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# FOREWORD

To think that we can understand Islam through current headlines and the conflicting opinions of political pundits is sheer illusion. We might do better to review some bare facts: Islam is a monotheistic religion whose followers believe that it was revealed through the archangel Gabriel in stages to the Prophet Muhammad over the course of a number of years, starting in 610 AD and lasting until his death in 632. The holy book of Islam, the Koran, is a transcription in Arabic of these revelations. The Koran is the basis of Islamic law, belief, and practice, and is supplemented by the accounts of Muhammad's sayings and actions, and by the interpretations of religious scholars.

Our review of facts tells us that Islam rapidly expanded through conquest and trade, and that a highly developed civilization emerged which has remained a source of culture and pride to Muslims for well over a thousand years. To this day, over 1.5 billion Muslims (about a quarter of the world's population) share a strong sense of community and identity despite the fact that Islam—the majority religion in countries stretching from West Africa to Indonesia—spans many diverse peoples and lands. Most Muslims are not even Arabs, yet they all turn towards Mecca in prayer and recite the same holy words in Arabic. These bare facts are more helpful in understanding Islam than the acts and words of misguided fanatics; yet even more helpful would be a well qualified personal guide to introduce us to a multitude of ways through which we can approach the inner life of this faith.

It is difficult to imagine a time when the West has been more in need of a good personal guide to the world of Islam. But how will we know when we have found such a guide? With patience he will certainly explain to us the most important concepts that we must know in order to understand the Muslim way of life and thinking. His words will lead us to places where we can experience sights and sounds that broaden and deepen our understanding of that other civilization in a way that is just as powerful as any listing of facts and data. Along the way, our guide might introduce us to some notable people, or point out intriguing paths that lead to some remarkable places we might later explore more fully on our own, or he might pause to direct our attention to the chanting coming from a gathering of dervishes in a room high above the street. Of course, our guide must be fully aware of the gaps that exist between that other way of life and our own; he must tell us only the truth and leave out personal biases; and, finally, he must have the skill and geniality to communicate effectively. Readers of this book certainly have such a guide in Jean-Louis Michon.

It should be a comfort to readers, both Muslim and other, to learn that Dr. Michon's point of departure is that Islam is "an expression of the Universal Tradition". By this he means that there is and always has been a single source of Truth in the universe, and that this Truth has chosen to manifest Itself to various times and peoples in forms that are suited to those people. From this perspective, Islam, like other revealed traditions, is precious in and of itself because wherever one looks within its many aspects, the tradition bears the imprint of Providence. What we as outsiders must do is to learn how and where to look for this imprint. It may come as a surprise that such an attitude regarding the validity of other faiths is, in fact, deeply embedded in Islam itself. It is an article of faith for Muslims that there have been many prophets sent by God to many peoples and that these

**1**. *Opposite*: Tile work from the Alhambra, Granada, Spain

prophets must share the unflagging respect of believing Muslims. This results in a certain kinship between Muslims and other "People of the Book", primarily Jews and Christians. This, too, may be surprising to readers, but this book holds many such surprises. It is likely that some followers of other faiths who read these pages with open minds and hearts will, through their own familiarity with the sacred, come to comprehend something of the ancient kinship between Muslims and others who seek to know and to worship the One.

Besides the framework of the Universal Tradition mentioned above, Dr. Michon's approach in this book is notable in several other ways. First, he intertwines the spirit and development of the Islamic city with the other aspects of the religion. Here, the city is seen as a crystallization of the principles of the faith. From its arts, crafts, and architecture, to its government, to the clothing and assemblies of its citizens, the city demonstrates how a traditional society is steeped in constant reminders of the origin and the end of all bounty, virtue, and beauty—God. It is a reminder to us all of the possibilities of finding almost endless avenues of connecting spiritually to a higher reality, thus ennobling ourselves and paying due respect to the potential of those avenues. A ready example would be the traditional, and thus sacred, ambiance of a home. Dr. Michon makes the case that the role of the traditional city is to be a powerful force for individual and communal salvation. This is a challenging concept for modern people who often limit their religion to specific times and places outside their homes and everyday lives; yet to understand Traditional Islam we must understand that for Muslims it is natural for Islam, because of its sacredness and scope, to permeate all aspects of the individual and communal lives of believers.

This book is also notable in that it focuses a great deal of attention on art and music in Islam. Indeed, the well-chosen and often stunning illustrations that grace the pages of this book contribute greatly to its impact. Few writers have Jean-Louis Michon's degree of personal experience with Islamic art and music, and even fewer are able to penetrate beneath the forms to the spirituality within them. Although the discussions of art history or musical structures may at first seem peripheral to an introduction to the faith, patient reading will show that once again Dr. Michon uses these as a way to coax the spiritual essence of the forms to reveal themselves to us. The foreign words or ideas, though certainly useful to researchers, should not put off the general reader: One need not know the details of music theory to enjoy a symphony, but when we are alerted to the presence of patterns in a foreign work, new meanings can leap to our consciousness. The in-depth discussions of art and music establish for us one grand pattern, namely, that here, too, the Spirit enters the life of the individual and the community.

It is completely appropriate that the book should culminate in a section on Sufism, the personal quest for a "taste" of God's Presence. It is for this same goal, though with less exalted horizons, that all the other laws, practices, arts, and institutions of Islam primarily exist. Once again, we have a uniquely qualified guide in Dr. Michon. After his survey of Sufism, we are compelled to reflect that the source, namely Traditional Islam, which fed this kind of inwardness, peace, and virtue, could not be the same source that feeds the strident, militant version of the "religion" which claims the same name. For that realization, and much more, we owe our guide our heartfelt thanks.

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