

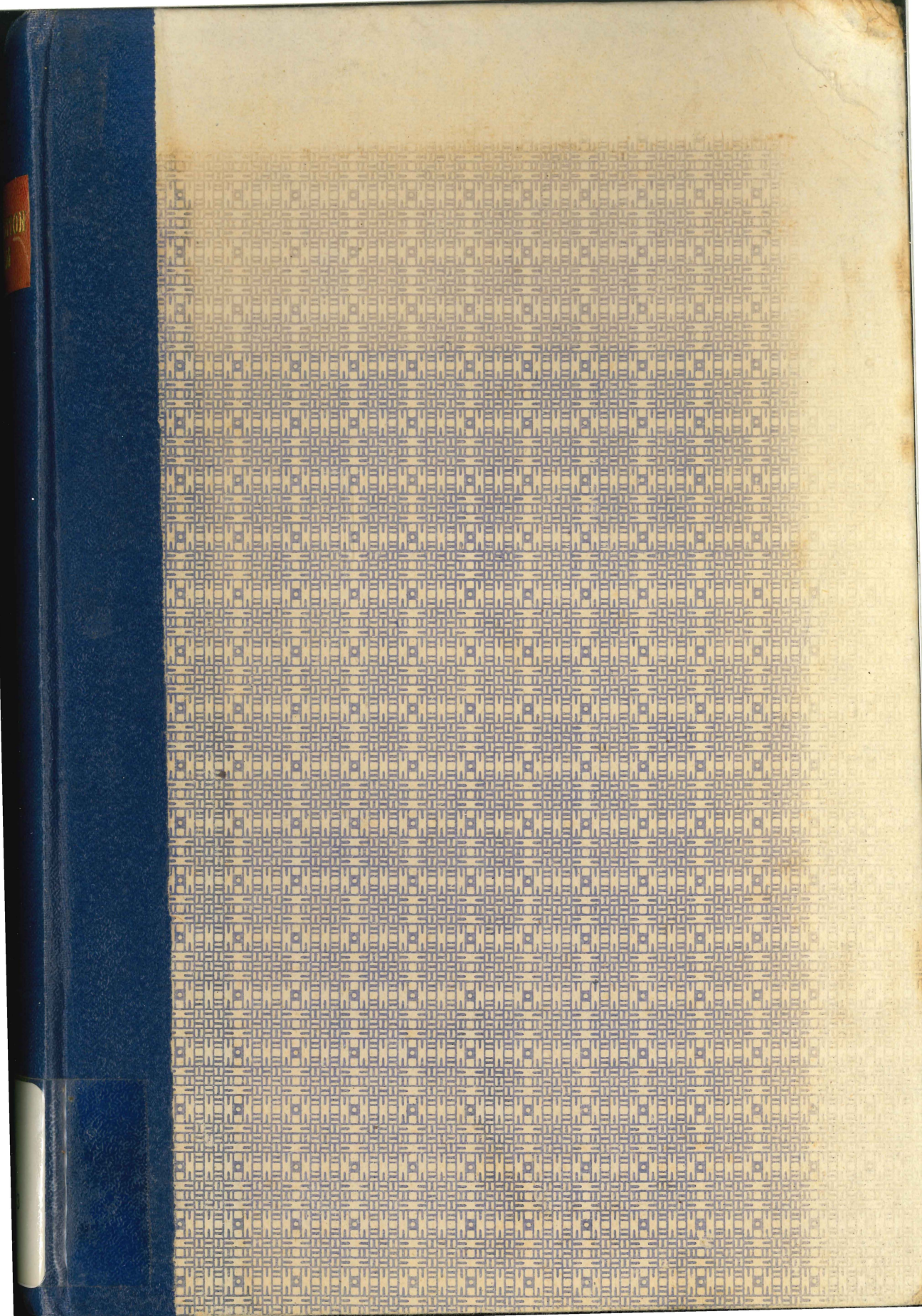
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INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

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Mathematics

476. The mathematical science has left ineffaceable traces of the Muslim share in its development. The terms *algebra*, *zero*, *cipher* etc., are of Arabic origin. The names of al-Khwarizmi, 'Umar al-Khayyam, al-Biruni and others shall remain as famous as those of Euclid and the Indian author of *Siddhanta*, etc. Trigonometry was unknown to the Greeks : The credit of its discovery goes undoubtedly to Muslim mathematicians.

To sum up

477. Muslims continued their work in the service of science until great misfortunes afflicted their principal intellectual centres, Baghdad in the East, and Cordova-Granada in the West. These were occupied by barbarians, to the great misfortune of science, at a time when the printing press had not yet come into vogue ; the burning of libraries with their hundreds of thousands of MSS. led to untold loss. The wholesale massacres did not spare the learned. What had been constructed in the course of centuries was destroyed in days. Once a civilization declines, due to such calamities, it takes several centuries of time as well as numerous resources, including the facilities to study the achievements of others — who should have assumed the relay after the fall of the previous standard-bearers of civilization, — before one can make up the distance. Moreover noble characters and great minds cannot be had at will : they are the gift and grace of Almighty on a people. That men of noble character are held in check, and not invested with the direction of their country men, is another tragedy which one has often to deplore.

The Arts

478. As in the case of the sciences, the Quran took the initiative in the development of arts among Muslims. The liturgical recitation of the Holy Quran created a new branch of music. The conservation of its text necessitated calligraphy and book-binding. The construction of mosques developed architecture and decorative art. To these were added later the secular needs of the wealthy. In its care for an equilibrium between the body and soul, Islam taught moderation in all things, led the natural talents in the right direction, and tried to develop in man a harmonious whole.

479. We read, in the *Sahih* of Muslim, an interesting saying of the Prophet : "God is beautiful and likes beauty." Another of his sayings is : "Beauty is prescribed in every-

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thing; even if you kill somebody, kill him in a nice manner." God has spoken in the Quran: "We have beautified the lower sky with lamps" (67:5), or "Lo! We have placed all that is in the earth as an ornamental thing that We may try men: which of them is best in conduct" (18:7). It goes so far as to ordain: "Put on your dress of adornment on every occasion of prostration (prayer)" (7:31).

480. In the life of the Prophet, we come across the following instructive incident: One day he saw the interior of a grave which was not fully levelled. He ordered the defect to be mended, adding that it would do neither good nor harm to the dead, but it was more pleasant to the eye of the living.

481. The taste for fine arts is innate in man. As in the case of all other natural gifts, Islam seeks to develop the artistic talents with the spirit of moderation. It may be recalled that excess even of self-mortification and of spiritual practices is forbidden in Islam.

482. The *minbar* (pulpit) in the mosque, which was prepared for the Prophet, was decorated with two balls, like pomegranates, and the two little grand-children of the Prophet enjoyed playing with them. This was the beginning of wood-carving. Later on, copies of the Quran were illuminated in colour, and the greatest care was taken in their binding. In short, Islam never forbids artistic progress. The only break put in is the one against the representation of animal (including human) figures. The prohibition does not seem to be absolute, yet the Prophet has placed a restraint on this activity. The reasons for this are metaphysical as well as biological and social. In the creation of the different kingdoms, animal life is the highest manifestation, the vegetables and minerals being of a lower order. Therefore in his anxiety to pay his profound respect to the Creator, man reserves for God the privilege of the supreme creation, and contents himself with the representation of inferior objects. The biological aspect is that an unutilized talent reinforces those in constant use. Thus, a blind man possesses a memory and a sensibility which are far superior to those in ordinary men. By abstaining from animal representations in painting, engraving, sculpture, etc., the innate talent of the artist seeks other outlets and manifests itself with greater vigour in other domains of art. As regards the social aspect, the horror of Chauvinism, degenerates into idolatry, and a restraint on animal representation would lead to restraint on idolatry. There are however several exceptions: such as toys of children, decoration of cushions