

Book Review

Introduction to Traditional Islam, Illustrated: Foundations, Art, and Spirituality, By Jean-Louis Michon, Foreword by Roger Gaetani, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008, PP. 160

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Behind the boisterous media, dominated by headlines of militant and political Islam, resides the more serene and cultivated form of traditional Islam. This form of Islam is more and more under threat from two different extremes: the fundamentalists and the modern secularists. French scholar Jean-Louis Michon (1924–2013) adeptly unveils the lesser-known dimensions of the Islamic tradition, distilling the essence and beauty of this misunderstood religion, which although often overlooked has over 1.5 billion adherents.

As many introductions to Islam devote their attention to the history of the faith, particularly on the Prophet Muhammad and the sacred foundation of the Koran, readers seeking a broader examination of the Islamic tradition often need to amass numerous books to obtain a full picture of the religion. The wide-scope presentation of Islam provided in this volume spares the reader such an endeavor. Roger Gaetani bears witness to the unique qualifications and depth of Michon’s perspective, noting in the foreword, “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.... Readers of this book certainly have such a guide in Jean-Louis Michon” (p. ix).

This work is divided into four parts: (I) Islam: Foundations; (II) The Message of Islamic Art; (III) Music and Spirituality in Islam; and (IV) The Way of the Sufis. It is beautifully illustrated and contains over two hundred seventy color photographs.

Given the difficulties of finding reliable and accurate information on the world of Islam (dar al-islam), works like this one are not only timely but essential. Although Islam is said to be the final religion of this temporal cycle, it is also the youngest religion, which is facing myriad problems not only from the outside world or non-Muslims, but also within the community of its own believers. Michon astutely observes, “Today, the unity of the Muslim community is more than ever compromised by national rivalries and ideological dissensions which rarely have anything to do with the ultimate interests of believers” (p. 44).

Michon presents the Islamic tradition in such a way as to help the reader better understand the common ground between Islam and other religions, especially the Abrahamic monotheisms of Judaism and Christianity, who are regarded as the “People of the Book” (ahl al-kitab).

The importance and influence of the Muslim community (ummah) on the believer is continually highlighted within the religion. Michon writes,

Certainly, in his conduct, a man commits himself alone and it is he alone who will appear before the Supreme Judge to answer for his actions. However, the bond which links him to the social body is so tight that he depends for his salvation largely upon those around him and upon the more-or-less favorable circumstances that prevail there for the accomplishment of revealed Law. (p. 9)

The centrality of mutual admonition as an essential virtue is stressed in the Koran: “Verily, man is in loss, save only them that believe and perform good works, and exhort one another to Truth and exhort one another to patience” (103:2–3).

The ongoing effort of each believer to submit to the Divine Will, along with the communal framework, serves to further aid in this effort. This is especially apparent in the Islamic city. Michon explains: “in the Muslim city, the striving after individual salvation involves ipso facto the sacralization of the social, whilst inversely the community entrusted with the Divine Message, wise institutions, and the example of the just conserves their content for the benefit of its members” (p. 9).

The declaration of the oneness and remembrance of the Divine are essential goals that the Koran continuously urges believers to strive for. As taught in the Koran: “Nothing is greater than the remembrance of God!” (29:45) The Islamic prayers (salat) are said five times a day: at dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset, and after nightfall. The ambience of prayer impregnates the whole of human existence. Prayer, as Michon writes, “punctuates with its rhythm the entire life of

the individual from puberty to death; by its continuous renewal, it stamps upon time's passing the mark of that unique instant when the primordial Pact to adore their Lord was first joined by souls" (p. 19).

In Islamic art, like all forms of sacred art, "artistic creativity is nothing other than a predisposition which God has placed in man to help him follow the path which leads to Him" (p. 52). Muslim artists are visually able to illustrate in their work the sublime notion such as that of *tajalli*, "the infinite radiation of the Divine Essence across the multiplicity of levels of existence" (p. 58). Michon also discusses the Divine mark of calligraphy and its connection to the believer: "the Word of God possesses a power of recollection that acts upon the best part of man, assembles his scattered energies, and concentrates them, 'in the path of God', thereby giving him the best chances for spiritual enlightenment, since God has promised 'the good end to those who revere Him' (Koran 7:128)" (p. 66).

The presence of prayer intertwines with the believer's own identity so much so that, as Michon notes, the general believer or "Muslim personality is positively enwrapped in the recollection of divine Unity" (p. 43). He analyzes the meaning of the outward and inward dimensions of the Islamic tradition in the following passage:

[T]he revealed Message has two dimensions or aspects: one that is outward on the surface and another that is inward and deep. The first is the Law (shari'ah) which is binding on all responsible men and women, ties them to itself by reason, and rules their faculties of feeling and action; followed to the letter, it makes for the restoration to creatures of their original status the shapes them to attain to the felicity promised in the Hereafter. The second is Truth (haqiqah) which concerns the essential realities hidden behind outward appearances and is perceptible only to the "eye of the heart" open to contemplation. It is like the anticipation in this world of the vision God accords to His intimates. (p. 44)

Sufism, or the mystical or inner dimension of Islam, was not something that superimposed itself onto traditional Islam; it was, in fact, present from the inception of Islam, and its presence can be found on every page of the Koran—especially in verses that teach that the Divine is nearer to the human being "than his jugular vein" (50:16), or that God "is the best and the most beautiful recompense" (73:20). It is said that the Prophet Muhammad himself was the first Sufi. The Sufi makes it a practice to always live in a state of moment-to-moment remembrance, not only

when engaged in the five daily prayers, but in each moment throughout the day. As the Koran instructs, “Remember Me, and I will remember you” (2:152). Self-knowledge can be said to be the goal of every mystical quest. Within Islam, this is affirmed by the hadith of the Prophet, “He who knows himself knows his Lord.”

Good company becomes a prerequisite for the spiritual path to ensure its success. With this said, there are moments when the traveler is prescribed to take leave, both outwardly and inwardly, from the world to practice dhikr, the remembrance or invocation of the Divine. Of all the distinct formulas of invocation the name Allah is said to be the most complete and efficacious. Michon quotes the advice of one of the great philosophers and theologians within the Islamic tradition, al-Ghazali (d. 1111):

The best method consists of breaking totally your ties with the world, in such a way that your heart is occupied with neither family nor ... money.... In addition, you must be alone in a retreat to carry out, from among your acts of worship, only the prescribed salat ... and, being seated, concentrate your thoughts on God, without other interior preoccupation. You will do this, first by saying the name of God with your tongue, repeating without ceasing Allah, Allah, without relaxing your attention. The result will be a state in which you will effortlessly feel this name in the spontaneous movement of your tongue. (pp. 146–147)

Introduction to Traditional Islam stands out among many introductory books on the Islamic tradition for the precision, warmth, and beauty in how it conveys the art, spirituality, music, and culture that lie at the heart of this faith, the world’s second-largest religion. Giving the urgent need for the West to understand Islam in all its diversity, it is an admirable and timely volume that can assist in this process. Michon recalls the timeworn paths traveled by generations of Sufis who have fulfilled their task “to pass from century to century the good news that there exists a path which leads to God, and to guide along this path the souls enraptured by a Truth which never dies” (p. 149). They have responded to the call to bring to everyone to realize the transcendent wisdom that is “neither of the East nor of the West” (Koran 24:35).