

## Wonder Beyond Belief: On Christianity

**Navid Kermani**

**Tony Crawford, Translator**

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*This rare theological gift tugs at the curtain fixed between Islam and Christianity.*

Navid Kermani's *Wonder Beyond Belief* is a work of artistic inquiry that is rife with spiritually edifying morsels, made all the more piquant by the author's outsider's perspective.

Primarily by approaching great works of Christian art, Kermani meditates upon the foundations of Christianity. As a Muslim, he remains at a theological distance. He is a friendly observer whose caveats around belief land gently.

Kermani's comparisons of Christian theology with mystical Sufi theology are particularly beautiful. When speaking of Botticelli's *Christ Carrying the Cross*, he notes that Jesus seems to be dancing with the burden rather than suffering under its weight, and if one steps far enough away from the painting, Jesus begins to look more like a feminine figure. This jibes well with the Sufi belief that Jesus is "the incarnation of mystic-erotic love."

Stefan Lochner's *Madonna of the Rose Bower* elicits in him respect and awe for Mary, matched by Sufism's embrace of the divine feminine. To Kermani, Christianity's gorgeous depictions of the mother of God speak to something powerful, while "no one has ever succeeded in painting a halfway believable picture of the Father."

Through art, poetry, architecture, and the liturgy of High Mass, this is a lovely meeting of faiths. Kermani paints evocative images of his own beliefs through philosophical and spiritual musings. His conversations with an unnamed "Catholic friend" demonstrate that, to revitalize faith, Christians should reclaim the wonder that once permeated their artistic expressions.

One significant deviation from the artwork comes in a chapter on Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, a Christian leader in Syria who dedicated his life to bridging the divide between Christians and Muslims. He was kidnapped by ISIS in 2013 and is presumed dead. His example of love is mirrored in the featured works of art; in the end, Kermani finds love to be the most the compelling and vibrant feature of the Christian expressions he examines.

*Wonder Beyond Belief* is a wellspring for the devout—both Christian and Muslim. This is a rare gift, one that tugs at the curtain fixed between two religions to dispel historically ingrained hostilities.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (January/February 2018)

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