This is the accepted manuscript (post-print version) of the article.
The content in the accepted manuscript version is identical to the final published version, although typography and layout may differ.

How to cite this publication
Please cite the final published version:


Publication metadata

| Title: | Islam in Bosnia between East and West: The Reception and Development of Traditionalism. |
| Author(s): | Mark Sedgwick & Samir Beglerović |
| Journal: | Journal of Religion in Europe |
| DOI/Link: | doi.org/10.1163/18748929-20201498 |
| Document version: | Accepted manuscript (post-print) |

*General Rights*

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*If the document is published under a Creative Commons license, this applies instead of the general rights.*

This cover sheet template is made available by AU Library
Version 2.1, September 2020
Islam in Bosnia between East and West:
The Reception and Development of Traditionalism

Abstract
The article looks at the reception and development of Guénonian Traditionalism in Bosnia from the 1970s to the present day. Traditionalism was initially received in Yugoslavia as esotericism, but then its reception became more Islamic, based in Sarajevo’s Islamic Theology Faculty. After the Bosnian War, Islamic Traditionalist works became popular among young Bosnians who wanted to combine Islam with European identities. Some Bosnian ulama taught Traditionalist works to their students, a development unparalleled elsewhere, and wrote their own Traditionalist-influenced works, mostly dealing with interreligious dialogue. The Bosnian reception and development of Traditionalism is unique, and it is argued that this reflects Bosnia’s special position between East and West.

Keywords: Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Guénon, Traditionalism, Islamic Theology Faculty, East and West, interreligious dialogue

In 1980, a Bosnian lawyer living in Communist Yugoslavia, Alija Izetbegović (1925-2003), later the first president of independent Bosnia and Herzegovina, published a book entitled Islam između Istoka i Zapada (Islam between East and West).¹ The book was based around a three-part division, contrasting Islam with Communist materialism and with Christian religiosity. Since 1980,

¹ Alija Izetbegović, Islam između Istoka i Zapada (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1980).
Communist materialism has receded in importance, but the relationship between Bosnia, Islam, East, West, and Christianity still remains highly topical. The purpose of this article is not to resolve it, or even to define the slippery terms involved, but rather to cast light on Islam in Bosnia by looking at its relationship with another phenomenon that lies somewhere between East and West: Guénonian Traditionalism.

Guénonian Traditionalism is so called because of its origin in the work of the French philosopher René Guénon (1886-1951), who was born by the river Loire and died in Cairo as ‘Abd al-Wāhid Yaḥya, a Sufi Muslim. Guénonian Traditionalism—or, for short, simply “Traditionalism,” with a capital T—is a coherent philosophy that has been further developed by many other Traditionalists from the 1920s until the present day. It is often understood as perennialism, and it is indeed perennialist, finding a single and eternal esoteric truth in all religions. For Guénon, Sufism represented the esoteric heart of Islam. Traditionalism is not just perennialism, however; it also includes a powerful critique of modernity that now has increasing political significance.²

After Guénon’s death, Traditionalist Sufism was further developed by Frithjof Schuon (1907-98), known to his followers as Shaykh ʿĪsā Nūr al-Dīn, who established an unusual Sufi order, known as the Maryamiyya in honour of the Virgin Mary (Maryam). The Maryamiyya was never large, but spread around the world; its importance derived from the writings and activities of its members, ²

² For the history of Traditionalism, see Mark Sedgwick, Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
not from their quantity.\(^3\) Since Schuon’s death, the leading Islamic Traditionalist and Maryami has been Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933), an Iranian scholar of Islamic Studies who moved to the United States after the Iranian Revolution. Nasr was the Traditionalist who was of greatest importance to Bosnian Islam. Traditionalism, then, is a hybrid school, bringing together French esoteric philosophy, Egyptian Sufism, the Virgin Mary, Iran, and American academia. It, too, lies between East and West.

The impact of Traditionalism on Islam in the West (especially Europe and the United States) and in the Middle East (especially pre-revolutionary Iran and, to a lesser extent, Turkey and Jordan) has now been relatively well studied.\(^4\) It is clear that Traditionalism has been received in different ways and has taken different forms in different countries at different times; as with many global phenomena, it is localized in varying ways. This is one reason that a philosophy developed in the 1920s remains relevant in the 2020s. So far, however, no work has been published in English on the reception of Traditionalism in Bosnia and Hercegovina.\(^5\) In Bosnia and Hercegovina, as this article will show, Traditionalism has been received in three different ways during three different

---


periods. Firstly, during the 1970s, it was received by a small number of internationally-connected Yugoslav intellectuals as esotericism, in a form that was similar to that which it was taking in Italy, France and the United States at the same time. Then, during the 1980s, it was received in Islamic form by a group of Bosnian Muslim ulama (religious scholars) who had grown up in the closed Yugoslavia of the 1960s and 1970s, and became interested in Traditionalism as Yugoslavia slowly opened up to the West, and foreign literature became more easily available. Finally, after the Bosnian War of 1992-95, Islamic Traditionalism helped a new generation of well-educated young Bosnians reconcile their Islam with increasingly Western identities. During this third period, ulama from the second period also taught Traditionalist works to their students and wrote their own Traditionalist-based books, mostly in the field of interreligious dialog. The second and third stages of this reception and development of Traditionalism are unique, and it is argued that this reflects Bosnia’s special position between East and West.

1. Islam in Bosnia

Although there were Muslims in Bosnia before the Ottoman conquest of 1463, it was under Ottoman rule that Islam became firmly established there. It is unclear why far more of the Slav inhabitants of Bosnia became Muslim than was the case elsewhere in the Balkans, and several interesting explanations have been advanced. Whatever the reason, Islam prospered, mosques

---

were built, and Islamic educational institutions were established. 7 Foremost among these was the Ghazi Husrev-beg madrasa in Saraybosna (now Sarajevo), founded in 1537.

After the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary in 1878, the Austro-Hungarians established modern Bosnian Islamic administrative and educational institutions that still exist, in slightly modified form, today. In 1882, they appointed a Bosnian Reis-ul-ulema (Ra‘īs al-ʿulamā’, president of the ulama) with a supporting institution, known as the Ulama-majlis (Ulama council) or Rijaset (presidency). A Higher School for Sharia Judges (Hochschule für Scharia-Richter or Šeriatška sudačka škola) was established in 1887, providing Islamic education within an institutional framework based on that of the Austro-Hungarian university, and including the study of European jurisprudence and history as well as uṣūl al-fiqh (principles of Sharia jurisprudence). 8 In 1912, the Ulama-majlis became the Religious Community of the Followers of Islam (Religionsgesellschaft der Anhänger des Islams). This later became the Islamic Religious Community of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Islamska verska zajednica Kraljevine Jugoslavije), and then, in 1969, the Islamic Community (Islamska zajednica). The term “Islamic Community,” then, indicates an administrative body, not Bosnian Muslims in general, and reflects Austro-Hungarian administrative terminology.


The Higher School for Sharia Judges was transformed into the Higher Islamic School for Sharia and Theology (Viša Islamska šeriatsko-teološka škola), closed in 1945 by the new Communist government of Yugoslavia, and re-established in 1977 by a liberalizing Communist regime as the Islamic Theology Faculty in Sarajevo (Islamski teološki fakultet u Sarajevu). In 1978, this started a journal, *Islamska misao* (Islamic Thought), in which the first Bosnian translations of Traditionalist works would appear, starting in 1983.

### 2. The arrival of Traditionalism in Yugoslavia during the 1970s

The earliest Traditionalist work to appear in the language that was then called Serbo-Croatian, the common language of most of Yugoslavia that in its written form is almost indistinguishable from contemporary Bosnian, was an article by Guénon that had been included in a 1957 French collection, *Panorama des idées contemporaines* (Panorama of Contemporary Ideas) which was translated in its entirety and published in the Yugoslav capital Belgrade in 1960. This, however,

---


10 Apart from Slovenia, Macedonia and Kosova.

reflected an interest in French thought in general, not in Traditionalism in particular. After this, one further article by Guénon was translated in a special issue of an avant-garde magazine in 1976,12 this time reflecting an interest in the role played by esotericism in the artistic avant-garde. In 1980, then, Traditionalism was barely known in Yugoslavia.

There were, however, some Yugoslav Traditionalists. One of these was the Serbian painter and journalist Dragoš Kalajić (1943-2005), who had studied painting in Rome, where he had discovered Traditionalism and met Julius Evola (1898-1974),13 an Italian collaborator of Guénon whose focus was not on Islam but on politics. Kalajić published two books drawing on an Evolian Traditionalist perspective, *Mapa (anti)utopije: ogled jedne morfologije krize kulture modernog Zapada* (Map of (anti-)utopia: An account of a morphology of the crisis of the modern Western culture), which appeared in 1978, and *Smak sveta* (The End of the World), in 1979.14 These emphasized the Traditionalist critique of modernity. He published the first book-length translations of Guénon into practice, proper names are transliterated into a common Cyrillic/Latin standard, and do not retain their original spellings. Guénon thus becomes Genon.


13 Saša Gajić, “Dragoš Kalajić – ideolog srpske ili evropske desnice?” *Nova srpska politička misao* 11 (2004): 151-63, p. 157. Kalajić and Evola are often said to have been very close in Evola’s last years, but this is poorly documented. Evola, like Kalajić, had started as a painter.

Serbo-Croatian, and after the collapse of Yugoslavia became Serbia’s most prominent Traditionalist. Later Serbian Traditionalism, however, is not the focus of this article; it requires an article all to itself.

Another Yugoslav Traditionalist was Rusmir Mahmutćehajić (born 1948), a Bosnian professor of electronic engineering then teaching at the University of Osijek in Croatia, who may have discovered some pre-war Traditionalist works in a private library, and who during the early 1970s was in contact with a Swiss follower of Schuon, Titus Burckhardt (1908-84), who in turn introduced him to Nasr, then the leading Traditionalist author writing from an Islamic perspective. As well as being an electronic engineer and a Traditionalist, Mahmutćehajić was also an experimental novelist; his Krhkost (Frailty), published in 1977, was written in a kind of rhymed prose. Mahmutćehajić later became one of Bosnia’s most prominent Traditionalists.

There was no contact between Kalajić and Mahmutćehajić, whose interests were in very different aspects of Traditionalism. The two men later found themselves on opposite sides during the Bosnian War. They have something in common, however. As intellectuals with artistic or literary interests and international connections, they shared a background similar to that of many

---

15 Rene Genon, Mračno doba, trans. Nada Šerban (Čačak: Dom kulture, 1987) was a selection from Guenon’s works. It was followed by Velika trijada, trans. Šerban (Belgrade: Sfairos, 1989).


17 Rusmir Mahmutćehajić, Krhkost (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1977).
Traditionalists outside Yugoslavia. Their reception of Traditionalism also followed models found elsewhere, in Italy, France and the United States. In all these countries Traditionalism was a highly intellectual form of esotericism, as it seems to have been for Kalajić and Mahmutčehajić.

3. The translation of the Traditionalists in Yugoslavia during the 1980s

The translation of Traditionalist works into Serbo-Croatian began in 1981 with a collection of essays on Sufism edited by Darko Tanasković (born 1948) and Ivan Šop. Neither of these were Muslim. Tanasković was a Serbian philologist who taught at the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Belgrade, and Šop was a less prominent Serb with an interest in the Orient.

Their book was made up of translated pieces, starting with an opening chapter on mysticism, followed by nineteen chapters on Sufism. Most of these were by Western and Soviet scholars, including classics by Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921), R. A. Nicholson (1868-1945), A. J. Arberry (1905-

---

19 Little is known of Šop, who only published two other books, Nasredinove metamorfoze (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 1973) and Istok u srpskoj književnosti: šest pisaca--šest viđenja (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 1982).
20 This was a translation of F. C. Happold’s “Perennial Philosophy,” taken from Happold, Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology (1963; London: Penguin, 1990): 18-21. Despite its title, Happold’s article does not actually discuss the perennial philosophy, but instead provides a general introduction to mysticism, which it notes in passing has been called “the perennial philosophy” because it “has manifested itself in similar or identical forms wherever the mystical consciousness has been present” (p. 20). Happold is not in any sense a Traditionalist.
There were also four articles by Traditionalists, by William Stoddart (born 1925), Burckhardt, Nasr, and—as the last chapter in the book—Guénon himself. Either Tanasković or Šop knew Traditionalism well, then, and as Tanasković was later close to Kalajić (as we will see), it was probably he who chose the Traditionalist works included in the book. Neither Tanasković nor Šop, however, played any known role in either later Serbian or Bosnian Traditionalism. Tanasković and Šop’s book, then, is something of an anomaly.

Shortly afterwards, in 1983, the second stage of the reception of Traditionalism began with the publication of translations of Traditionalist authors made by Bosnian ulama, lecturers at the Islamic Theology Faculty, in the journal *Islamska misao*. This development was unprecedented in the history of the reception of Traditionalism, which elsewhere had interested secular intellectuals, not the Islamic establishment. The first translation was of Nasr’s “The Prophet and Prophetic Tradition: The Last Prophet and Universal Man,” made by a lecturer at the Islamic Theology Faculty, Adnan Silajdžić (born 1958), followed by another translation of Nasr, made by

---


22 Some members of the Islamic establishment in Iran have been interested in Traditionalism, but the Iranian Islamic establishment as a whole has not.

his wife, Amra Silajdžić.\textsuperscript{24} Three years later, in 1986, Nasr was again translated in \textit{Islamska misao}, this time by Enes Karić (born 1958), also a lecturer at the Islamic Theology Faculty. Karić translated four articles, two on the Ikhwān as-ṣafā (Brethren of purity), an eighth- or tenth-century philosophical group, and two on the philosopher Abū’l-Raiḥān al-Bīrūnī (973-1050).\textsuperscript{25} These were followed by further translations in 1991, two more by Karić\textsuperscript{26} and one by Rešid Hafizović (born 1956),\textsuperscript{27} all on slightly more general topics: the articles translated by Karić dealt with the quest for eternal wisdom and with Islam and modern science, while the article translated by Hafizović dealt with the \textit{ṭarīqa} (the Sufi path or order). In a later issue in the same year, Mahmutćeđahajić published a Traditionalist-inspired article of his own, “Sedam pitanja o sufizmu” (Seven Questions regarding Sufism).\textsuperscript{28} In 1992, another lecturer at the Islamic Theology Faculty, Nevad Kahteran (born 1968),

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Husein Nasr, “Izučavanje šiizma,” \textit{Islamska misao} 5, no. 57 (1983), pp. 27-36.
\end{itemize}
joined the group with a translation of an article by Nasr on the contemporary relevance of Islamic philosophy. All of these save Adnan Silajdžić’s wife Amra and—more surprisingly—Karić later became prominent Bosnian Traditionalists, whose own Traditionalist writings are discussed below.

It is not clear to what extent this group of Bosnian ulama understood that the works of Nasr that they were translating represented the Traditionalist school, and to what extent they simply understood them as the work of Islamic scholars in the West. The earliest articles, as we have seen, dealt with somewhat technical issues in Islamic philosophy; later articles addressed topics of more general interest, but it would still have been possible to read them out of the Traditionalist context within which they were written. Of all these early Bosnian contributors to *Islamska misao*, only Mahmutčehajić definitely knew what Traditionalism was.

4. Traditionalism in Bosnia after the Bosnian War

In 1991, as Yugoslavia began to fall apart, Mahmutčehajić returned from Croatia, where he had been living since finishing his BA degree, to his native Bosnia. He became deputy prime minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991, and then minister of energy, mining, and industry, in which post he was one of the leaders of the defence of Sarajevo during the siege of 1992-96. He resigned from the Bosnian government, however, in 1994, “in protest at and opposition to the increasing...
and essentially defeatist ethno-nationalist vision of his former colleagues in government.” For Mahmutčehajić, the model for Bosnia and Herzegovina that his colleagues accepted at Dayton, which maintains the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina in principle but in practice accommodates Bosniak, Croat, and Serb ethnic segregation, represented defeat. He remained dedicated to the pre-war ideal of a Bosnia in which “cultural and religious plurality is a source of strength, not weakness, of understanding, not conflict, and of creative coexistence rather than intolerance” and has since 1994 attempted to advance this ideal through an NGO, the International Forum Bosnia.

The Serbian Traditionalists Kalajić and Tanasković, in contrast, became Greater Serbian nationalists, and Kalajić was associated with extreme anti-Muslim positions. After the end of the Bosnian War, Kalajić became the main Serbian representative of the European New Right and of the post-Traditionalist Eurasianism of the Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin (born 1962).


31 Mahmutčehajić, “Biography.”


33 Gajić, “Dragoš Kalajić.”
In general, intellectual and academic life went into hibernation during the Bosnian War. The end of the war left a greater interest in Islam among much of the Bosnian public, and a vacuum in intellectual and academic life that various groups from both the Muslim World and the West tried to fill. While Wahhabi missionaries tried to stamp out most of the Bosnian Islamic tradition, which they saw as bidʿa (blameworthy innovation), Sufis and Neo-Sufis from Turkey and the West attempted to “conserve” and “revive” that tradition, adding content that was in fact essentially foreign to it. In all of this, the notion of “tradition” had a central position, understood sometimes as something that had to be changed, and sometimes as something that had to be reframed. Traditionalism also addressed the issue of tradition, from a different angle.

Translations of Traditionalist works continued. *Islamska misao* stopped publication in 1993, but a variety of other publications printed Traditionalist articles, ranging from academic journals to *Preporod* (Renaissance), the weekly newspaper published by the Islamic Community.

There were also new translations of books, starting just before the war in 1991 with Nasr’s *Three Muslim sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardī, Ibn ‘Arabī*, and followed by *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* in 1992, and *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* in 1994. Two of these were published by El-Kalem, the publishing house of the Islamic Community.34 After the war,

---

Nasr’s works remained very popular in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and many other translations were published, often made by the Traditionalists discussed in this article, but also by other translators, who also translated works by other Traditionalists, notably Lings and Schuon. These new translations included, for example, Nasr’s *A Young Muslim’s Guide to the Modern World*. A variety of commercial publisher participated in this stage of the reception of Traditionalism; there was clearly a market for Traditionalist books. The translation of Traditionalist works into Bosnian was part of a larger wave of translations of works written in Western languages.

In just four years, from 1994 to 1998, the Bosnian public had the opportunity to read not only Nasr but also Lings, Burckhardt, and Guénon, mostly translated by Mahmutčehajić, who had moved to

---


teach at the University of Sarajevo after retiring from politics in 1994, and two books by Frithjof Schuon, translated by Hafizović. One important book by Lings, *Muhammad: his life based on the earliest sources*, was even translated twice. These were followed in the early twenty-first century by further translations of Lings (one new book), Burckhardt (three new books), and Schuon (five new books) by other translators. In addition, there were also translations of books by authors close to the Traditionalists: Henry Corbin, translated by Hafizović, Toshihiko Izutzu, and William C. Chittick.

The number of these translations is testimony to their popularity among the wider Bosnian public. No sales data is available, but the general impression is that the typical reader of these books was a well-educated member of the younger generation, probably a university graduate with a degree in economics or foreign languages, the sort of Bosnian who listens to much the same music and watches much the same TV channels as their equivalents in other parts of Europe. One reason why such Bosnians are so exposed to the West is the existence of a massive Bosnian diaspora, which in north-west Europe is confronted with the widespread conviction that Muslim and

---


38 Frithjof Schuon, *Dimenzije islama* (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 1995); *O transcendentnom jedinstvu religija* (Sarajevo: Bemust, 1996).
European identities are incompatible. The experiences of the Bosnian diaspora of course also have an impact on Bosnians in Bosnia. For many such readers, closer to Western culture than to the cultures of the Middle East, it may be supposed, there was something especially attractive about books on Islam written from a Western perspective by authors who were themselves Westerners, or (in the case of Nasr) had lived for long in the West. Nasr’s *A Young Muslim’s Guide to the Modern World*, for example, was in practice a young Muslim’s guide to living in the West.

5. Traditionalist Networks in Bosnia

The postwar arrival of Traditionalist texts in Bosnia was followed by the arrival of leading Traditionalists in person. Mahmutćehejić, as we have seen, had already been in contact with Burckhardt and Nasr, and also with Lings. Nasr visited Sarajevo in 2000, and lectures by him were arranged by Karić at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences (Fakultet islamskih nauka, the new name of the Islamic Theology Faculty after 1990), the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Sarajevo, and at the Ghazi Husrev-bay madrasa. Chittick visited twice at the invitation of Mahmutćehejić; he also knew Hafizović, apparently independently of his connection with Mahmutćehejić. In


return, Kahteran spent a year with Nasr at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, where Nasr taught, in 2002. During this period, he wrote a PhD thesis on “Perenijalna filozofija: U mišljenju Rene Guenona, Frithjofa Schuona i Seyyeda Hosseina Nasra” (Perennial philosophy: In the thought of René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr). This was supervised by Hafizović, defended at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Sarajevo, and later published by El-Kalem, the press of the Islamic Community. In the introduction, Kahteran acknowledged Nasr as his “spiritual mentor.”

This acknowledgment and these contacts suggest that a Bosnian branch of the Maryamiyya may have come into being, joining branches in the United States (notably under Nasr in Washington, DC), England (under Lings), and other countries. There is inevitable uncertainty concerning this, as branches of the Maryamiyya never announced their existence, and even tried to conceal it. This secrecy, which is at variance with normal Sufi practice, is one of the ways in which the Maryamiyya was unusual.

It is clear that there were solid personal relations between Mahmutće hajić, Hafizović, and Kahteran and leading Traditionalists such as Burckhardt and Lings, and especially Nasr and Chittick (whose own relationship with Traditionalism is rather ambivalent). These relations seem more

42 Nevad Kahteran, Perenijalna filozofija – U mišljenju Rene Guenona, Frithjofa Schuona i Seyyeda Hosseina Nasra (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2002).
43 Ibid., pp. 8
44 Sedgwick, Against the Modern World.
than purely scholarly. Nasr identified Hafizović as “a leading authority on Islamic thought and the school of perennial philosophy whose way of seeing things is the same as my own,”45 Nasr also spoke of the existence of an “intellectual elite in the Guénonian sense” in Bosnia, emphasizing the role of Mahmutčehajić.46 Guénon had called in his early work for the creation of an “intellectual elite,” which in his terms meant something closer to what most people would call a “spiritual elite,” to guide the West through the end of the current dark age,47 and the Maryamiyya was in some ways the answer to that call, though not an answer that Guénon ultimately recognized. Nasr concluded his overview on Traditionalism in Bosnia by listing the names of Mahmutčehajić, Karić, Hafizović, and Kahteran.48 For Nasr, then, the development of Traditionalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the work of four persons, acting as some sort of group, and the leader of the group was Mahmutčehajić.

Mahmutčehajić, for his part, self-identifies as a Traditionalist, describing himself in the first paragraph of the “Biography” section of his website as a “scholar of the Muslim intellectual

45 Blurb on the back cover of Hafizović, Stubovi islama i džihad (Sarajevo: Connectum, 2015).
46 “I first heard of Rusmir Mahmutčehajić from Titus Burckhardt in the early 1970s. He told me of a young Yugoslav who was devoted to the traditional perspective and who was very familiar with the works of Guenon, Coomaraswama, Schuon, and himself.” Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Preface”, in: Rusmir Mahmutčehajić, Maintaining the Sacred Center, pp. ix.
48 Nasr, “Preface,” in Maintaining the Sacred Center, pp. ix-x.
tradition, considered as a branch of *religio* and *philosophia perennis*.” 49 *Religio Perennis* is the Schuonian Traditionalist term for the esoteric core common to all religions, elsewhere more usually termed the *philosophia perennis*. Mahmutćehajić also shares the interest in the Virgin Mary that is characteristic of members of the Maryamiyya, entitling what is perhaps his most important book *Hval i djeva* (The Praised and the Virgin); the Praised is the Prophet Muhammad, and the Virgin is, of course, Mary. 50

It seems, then, that there may well have also been a branch of the Maryamiyya in Bosnia. It is less clear, however, what its impact was.

6. The development of Bosnian Traditionalism

Not only were many Traditionalist works translated into Bosnian, but Traditionalism also developed in Bosnia through original Traditionalist works written there. The first author to do this was Mahmutćehajić, who used Traditionalism to address Bosnian issues, trying to find “metaphysical principles” in the Bosnian material and written heritage, and also in the everyday political situation. Mahmutćehajić was followed by Hafizović, Kahteran, and Silajdžić. What the “Bosnian Traditionalism” developed by these four authors was most applied to was an issue that seemed especially urgent in the aftermath of the Bosnian War: interfaith dialogue. This is also an issue that many international NGOs and funding agencies operating in Bosnia consider important.

49 Mahmutćehajić, “Biography.”

Although among the earliest translators of Traditionalist works into Bosnian and although in contact with Nasr and listed by him as among Bosnia’s Traditional scholars, Karić does not appear as a Traditionalist in his voluminous writings, or indeed as adopting any other particular perspective. Such a stance is perhaps appropriate for someone who held office as minister of education of Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1994 and 1996.

6.1. Rusmir Mahmutčehajić

The idea of interreligious dialogue, well as many other connected themes, is extensively developed in the works of Mahmutčehajić, who is well known in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a writer. Apart from publishing in various journals and with well-known publishers, he also started his own journal, Forum Bosna, published by the International Forum Bosna, a high-profile promoter of interreligious dialogue, over which he presides.51 This, and his political activities during the war in Bosnia, has given him public recognition as one of Bosnia’s leading intellectual and as one of the few intellectuals who are interested in both political philosophy and practical interfaith dialogue. He has also been extensively translated into English, often published in America by Fordham University Press in its “Abrahamic Dialogues” series.52

---

51 See its website at http://www.forumbosna.org. The International Forum Bosna is not to be confused with the Bosnia International Forum (https://bif.ba), which focuses on the Bosnian diaspora and on economic issues.

the Sacred Center: The Bosnian City of Stolac was published by the Maryamiyya’s own press, World Wisdom. The perennial philosophy is good basis for interreligious agreement, and is used as such by Mahmutćeđahijić, for example in his major 2002 article “Istost u različitosti: Religio perennis u judaizmu, kršćanstvu i islamu” (Sameness in Diversity: Religio Perennis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

In his books, which are based strongly on Traditionalist thought, Mahmutćeđahijić addresses a variety of themes, from metaphysics and philosophy, through Bosnian literary heritage and theology, to political theory and Bosnian political philosophy. Two ideas are central: perennialism and the importance of the Bosnian sacred heritage. It is almost impossible to find an article of his in which the idea of perennialism is absent; the perennial philosophy is the background to almost all his discussions.


55 To compare: Adam B. Seligman, “Mahmutćeđahijićevi epistemološki vidici Bosne u svijetu” (Mahmutćeđahijić’s epistemological visions of Bosnia in the World), Dijalog, Sarajevo, Akademija nauka i umjetnosti Bosne i Hercegovine, 2006, No. 1-2, pp. 265-276.
6.2. Rešid Hafizović

Hafizović’s earliest articles and books show the clear influence of Schuon, but later Corbin becomes more important. Many works by Schuon are cited in Hafizović’s 1995 *Teološki traktati 1: O načelima isalmskog vjerovanja* (Theological Treatises 1: Considering the Fundaments of Islamic Belief), as are Nasr, Guénon, Burckhardt, and another Traditionalist, Leo Schaya (1916-85). In this book, Hafizović develops an amalgam of a modern esoteric, classical Christian, and common Muslim theological vocabulary, developing some interesting theories on this basis. A central concept is that of the Divine Spirit or *rūḥ* (*božanski duh*). He presents two spiritual realities of man (“spiritual values”): one dominated by mind (*‘aql*) and the other by soul (*nafs*), both “the microcosmic shadows of God’s Spirit.” The person who subdues *nafs* to *‘aql* achieves complete sapiential and existential dominance. He also explains the pluriformity of angels as different reflections of one Face, dissimilar gifts of one Spirit, multiple names of one Nature, and diverse servants of one and the same Lord. Hafizović never quite explains what he means by the Divine Spirit; the way in which he plays with language, using terms that cannot be expressed precisely,

---


57 Ibid., str. 154.

58 Ibid., str. 79.
leaves space for crossing from one tradition to another, from external to internal, from applied dimension to its *nous*.\(^59\)

This is especially visible in the second period of his writings where he moves toward Corbin, following Corbin’s method of using comparative esoteric notions and theories from different traditions, including Emanuel Swedenborg. Corbin’s *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* became a major source for his “esoterization” of Islamic theology. In one of the two articles that are republished in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, chapter “*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” Corbin argues that the spirit and almost the form of the thought of Ibn ʿArabī and Mulla Ṣadrā Shirāzī are the same as found in Swedenborg.\(^60\) The concepts used by Corbin in this article (including the *mundus imaginalis*, *Nā-kojā-Ābād*, and *hierognosis*) and the central terms *imaginary* and *imaginial* are the standard terminology of Hafizović.\(^61\)

Hafizović’s switch from Traditionalist references to Corbin might be seen as a rejection of Traditionalism, but it might equally be seen as a development of Traditionalism, a shift to

\(^{59}\) A critical approach to Hafizović’s style of writing, especially considering the language he uses, can be found in Adnan Silajdžić, “Uz objavljivanje knjige O načelima islamske vjere autora Rešida Hafizovića, Bemust, Zenica, 1996,” *Znakovi vremena* 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 152-155.


references that are more commonly cited in international academia but do not contradict Traditionalist perspectives, with which Corbin is broadly compatible. The connection between Ibn ʻArabī and Swedenborg was first made at the end of the nineteenth century by an early Swedish Sufi, ʻAbd al-Hādī Aguéli (1869-1917), the source from whom Guénon first discovered Sufism. Like Mahmutćehejić, and indeed like Corbin himself, Hafizović is also involved in interreligious dialog, and his esoterization of Islam is also a universalization of it, as it was for Aguéli.

6.3. Nevad Kahteran

A similar use of the Traditionalists’ ideas is visible in the work of Kahteran, though less than in the work of Hafizović, in terms of both quantity and development. Like Mahmutćehejić, Kahteran builds on perennialism in terms of the idea of interreligious dialogue. In the words of the well-informed reviewer of the English translation of a volume of his articles, Kahteran stresses the importance of Traditionalist’s paradigm for overcoming the “ethnic-religious violence,” using “the


63 See especially Rešid Hafizović, Muslimani u dijalogu s drugima i sa sobom - svetopovijesne i hijeropovijesne paradigm (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2002) and his later and more critical Islam u kulturnom identitetu Evrope (Sarajevo: Ibn Sina, 2018).
multicultural and multireligious vision of traditional thinkers such as René Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.”

Kahteran begins with the concept of love as found in the work of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, understanding love as an ontological necessity and positioning it even above reason. Love is the attribute of God that stands in opposition to human love. Kahteran does not explain how to transcend this abyss in terms of ontology or of metaphysics in general, but focuses on the life of Rūmī and his introduction to Shams-i Tabrīzī, probably as an historical example of the dissolution of the ontological breach between human and God. Kahteran approaches interreligious dialogue by placing it within the broader context of cross-cultural and multicultural philosophy, as well as by connecting it to the East Asian traditions of Confucianism and Daoism, an approach that he

---


65 Nevad Kahteran et al., Rumijevo filozofija ljubavi (Sarajevo: Šahinpašić, 2007), p. 35.

66 Hence the title of one essay of his: “What is the meaning of and to what end do we study cross-cultural or multicultural philosophy?”, Rumijevo filozofija ljubavi, pp. 1-17.

67 Analogically to the work “Rumi’s Philosophy of Love”, Kahteran has published next book also as editor, under the title: Platforma za islamsko-confucijansko-daoistički dijalog na Bakansu/A Platform for Islamic-Confucian-Daoist Dialogue in the Bakans, Sarajevo, “ITD Sedam”, 2010. Though its double-language title can assume that this book is also bilingual, still, apart of not completely four pages of “Afterword”, it is written fully in Bosnian.
This approach is based on two foundations: philosophizing beyond reflexive critique, and philosophizing within a global context. Kahteran sees his task as trying to “introduce extraordinary knowledge within the philosophical study of Chinese philosophy into the philosophical circle of the ex-Yugoslav countries.” Even though he again refers to this task in a later book, it remains unclear exactly how this method can be applied, both in general and in a specifically Balkan context.

6.4. Adnan Silajdžić

Only Silajdžić relativizes the Traditionalists, taking a somewhat “sober” approach to their theories and treating them as a distinct and discrete phenomenon. Though it was Silajdžić who first introduced Traditionalist thought into the Bosnian language in an Islamic context, some critical

68 Kahteran states: “It is by the Will of Heaven that it is indeed professor Nasr who gathered this exploratory team of learned people in order to deepen ‘dialogue among civilizations’ and ‘ecumenical vision’.” Ibid, pp. 15-16.

69 Ibid, pp. 16-17.

70 Ibid, pp. 13.

71 Nove granice kineske filozofije, ed. Nevad Kahteran and Bo Mou (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2018). In “Platforma za islamsko-konfucijansko-daoistički dijalog na Bakanu” it is stated that the “New Frontiers of Chinese Philosophy” is being published in the same year, meaning 2010, in Sarajevo by publishing house Šahinpašić (p. 14, footnote 1).

72 Kahteran is still writing about this; see Situating the Bosnian Paradigm: The Bosnian Experience of Multicultural Relations (New York: Global Scholarly publications, 2008).
standpoints mark his later relation with perennialism. Around 1997, he provided a text on
dogmatics aimed for internal use at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences. In it, the Five Pillars of Islam
are treated through the prism of the vocabulary of traditional Islamic theology, Sufi terminology,
and some Traditionalist theories. Guénon and Schuon are introduced, and the concept of
religio perennis is used as kind of bridge between theology and Sufism. Silajdžić understood
perennialism and Traditionalism from the perspective of theology and philosophy, finally defining
an autonomous approach towards Traditionalism by using Guénon almost exclusively for his
critique of modern civilization, and Nasr as one of the rare Muslim authors who are able to use the
parallel legacies of philosophy, theology, and science.

This approach is visible in his text on the Five Pillars of Islam, especially in the second part of the
text, where a mostly new introduction for the subject is offered to students. It is even more
visible in an article dedicated to the question of human freedom. In this, Silajdžić discusses
different approaches to the problem of freedom, problematizing it inside a radical understanding,

---

73 The full text has never been published, but Samir Beglerović has a copy in his private archive.
74 Martin Lings (pp. 7, 19), Frithjof Schuon (pp. 10, 19, 25, 47 /and his book “The Transcendent
Unity of Religions”/, 59), Rene Guenon (pp. 19, 59), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (pp. 33, 35, 48, 59).
75 Ibid, pp. 19.
76 This could be seen in his later works, for example, ones published in English under title: Muslim
Perceptions of other Religion, Sarajevo, El-Kalem and Fakultet islamskih nauka, 2006, pp. 31-32,
47, 61, 76-77.
77 Silajdžić, Five Pillars of Islam (shurūṭ al-islām), pp. 60-76.
either as reality or illusion. He begins with Guénon’s critique of modernity, and uses this also in his later work. His method is to address phenomena through different dimensions, beginning with theology and metaphysics, moving through post-enlightenment and positivistic science, and ending with sociology and culture. He cites and reflects upon early, classic, and modern or contemporary literature, and then presents, very clearly, his own critique. After offering a brief sketch of possible understandings of freedom, reflecting on its meaning for Socrates, Kant, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl, Guénon, Denis de Rougemont, A. N. Marlow, and Schuon, and within the Muslim classics and the Frankfurt School, Silajdžić concludes that freedom, at last in Muslim thought, insists upon two human dimensions—homo faber (man the maker [of his own fortunes]) and homo sapiens—under the condition that the human is endeavouring to complete him/herself as the slave of God (ʻabd Allāh). This, as he explains at the end of an article on “Sloboda – stvarnost ili iluzija” (Freedom: Reality or illusion?) draws on the understanding of the relationship between God and the human nature and heart of “the representatives of the perennial philosophy.”

Silajdžić’s method also emphasizes the necessity of thoroughly understanding the basics of any problem and, especially, the context in which it emerged. Though he shows respect for the theories and, especially, critiques of the Traditionalists, notably Guénon and Nasr, he at the same time puts them in the category of “modern Traditionalists as such,” and uses them to further

---


develop his own critiques. For example, in what is probably his most important book, *Islam u otkriću kršćanske Evrope: Povijest međureligijskog dijaloga* (The Christian European Discovery of Islam: The History of Interreligious Dialogue) he analyses Traditionalists (this time Corbin and Schuon) in a specific cultural-religious context, as intellectuals who, due to the strength of the esoteric idea of the transcendent unity of all religions, were deeply interested in dialogue with Louis Massignon, explaining them rather as “Massignonians” rather than as Traditionalists.  

7. Traditionalism at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences

The Faculty of Islamic Sciences, as the Islamic Theology Faculty has been known since 1990, was the site of the first reception of Traditionalism by the Bosnian ulama, and is where all the Bosnian Traditionalists discussed above have worked, with the single exception of Mahmutćehajić, and even he was briefly an external lecturer in the MA program there. It is therefore not surprising to find that Traditionalist works are taught in courses at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, though this is still unprecedented outside Bosnia: nowhere else is there a comparable emphasis on Traditionalism at a major Islamic institution. Only in pre-revolutionary Iran can anything comparable be found, at Nasr’s Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, and this was not part of Iran’s network of Islamic institutions. It was important for the intellectual life of pre-revolutionary Iran, but there were also other institutions teaching philosophy, and many other institutions

---


teaching Islam. In Bosnia, in contrast, the Islamic Theology Faculty was originally the only institution for training future ulama—imams, preachers, and teachers of religion in schools. During and after the Bosnian war, three more institutions were opened, two in Bosnia and one in the Sandžak, an area of Serbia where many Muslims live, but the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Sarajevo remains the leading institution, and the only one for training theologians and imams.

The Faculty’s four-year BA program in Islamic Theology contains 55 courses, of which 30 are in the classic central subjects in which any member of the ulama must be trained: Arabic, Quran, Hadith, Uṣūl, the details of ‘ibādāt (worship), and the Sharia. The remaining courses include one elective and 24 “other” subjects: Hadith methodology, pedagogics, sociology and psychology, philosophy and history, and some non-standard approaches to Islam—Sufism and Shiism. In 2019, five required courses had a significant Traditionalist emphasis in their reading lists, as did one of the many possible elective courses. Four of the courses with a Traditionalist emphasis were in the category of “other” subjects, meaning that almost 20% of such “other” courses had a Traditionalist emphasis. One course with a Traditionalist emphasis was in the central subject of Uṣūl al-dīn (fundamentals of Islam).

There were two courses in the first year with a Traditionalist emphasis, the course on Uṣūl al-dīn and “Introduction to the Study of Religion.” The first of these had two assigned texts, both by

Hafizović, of which the first was his early and Schuonian Teološki traktati 1, discussed above. There were two recommended texts, one of which was a translation of Nasr’s The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity. The second of these two first-year courses, the “Introduction to the Study of Religion,” used several texts by Bosnian and Western scholars who were not connected to Traditionalism, and also assigned two articles by Silajdžić, and recommended one further article of his and two books. The required articles were “Islamska pobožnost” (Islamic Religiosity) and “Međureligijski dijalog pred izazovima modernog svijeta” (Interreligious dialogue in the face of the challenges of the modern world), an article on the topic that has interested so many Bosnian Traditionalists. The recommended article was also on interreligious dialogue, and one of the recommended books was his major work, Islam u otkriću kršćanske Europe, discussed above; the other book was Muslimani u traganju za identitetom (Muslims in search of identity).

---

83 “Studijski program Islamske teologije” (2019). The other recommended text was the Introduction to Islam of Muhammad Hamidullah (1908-2002), an Indian-French scholar who is in some ways comparable to Nasr.


85 Adnan Silajdžić, “Nema istinskog kršćansko-muslimanskog dijaloga bez zrele i odgovorne vjere u Boga,” in Allah, kršćanski odgovor, ed. Miroslava Wolfa (Rijeka: Ex libris, 2015); Muslimani u traganju za identitetom (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2006); Islam u otkriću kršćanske Europe (Sarajevo: Povijest međureligijskog dijaloga, 2003).
In the second and third years, students took two courses with a Traditionalist emphasis:

“Introduction to Sufism (Tasawwuf)” and “Shi’ism.” All the texts for the course on Sufism were either by Traditionalists (Nasr and Hafizović) or by Corbin. The first texts read was Nasr’s *Living Sufism*, followed by Corbin on meditation on Islam and on “Theological, ontological and esoteric *tawḥīd* [unity],” and then Hafizović’s “Definicija sufizma, jezik sufijske literature i sufijski traktati” (Definition of Sufism, the language of Sufi literature and Sufi tracts). The course on Shi’ism assigns 17 short texts, of which four were by Hafizović, four by Corbin, and five by Muḥammad-Ḥosain Ṭabāṭabā’ī (1903-81), an Iranian philosopher to whom Corbin and Nasr were both close. The remaining texts were by a Pakistani Scholar, Husain Mohammad Jafri (1938-2019), and by Ayatollah Khomeini.

In their final year, students took a course of which the very existence reflects a Traditionalist understanding: “Islamic art.” Art is not generally understood as central to Islam in the way that *tafsīr* (Quranic exegesis), for example, is, but one of Guénon’s earliest collaborators was an art historian, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), from whom Guénon adopted an understanding of art in terms of sacred symbolism. These ideas were developed further by Burckhardt and by

---


87 “Studijski program Islamske teologije” (2019).

Schuon, himself an amateur painter, and an emphasis on art and aesthetics became characteristic of the Maryamiyya. Five books were assigned for “Islamic Art,” among which are two of Nasr’s major works, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* and *Traditional Islam in The Modern World*; the others are by Bosnian and Western scholars who are not Traditionalists. In addition, two of the four recommended texts were by Burckhardt: *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* and *Sacred Art in East and West*.  

Final-year students might also be able to take a further, elective course on Sufism, “An Overview of Sufi learning,” which used three assigned texts: that by Hafizović of which an extract was also used in the required course on Sufism—*Temeljni tokovi sufizma* (Major Currents of Sufism)—and Nasr’s *Living Sufism*, the whole of which was also assigned for the earlier course on Sufism. In addition, there were two texts by non-Traditionalist Bosnian scholars.  

Given these readings, graduates of the BA program in Islamic Theology are familiar with two major Bosnian Traditionalist authors, Hafizović and Silajdžić, with Nasr and Corbin, and with Traditionalist understandings of religion in general and Islam in particular, and Traditionalist understandings of Sufism, Shi’ism, and sacred art. These readings are important for a few students in each year, but have only limited impact on most students, who generally come from

---

89 “Studijski program Islamske teologije” (2019).

90 Đemal Čehajić, *Derviški redovi u Jugoslovenskim zemljama* (Sarajevo: Orijentalni institut u Sarajevu, 1987) as a required text, and and Samir Beglerović, *Tesavvuf Bosne u vidicima Fejzulaha Hadžibajrića* (Sarajevo: Bookline, 2015), as a supplementary text.
backgrounds that differ from those of the young Bosnians who are thought to be the typical readers of the Traditionalist works published by commercial publishers. They are less likely to read English, and more likely to have a rural background. They are less concerned with the problems addressed by Nasr in his *A young Muslim’s guide to the modern world*. As often happens (and as may be necessary), the curriculum reflects the interests of the teachers more than those of the students.

8. Conclusion

Traditionalism, then, is a well-established aspect of postwar Bosnian intellectual life, especially for the younger generation of well-educated Bosnians who want to reconcile Islam with Western perspectives. It is also important when it comes to the question of interreligious dialogue, notably in the work of Mahmutčehajić and Kahteran, and in the courses taught at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences. That Traditionalism plays an important part in interreligious dialogue is not unprecedented: other Traditionalists outside Bosnia also engage in this dialogue, either individually, as in the case of Nasr, or institutionally, as in the case of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, a Jordanian body directed by a Jordanian Traditionalist, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad (born 1966). Mahmutčehajić is a senior fellow of this Institute, as is Karić. The

---

91 Sedgwick, “The Modernity of Neo-Traditionalist Islam.”

impact of this Institute, of Mahmutćehajić’s the International Forum Bosna, and of interreligious
dialogue in general, are topics that lie beyond the scope of this article.

The presence of Traditionalism in the Islamic establishment and the role played by it in the courses
taught at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences is unprecedented elsewhere, however. It can be explained
in part by the interests of the Bosnian scholars working at the Faculty, and perhaps also in part by
the origins of the Faculty in the Austro-Hungarian Hochschule für Scharia-Richter (School for
Sharia Judges), with its emphasis on Western jurisprudence as well as usūl al-dīn, an emphasis
reflected in contemporary courses at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in history, psychology, and
pedagogy, all of which tend to use translations of Western texts, as it is felt that Muslim
intellectuals have not developed appropriate approaches to these fields. Traditionalist works fit
more comfortably with these than with the classic Arabic texts used to teach subjects such as
Hadith.

The unusual openness of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences to texts translated from Western
languages ultimately reflects Bosnia’s unusual position between East and West. In Turkey and the
Arab world, the ulama generally focus on the classic texts of their discipline, and do not often read
in Western languages. The Bosnian ulama of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, in contrast, all grew
up in Yugoslavia, and share a cultural orientation towards the West that is also found among the
younger university graduates who are the typical readers of the translations of Traditionalist

follows the approach of his PhD supervisor, Fazlur Rahman, and is thought by some (including
most Bosnian Traditionalists) to be too open to Salafism and Wahhabism.
works that this article has identified with the third stage of the Bosnian reception of Traditionalism. This, too, reflects Bosnia’s position between East and West.

Bibliography


