Death is slaughtered on their boundary. The eternity of hell and heaven is a state without death, but the mercy of the Living and the life of the Merciful abolish this differentiation in the return of all things to Him. The eternities of hell and heaven are the image of the distinction between evil and good deeds, but it is not deeds that redeem us – God’s eternity is redemptive.

Differentiating between hell and heaven, between evil and good or, as is said in the parable of the Messiah, the tares and the wheat,⁴⁰ is impossible in this world. The entire Enlightenment project of modernity was based on the opposite assumption. Overcoming doubt of the unseen, which is at the center of the traditional doctrine and the ritual that is inseparable from it, was set in a political context in modernity, in which the ultimate purpose of humanity is realization in society and history. As Eric Voegelin concludes, “Gnostic speculation overcame the uncertainty of faith by receding from transcendence and endowing man and his intra-mundane range of action with the meaning of eschatological fulfillment.”⁴¹

If the purpose of war is perfect order in this world, death nullifies its point, and more – it mocks life and every attempt in life to deny or disregard death. Before every one of us is the perfect pair, the Praised and the Virgin, who are the manifestation of the One on this side of the place of war and on the other, beyond death. Contrary to them are association, concealment and hypocrisy.

After indicating the just outcome of the judgment of our deeds, the Praised warns us, as God’s revelation says, of the day of distress,

³⁹ See Ibn Māja, “Zuhd”, 21.

⁴⁰ See Matt., 13:24-30.

⁴¹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 129.

when beginnings and ends will cease, when differentiation will be complete and no indifference or unbelief will remain without consequences. The reality of the Hour is revealed in this way. It cannot be escaped in any yesterday or tomorrow. Every order in time is broken down. The just outcome of all this is differentiation into the eternity of hell and the eternity of heaven, as God says in the Recitation:

Surely the unbelievers, who have done evil, God would not forgive them, neither guide them on any road but the road to Gehenna, therein dwelling forever and ever; and that for God is an easy matter.⁴²

Say: "Is that better, or the Garden of Eternity, that is promised to the godfearing, and is their recompense and homecoming!" Therein they shall have what they will dwell forever; it is a promise binding upon thy Lord, and of Him to be required.⁴³

The eternities of hell and heaven are states without death, but not without mercy. The possibility of calculation and quantification ceases in eternity. Absolute differentiation is the image of the just outcome or of judgment from full knowledge. The consequences of the consciousness that concealed the Signified with signs and of the consciousness that was oriented towards Him through the world are in this judgment. These are the two outcomes of waging war – hell as the result of waging war for the world and heaven as the result of waging war for the Living.

Neither eternity, whether in hell or heaven, restricts God or His mercy. These eternities give way to human finitude and hence to all calculation. This does not make them absolute; as manifestations, they too are worlds, are contingent. The eternity of hell, like that of heaven, is conditional; only God's eternity is unconditional. Were it not so, His will would be limited by some eternity other than His. Whatever the reshaping of the self from the insignificance of the embryo to death⁴⁴ and from death to standing before God, from this earth and this heaven to the next earth and the next heaven,⁴⁵ none of these states can escape either God's "now" or God's will. Every contingent eternity is subordinate to that "now" and that will.

⁴² Q 4:168-169.

⁴³ Q 25:15-16.

⁴⁴ See Q 30:54.

⁴⁵ Q 14:48.

Wretchedness is the state of the self that denies its debt to God, while happiness is the acknowledgement of the debt and the consequent realization of the right to redemption. Hell and heaven are the two signs of those human states, as God says:

As for the wretched, they shall be in the Fire, wherein there shall be for them moaning and sighing, therein dwelling for ever, so long as the heavens and earth abide, save as thy Lord will; surely thy Lord accomplishes what He desires. And as for the happy, they shall be in Paradise, therein dwelling forever, as long as the heavens and earth abide, save as thy Lord will – for a gift unbroken.⁴⁶

God's mercy that encompasses all things manifests itself in the eternity of heaven, which is thus less contingent than the eternity of hell. If hell is eternal, heaven is eternally eternal. Hell is extinguished in heaven, and people then gather in that eternal eternity, as is said through the Praised:

God will admit into Paradise those deserving of Paradise, and He will admit whom He wishes out of His Mercy, and admit those condemned to Hell into the Fire. He would then say: See, he whom you find having as much faith in his heart as a grain of mustard, bring him out. They will then be brought out burned and turned to charcoal, and would be cast into the river of life, and they would sprout as does a seed in the silt carried away by flood. Have you not seen that it comes out yellow and intertwined?⁴⁷

The passage from the fire to the garden, from suffering to bliss, from darkness to light, from wrath to mercy and from severity to clemency, does not mean the absolute eternity of heaven, for all things vanish except the Face of God.⁴⁸ They do not vanish in some indeterminate future, but here and now, for there is no reality but the Reality, no eternity but the Eternity. Nullity has no being, so the manifestation of the Face from one moment to the next (which is to say from one contingent eternity to the next) is always and eternally different.

⁴⁶ Q 11:106-108.

⁴⁷ Al-Bukhārī, "Īmān", 14; Muslim, "Īmān", 304.

⁴⁸ See Q 28:88.

5. The Miḥrābs of Bosnia

The series of images of Bosnian *miḥrābs* presented in this text begins with one from the Čaršija Mosque in Jajce. The *muqarna* vault consists of fourteen rows, signifying the fourteen degrees of being or levels of existence relating to our earthly position – seven ascending and seven descending levels in the structure of the heavens and earth, corresponding to the seven degrees of ascent and descent in the human self. The concomitance of each of these levels is the House, or the image of the human heart.

The world was created with seven earthly and seven heavenly degrees.⁴⁹ Referring to the House in the sacred Bekka valley, the Praised says:

This House (the Kaʿba) is one of fifteen, seven in the heavens up to the throne and seven up to the limits of the lowest earth. The highest situated one, which is near the throne, is the “visited House.” Every one of these houses has a sacred territory like that of the Kaʿba. If any one of them fell down, the rest would fall down, one upon the other, to the limits of the lowest earth. And every house has its heavenly or earthly worshippers, like the Kaʿba.⁵⁰

Accordingly, the *miḥrāb* is the sign of this human differentiation through all degrees of existence and is thus a sign of our potential to return, to ascend towards our original state or to sink even lower and further from our original vow to God. Every ascent means leaving the darkness for the sake of the Light, and every descent means sinking into deeper obscurity. When we are in the *miḥrāb*, which, principally speaking, we always are when praying, we face the Kaʿba as the sign of the center of all existence. The fourteen houses, one after another, denote the levels of the visible and the concealed, or the degrees that correspond to the upright path to the human heart. This is the path we ascend by means of our realization in the testimony that there is no self but the Self.

⁴⁹ Q 65:12.

⁵⁰ Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, *Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka* (Leipzig: Olms Verlag, 1858), 6, 1; our quotation of English translation is in Arent J. Wensinck, “The Ideas of the Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth”, in Arent J. Wensinck, *Studies of A. J. Wensinck: An Original Arno Press Anthology* (ed. Kees W. Bolle; New York: Arno Press, 1978), 51-52.

Every *mibrāb*, regardless of its form, denotes the potential of the human self to ascend towards the Light by following the Praised as our finest example and a light-giving lamp. The ascent is a movement from a lower level to a higher level, made possible by the memory of the vertical axis or of the circumambulation around it. There is no light in existence without shadow; it is always dark by comparison with a higher level, as indicated by the alternation of day and night and the phases of the moon. At every degree, these alternations and phases are different states of the self and thus of the meaning of what can be seen in the outer horizons.

In the Čaršija Mosque in Stolac, the succession of months through the year, from winter to summer, from cold to heat and from darkness to light, are depicted in twelve images, one for each month. Nine of these are visible and three are in darkness, and one could speak of each as a state of the self in its ascent from the uttermost depths to the sublimest heights, from the grave to resurrection, from now to eternity.

The inscription referring to Zachariah and Mary and, in its widest meaning, to John and Jesus, is associated with this. The inscription is invariably in fine calligraphy, which means that we are facing the *mibrāb* with our sacred listening and speech, our sacred writing and reading. The words of the inscription were first heard, then spoken, and then written down. They are the speech of God with which the breath, tongue and lips of the Praised were inspired. When he utters them, they come wholly from his heart, borne there by the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit.

In transmitting what he received, the Praised was thus one with the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, and may thus be called the Praised Spirit of Truth, the Praised Holy Spirit.⁵¹ When these words are writ-

⁵¹ The descent or revelation of the Word of God to the Praised is associated once with the Spirit of Truth (Arabic *al-rūḥ al-amīn*, Q 26:192-95) and once with the Holy Spirit (Arabic *rūḥ al-quds*, Q 16:102; Aramaic *rūbā kadishā*, Hebrew *ruah ba-kodesh*). When the Praised transmits the Word, he is equated with the means of its revelation; if it were not so, the Word he speaks would not be God's. God is in it, and with it says that it is of Him and His, as the Praised testifies. Clearly, the translation given here of "Spirit of Truth" is not in line with the usual way it is translated. There are many semantic and etymological reasons justifying the proposed translation, reasons that can be derived from a comparative study of the terms in Arabic, Aramaic (*rūbā dasbrarā*) and Hebrew (*ruah ba-emet*).

ten down by human hand, they continued to bear witness to their source in the pure heart of the perfect man whom God chose to be His Messenger. The words enable the human self to ascend the path of our descent.

The images of nineteen selected Bosnian *miḥrābs*, given in the appendix, show them as they are now or, in the case of mosques destroyed in the 1991-1996 war against Bosnia, as they were before the destruction or before the inscriptions referring to Zachariah and Mary were erased. Destroyed mosques are marked with an asterisk. The inscriptions have been erased in the mosques of Konjic, Mostar, Ljubuški and Jablanica.

Because many of Bosnia's mosques have been destroyed or demolished more than once and some of them are of a much later date than the ones originally built on the sites, the dates given for their erection are those found on surviving inscriptions or in historical sources, where available, or dates based on tradition the author has been able to track down. As a result, the inscription of the Qur'ānic verse "Whenever Zachariah went in to her in the *Miḥrāb*,"⁵² which can be seen in the illustrations, may date from the time the mosque was first built or from when it was renovated or rebuilt.

The selection of these nineteen *miḥrābs* was based on research covering several hundred Bosnian mosques. Although there are more than 1,500 destroyed mosques in Bosnia today and almost as many surviving, renovated or entirely rebuilt, it is fair to say that the verse about Zachariah and Mary, and thus indirectly about John and Jesus, is to be found in every *miḥrāb*. The *miḥrāb*, as the universal symbol of the true faith or debt of rectitude (*al-dīn al-qayyim*), represents the quintessential testimony to the Unicity of God and the apostolate of the Praised through all the prophets and saints. It reminds us of our constant presence in the visible world of which the Unseen is the principle. Zachariah and Mary, John and Jesus were the last prophets before the Praised entered history; they are his witnesses and heralds.

This inscription in the *miḥrāb* indicates that God is neither in the heavens nor on earth, neither in the mosque nor in any other edifice; He is in the human heart, as He says: "My earth and My heaven embrace Me not, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace

⁵² Q 3:37.

Me.”⁵³ The Praised and Mary are perfect examples of believing servants. God speaks to us through the heart of the Praised, revealing to us the Recitation as His Word, just as He speaks to us through Mary’s heart, revealing Jesus the Messiah to us as His Word.

REFERENCES

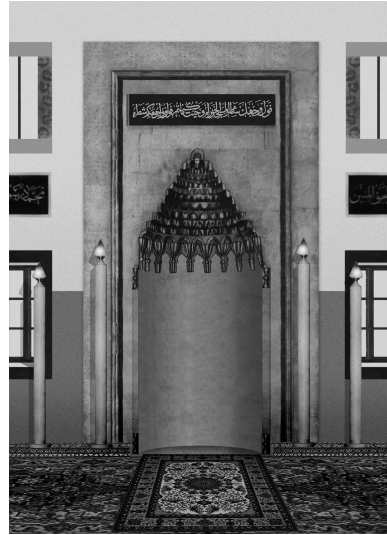
- ‘Alī al-Makkī ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad, *Fatḥ al-Karīm al-Khāliq fī ḥall al-fāz al-Durr al-fā’iq fī l-ṣalāt ‘alā asbraf al-khalā’iq (Ṣ) li-l-Sbaykb Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2010).
- Babić, Mirko, “Rezultati arheoloških istraživanja lokaliteta Atik džamije u Bijeljini”, *Glasnik Udruženja muzejskih radnika* 2 (2004), 48-70.
- Burckhardt, Titus, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976).
- Djedović, Rusmir, “Dovište na Ratišu kod Srebrenika”, in Salih Kulenović, Rusmir Djedović and Enes Mutapčić (eds.), *Srebrenik: historijsko-etnografske skice* (Srebrenik: Centar za kulturu i informisanje, 2007), 69-76.
- Evlija Čelebi [Awliyā’ Chalabī], *Putopis: Odlomci o jugoslovenskim zemljama* (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1973).
- Fehérvári, Géza, “Tombstone or Miḥrāb: A Speculation”, in Richard Ettinghausen (ed.), *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), 241-254.
- Al-Ghazālī, Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 4 vols., (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘at al-‘Āmira al-Sharafiyya, 1908-1909).
- Handžić, Mehmed, “Sarajevo u turskoj pjesmi”, in Esad Duraković (ed.), *Mehmed Handžić: Izabrana djela*, 4 vols., (Sarajevo: Ogdalo, 1999).
- Ibn Sīda, Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ismā‘īl, *al-Muḥkam wa-l-muḥīṭ al-a‘zam fī l-lugha*, 3 vols., (ed. ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān; Cairo: n.p., 1958).
- Al-Iṣfahānī, Abū l-Qāsim Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn Mufaḍḍal al-Rāghib, *al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qur’ān* (ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī; Cairo: Sharikat Maktabat wa-Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlādihī, 1371/1961).
- Khoury, Nuha N. N., *The Miḥrāb Concept: Palatial Themes in Early Islamic Religious Architecture* (PhD dissertation; Harvard: Harvard University, 1992).
- _____ “The Miḥrāb Image: Commemorative Themes in Medieval Islamic Architecture”, *Muqarnas* 9 (1992), 11-28.

⁵³ In Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘at al-‘Āmira al-Sharafiyya, 1908-1909), III, 12.

- _____. “The Dome of the Rock, the Ka‘ba, and Ghumdan: Arab Myths and Umayyad Monuments”, *Muqarnas* 10 (1993), 57-65.
- _____. “The Miḥrāb: From Text to Form”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30/1 (1998), 1-27.
- Melikian-Chirvani, Assadullah Souren, “The Light of Heaven and Earth: From the Chahār-tāq to the Miḥrāb”, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 4 (1990), 95-131.
- Miles, George C., “Miḥrāb and ‘Anaza: A Study in Early Islamic Iconography”, in George C. Miles (ed.), *Archeologia Orientalia: In Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1952), 156-171.
- Mujezinović, Mehmed, *Islamska epigrafika Bosne i Hercegovine*, 3 vols., (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, I: 1974, II: 1977, III: 1982).
- Padwick, Constance E., *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996).
- Papadopoulo, Alexandre (ed.), *Le Mibrāb dans l’architecture et la religion musulmanes* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).
- Perry, Mary Elizabeth, *The Handless Maiden: Moriscos and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- Al-Rūmī, Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn, *Discourses of Rūmī (Fihī mā fihī)* (trans. Arthur J. Arberry; London & New York: Routledge, 1995).
- Šanjek, Franjo, *Bosansko-humski krstjani u povijesnim vrelima (13.-15.st.)* (Zagreb: Barbat, 2003).
- Al-Suyūṭī, Abū l-Faḍl Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr, *al-Ḥirz al-manī‘ min al-qawl al-badī‘ fi l-ṣalāt ‘alā l-Ḥabīb al-shafī‘* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘at al-‘Āmira al-Sharqiyya, 1323 H.).
- Al-Tijānī, Abū l-‘Abbās Sayyid Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, *al-Ṣalāt al-ghaybiyya fi l-ḥaqīqat al-Aḥmadiyya* (Marakesh: al-Zāwīyat al-Kubrā li-Sayyidi Muḥammad al-Kabīr al-Tijānī, 2009).
- Voegelin, Eric, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- Wensinck, Arent J., “The Ideas of the Western Semites Concerning the Navel of the Earth”, in Arent J. Wensinck, *Studies of A. J. Wensinck: An Original Arno Press Anthology* (ed. Kees W. Bolle; New York: Arno Press, 1978), 1-65.
- Wüstenfeld, Ferdinand, *Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka* (Leipzig: Olms Verlag, 1858).

APPENDIX

(i) The Čaršija Mosque in Jajce, for which the dubious name of Esme-sultan Mosque has been advanced in recent years, along with a very unconvincing account of the Sultana's earring, dates from 1749. Her epitaph includes the words, "And have mercy upon our forebears, may they suffer no hardship in the world to come." The *mihrāb* forms part of the harmonious composition of the mosque. Its fourteen rows of muqarnas decoration denote the seven heavens above our lowest earth and the seven earths below as signs of our potential to ascend to redemption or descend into ruin.

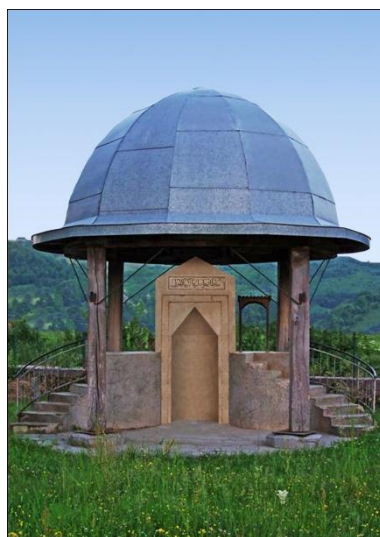


(ii) The Hajji Sinan Tekke in Sarajevo was built in the mid-17th century. It belongs to the Qādiriyya order. The *mihrāb* in the semā-khāna has a spear and an axe at its outer edges, further defining the meaning of the *mihrāb*. The inside walls of the semā-khāna are inscribed with the Qādiriyya *wird*, the liturgical words for the individual and the congregation, encircling the room and entering and emerging from the *mihrāb*.



(c.1). The Fethija in Bihać was originally St Anthony's Church, built in 1400.¹ Its current name of Fethija may be associated with the nouns *al-Fattāḥ*, the "Opener," one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God, and *al-Fātiḥa*, the feminine of "Opener," the name of the first *ṣūra* of the Qur'ān. The relationship between ourselves as open and God as the Opener is the opening, discovering or liberation of our original nature. This is the outcome of waging war, of being in the place of war with the world and the self, which we desire and for which we pray. Mosques in Jajce, Zvornik and Soko also bear this name. The number seven may be recognized in the design of the *miḥrāb* in this mosque, as in most others. The whole building is thus oriented towards the One and Peace. The verse about Mary and Zachariah is on a framed plaque above the *miḥrāb* muḥarnas.

(c.2). Tradition has it that the Muṣalla in Kamengrad was built in 1463. A *muṣalla* is a place designated for congregational prayer. The present-day *miḥrāb*, with the verse about Mary and Zachariah, is the successor to several earlier ones that were destroyed.²



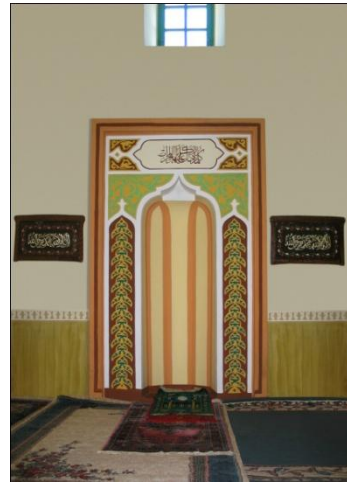
¹ See: Mehmed Mujezinović, *Islamska epigrafika Bosne i Hercegovine* (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1974-1982), III, 60.

² *Ibid.*, III, 31.



(c.3). Milošnik is the name of one of the six surviving mosques in Livno, where there were once fourteen. Its present form preserves a very ancient structure, albeit with significant later repairs. The *mihrāb* is of unusual and elaborate design. The latest wall paintings date from the latter half of the 19th century.³

(c.4). The Careva (Imperial) Mosque, is the only one of Blagaj's seven mosques to survive.⁴ The original mosque, dating from the early 16th century, underwent major alterations in the late 19th century. The inscription about Mary and Zachariah is above the simple *mihrāb* niche.



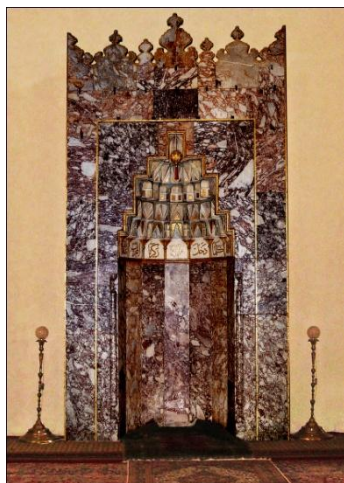
³ *Ibid.*, III, 109-110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 316.



(c.5). The Atik is the oldest mosque in Bijeljina, built in the early 16th century on a site that had been adopted as a place of prayer well before. It has been demolished, rebuilt and refurbished on several occasions and in the 17th century was converted into a church.⁵ During the latest reconstruction of the mosque, following its destruction in 1992, mediaeval tombstones (stećci) were discovered in the foundations, twenty-three of which bore epitaphs in Cyrillic.⁶ The inscription with part of the Qurʾānic verse about the Virgin Mary and the Prophet Zachariah is above the *miḥrāb* niche.

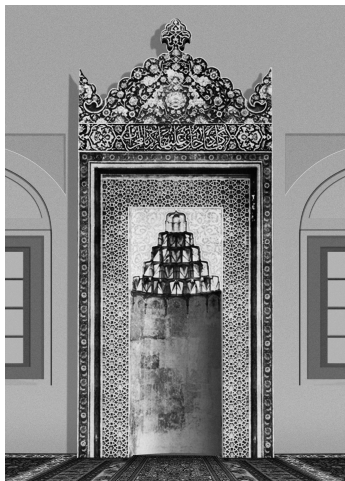
(c.6). The Begova or Bey's Mosque is Sarajevo's central mosque, built in 1531 and endowed by Ghāzī Khusraw Bey.⁷ Since then, it has had the symbolic meaning of the spiritual center of Bosnia. The whole of Baščaršija, with the madrasa, the other mosques, the bezistans, the caravanserais, and the shops forming a network of streets and courtyards, springs from and returns to the *miḥrāb* of the Begova. The stone *miḥrāb* has seven panels on which the Qurʾanic passage on the Virgin Mary and the Prophet Zachariah are incised and gilded.



⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 156.

⁶ See: Mirko Babić, "Rezultati arheoloških istraživanja lokaliteta Atik džamije u Bijeljini", *Glasnik Udruženja muzejskih radnika* 2 (2004), 51.

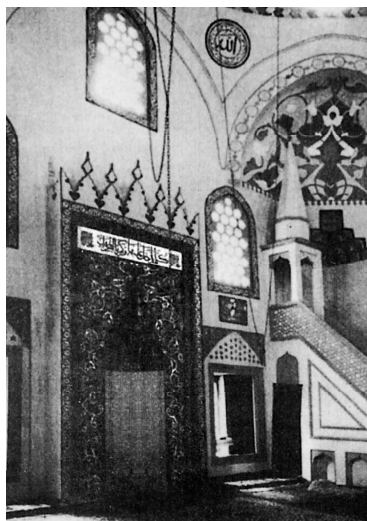
⁷ See: Mujezinović, *Islamska epigrafika Bosne i Hercegovine*, I, 292-293.



(c.7). The Aladža is Foča's central mosque, built in 1550. The walls of the interior and portico bore painted decorations, hence the name Aladža, meaning "painted," "colorful" or "multi-colored." One of seventeen mosques in Foča, its beauty and symbolic meaning made it a crucially important element in the collective memory of the Bosnian people. The inscription over the door read, "This holy mosque and sublime masjid was built in the name of God Almighty by the benefactor Ḥasan, son of Yūsuf, in the hope of recompense from Almighty God and seeking His pleasure. A mysterious voice pronounced its chronogram: 'O All-sufficient (God), accept (this) fine (work)'." The travel chronicler Awliyā' Chalabī inscribed these words on the sofa walls

of the mosque in 1664: "I have travelled much and visited many towns, but I have never seen such a place before."⁸ The panel of stone below the crown of the *miḥrāb* was carved with the Qur'ānic passage on the Virgin and the Prophet Zachariah. The Aladža was damaged by fire and restored on several occasions before being razed to the ground in 1992, making it one of the great symbols of the suffering of the Bosnian Muslims over the centuries.

(c.8). The Čaršija Mosque, Čajniče's central mosque, was built in 1570.⁹ Awliyā' Chalabī wrote of it in the chronicle of his travels: "It is a clean and spacious mosque in which the *miḥrāb*, *minbar* and *maḥfil* are works of art. When the bright rays of the sun shine through its windows of crystal, Najaf and Murano glass, it is brightly lit."¹⁰ The passage about the Virgin and the Prophet Zachariah was carved below the *miḥrāb* crown. With the destruction of this and the town's other mosques in 1992, all ten mosques referred to by Awliyā' Chalabī were lost.¹¹

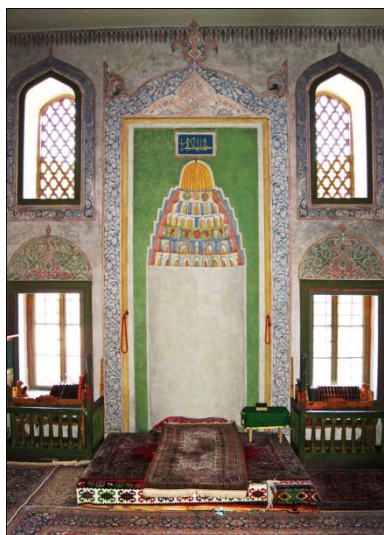


⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 37-38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 66-67.

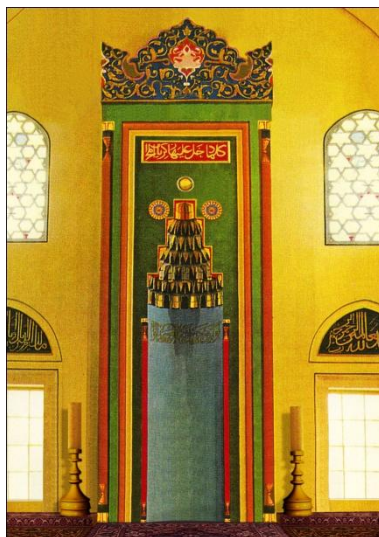
¹⁰ Evlija Čelebi [Awliyā' Chalabī], *Putopis: Odlomci o jugoslovenskim zemljama* (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1973), 400.

¹¹ *Ibid.*



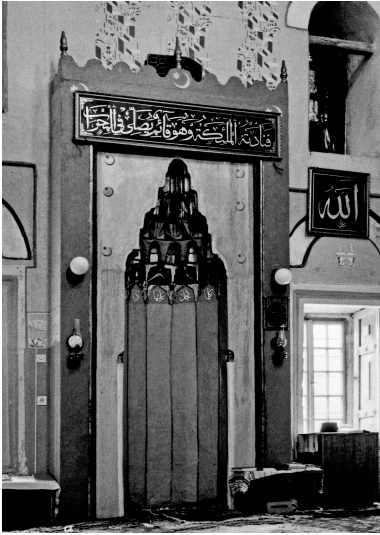
(c.9). In its present form, the Šarena Mosque is the successor to a number of earlier mosques, the first of which was built in the 16th century.¹² It is the best known of Travnik's sixteen mosques, gaining its name from the wall paintings on the inside and outside walls. The passage about Mary and Zachariah is above the *mihrāb* niche.

(c.10). The Ferhadija is the most famous of Banja Luka's thirty-six mosques. It was completed in 1579; the inscription over the entrance door recording its construction reads, "This is a place built for the faithful in the name of God."¹³ The Qur'ānic passage about the Virgin Mary and the Prophet Zachariah is below the *mihrāb* crown. The Ferhadija was razed to the ground in 1992.



¹² See: Mujezinović, *Islamska epigrafika Bosne i Hercegovine*, II, 325, 414.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, 191, 200.



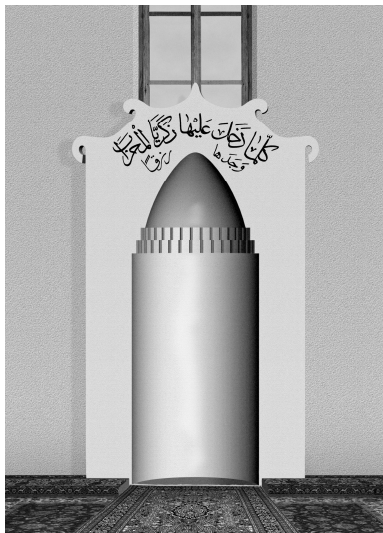
(c.11). The Tekke Mosque was built in 1579, one of several in Konjic. Its name refers to the Tekke with which it formed a single complex, though the Tekke is now long gone.¹⁴ The passage about the Virgin and the Prophet Zachariah is carved in the *mibrāb* in the panels below the muqarnas.

(c.12). Na Tepi is the local name for the mosque in Mostar built from 1612 to 1618 by Koski Mehmed Pasha. Its name is associated with the nearby Mala Tepa or lesser weighing station. The inscription over the mosque door includes the words, “The Holy Spirit said: ‘House of the All-Merciful and a place of the good.’” It is one of Mostar’s thirty-seven mosques.¹⁵ The *mibrāb* contains the Qur’ānic passage on the Virgin Mary and the Prophet Zachariah.



¹⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 422, 427.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 144, 219-221.



(c.13). Tradition has it that the Čaršija Mosque in Prijeđor was built in 1700. The ḥadīth “My houses on My earth are mosques, and those who visit them maintain them” is carved on a stone plaque.¹⁶ The passage about the Virgin Mary and the Prophet Zachariah was above the *miḥrāb* niche. This is another mosque that was destroyed in 1992.

(c.14). The Careva (Imperial) or Atik Mosque was built in 1719 in Kastel, the old walled town of Trebinje.¹⁷ The Qur’ānic passage about the Virgin in the *miḥrāb* and the Prophet Zachariah coming to her was inscribed in the *miḥrāb* niche. This mosque, too, was razed to the ground in 1992.



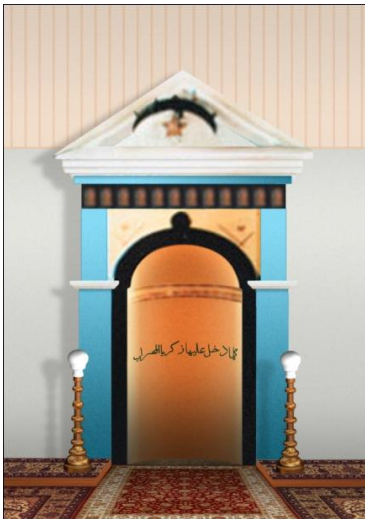
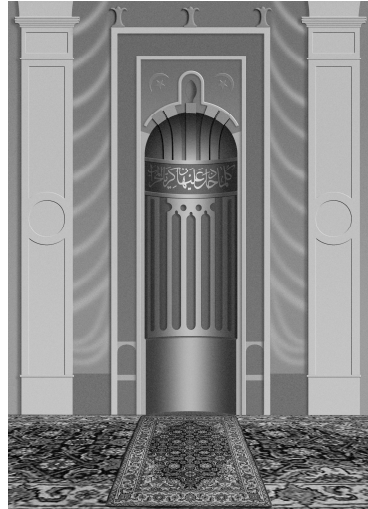
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, III, 39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 358.



(c.15). The Old Mosque in Maoča has the Qurʾānic passage about the Virgin and Zachariah above the *mīḥrāb* niche. Local tradition has it that the mosque was built in 1820.

(c.16). The Azizija was built in 1863 after Muslims expelled from Serbia came to settle in Brezovo polje near Brčko.¹⁸ The Qurʾānic passage about the Virgin in the *mīḥrāb* and the Prophet Zachariah visiting her was inscribed in the *mīḥrāb* niche. This mosque was also destroyed in 1992.



(c.17). The old Azizija Mosque in Bosanska Kostajnica was built after 1862, when Muslims fled there from Serbia.¹⁹ The Qurʾānic citation *kullamā dakbala ʿalayhā Zakariyyā l-mīḥrāb* ... was inscribed in its *mīḥrāb*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 164.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 46.



(c.18). The mosque built in Pabrišće in 1870 was the fifth mosque in Ljubuški. The inscription about the Virgin and the Prophet Zachariah was above the *miḥrāb* niche.

(c.19). This mosque in Jablanica was built in Pabriježje in 1912 and named “U Pabriježju.” Following the ancient tradition, part of the Qur’ānic verse on the Virgin Mary and the Prophet Zachariah was inscribed in the *miḥrāb*.

