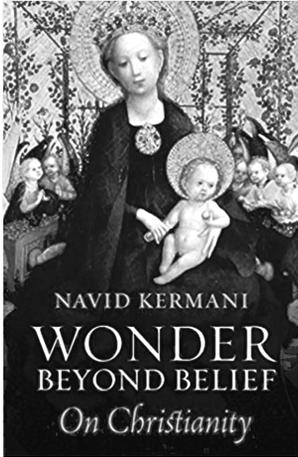


Navid Kermani, *Wonder Beyond Belief: On Christianity* (London: Polity, 2017). 978 1 5095 1484 7, pp.272, £25.00.



Navid Kermani's parents are from Persia, but he is first of all a German writer. Kermani is a Muslim; but does not see himself as an Islamic spokesperson. He is a scholar of Islam but does not produce boring articles. He is, most prominently, a poet: a virtuoso of verbalisation. Kermani, the artist, in this book is under the influence of art: we hear his stream of thought when he looks at images of Christianity. His notes are so experiential that they seem merely experimental. The text sounds radically honest, innocent indeed; but is it? I think that we should read Kermani's contemplations by successively

switching on three lights. The first is the light of the bystanders, the second is Johannine, and the third is the light of interreligious dialogue.

Our artist is not only a poet; he is an actor. In front of artistic masterpieces, he plays a role, I think. His role gets its character because he is never alone with the work of art before him. He has—let me read him thus—three bystanders. They seem to whisper remarks and questions over his shoulder. One of them is a Muslim. To his fellow believer, Kermani seems to say: 'Your love of what is your own—culture, country, person—manifests itself in your self-criticism. Your love of the other—person, culture, even religion—may be much hotter, may be unconditional.'¹ Those were his words on receiving the 2015 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade for the original German version of this book.

His second bystander is a Christian, 'the Catholic friend', as he keeps calling him: a person who must have opted for a confessionalist Catholicism, whose primary confession is the gratefulness for not being a Protestant—Catholic chauvinism. Protestantism, therefore, comes across as the most fleshless, bloodless and joyless form of life (if life at all); and that accords well with what Kermani seems to be telling his third bystander.

I imagine, as interlocutor at Kermani's readings of images, this somehow-still-Christian rationalist; it is really for him that Kermani plays his role: *I am a Muslim*, he seems to say, *and I love these images more than you do. I am in a more lively conversation with them than you, because I dare to see sex where you*

¹ See 'Über die Grenzen—Jacques Mourad und die Liebe in Syrien', at <http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/445651/?mid=819312>.

see a symbol of purity; and by the way, I dare to remind you of the atrocities and aberrations in your oh-so-humanist Christian Occident, which are no milder than what you consider to be typically Islamic. The belief that you have half forgotten strikes me—more than it strikes you—in its physical expressivity, but strikes me as unconvincing in its acclaimed rationality.

Originally, Kermani wanted the book to be called something like *My Christianity*, and it really makes us sense what a Muslim feels when looking at Christianity with benevolent curiosity; what he feels is, as the book now aptly calls itself: *Ungläubiges Staunen*. I feel fascination, yes indeed, to a degree beyond belief; but I am also the observer not completely absorbed, not fully understanding, I am—and remain—the doubting Thomas. So Kermani himself is the bystander when he sees Christians (Catholic and Orthodox only, of course) live in the light of their art. As bystander, however, his view is anything but sober: it is excited and exciting, free, fresh, hot—but unbelieving. So Kermani's words sometimes sound like the Gospel of John. What Jesus does and is and says is constantly, amusingly and tragically misunderstood by some bystander; but why does the bystander touch the outside only? Or, rather, what is the inside, and why is it so hard to see?

That brings us to the last light to be switched on: interreligious dialogue. It is often mistaken for a version of ecumenical dialogue. Ecumenism is looking for common belief formulae in order to overcome the divisions in our religious community. Interreligious dialogue does not need to show that basically we mean the same thing in our religions; because we do not aspire to become one religious community. We can be faithful friends in difference of belief. Still, we are interested in why others would find implausible what is for us the evident source of hope and joy: Christ Risen.

In the light of Kermani's respectful, indeed passionate, not-understanding, we can see that the transformation of comprehension that we call Christian faith is a gift. Then, however, we also want to respond to the questions that Muslims such as our poet implicitly ask. One is, how can you love as excessively as Jesus and still claim that the source for that can be found only in Jesus? I think the answer is: the joy of the Kingdom liberates us to that giving beyond counting.

Kermani, though, has not written his book to hear our answers. He has found his own; not in a sentence, though. Suddenly in the middle of all the works of art, he looks at a (we hope) living person: the Jesuit who launched the Mar Musa monastic community, Paolo dall'Oglio, abducted in Syria in 2013, a witness to that faith that drove him to be *innamorato dell'Islam*—to fall in love with Islam. It feels as if the poet and the priest were speaking together: 'Your love for the other may be much hotter, may be unconditional'.