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Foreword

In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

The present volume contains the supplications transmitted from one of the most venerated religious authorities of early Islam, `Ali b. al-Husayn b. `Ali b. Abi Talib, better known as Zayn al-'Abidin (`the ornament of the worshipers'). His grandfather, `Ali b. Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, was adopted by the Prophet in his childhood, and grew up under the personal care and guardianship of the recipient of the divine Revelation, the Founder of Islam.

His grandmother, Fatima, was not only the most beloved daughter of the Prophet, but also a partner in her father's mission. His father, al-Husayn, and his uncle, al-Hasan, the only grandsons that the Prophet had, were brought up by the Prophet, who showered his deepest love and affection upon them. Thus Zayn al-'Abidin derived his religious and spiritual authority and his divine knowledge in the closest and most intimate way through his father and grandfather from the Founder of Islam, the Apostle of God.

Zayn al-'Abidin was held in special regard not only by the adherents of the Household of the Prophet, who considered him their fourth Imam and the only religious authority of his time, but also by the learned circles of the Muslims in general. His period in Medina was that of a growing interest in the Traditions of the Prophet, especially those which dealt with legal matters. It was the time of the `seven lawyers of Medina', who were engaged in collecting these Traditions and formulating legal opinions.

Among the Medinan scholars, we find that Zayn al-'Abidin was considered to be an eminent traditionist. The famous Medinese lawyer of this period Sa'id b. al-Musayyab, regarded the Imam with the highest esteem. Another great jurist and traditionist of the period, al-Zuhri though he was attached to the court of the Umayyads, was also a great friend and admirer of the Imam.

His honourific, Zayn al-'Abidin (the Ornament of the Worshipers), which refers to his devotion to prayer, was given him by al-Zuhri. Thus, from the overwhelming number of reports recorded by both Shi'a and Sunni authorities, it would seem that Zayn al-'Abidin was widely respected by the community in general for his extraordinary qualities, such as the long duration of his prayer, his piety, his forbearance, his learning, and his generosity.

Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to his exalted position is the famous ode composed in his praise by Farazdaq, an eminent poet of his time. In it, Farazdaq refers to the occasion when the Caliph Hisham b. 'Abd al-Malik was overshadowed by the respect which the people showed towards the great-grandson of the Prophet. It was at the time of the hajj when both of them were trying to reach through the crowds around the Ka'ba to get to the Black Stone.

The people gave way to Zayn al-'Abidin while the Caliph struggled desperately. This deeply offended the Caliph, and, in a sarcastic tone, he enquired who the person had been to whom the people had shown such preference. Farazdaq, who was present at the scene, thereupon composed an ode and recited it, addressing himself to Hisham. It is worth quoting a few lines from this ode, a masterpiece not only of Farazdag's output but of Arabic literature in general.

It is someone whose footsteps are known by every place,

And it is he who is known to the bayt in Mecca,

the most frequented sanctuary;

It is he who is the son of the best of all men of God (i.e. the Prophet (s)),

and it is he who is the most pious and devout,

the purest and most unstained,

the chastest and most righteous,

a symbol [for Islam]

This is 'Ali [b. al-Husayn] whose parent is the Prophet,

This is the son of Fatima, if you do not know who he is;

Whosoever recognizes his God knows also

the primacy and superiority of this man,

Because the religion has reached the nations

through his House.

It was this `Ali b. al-Husayn, the Zayn al-'Abidin of Islam, who, as well as through other means, taught the Muslims the essence of Islamic spirituality through his supplications. They are not, however, merely supplications; they embody comforting answers to many questions with which the man of his time and the man of our time are confronted. They deal with the crises through which any Muslim or the follower of any religious persuasion has to pass, which result from a variety of stresses and strains, and which

arise from sources both inward and outward.

I do not wish to discuss here the authenticity, validity, textual history, or even the literary beauty of these supplications, as these points have all been dealt with by the translator in his comprehensive introduction. Indeed, there is no space in a foreword such as this in which to conduct such a discussion. Instead, I should like to say a word about the relevance of these supplications to modern readers, irrespective of their race or religion, or of whether they are from the east or from the west.

The author, as has been pointed out, was a man of purity and piety, sincerity and trustworthiness, who was committed to God and the cause of a suffering humanity. He had a bond of pain with the men of his time, as also with those who came after him. So let me start by asking the following question: Do these supplications, composed and taught in the seventh century, have any relevance for those who live in the twentieth century, or indeed those who are yet to be born?

To answer this we have to ask a number of other questions. Is man to be regarded only in biological terms as the most cunning of animals? Is he to be seen as an economic beast controlled by the laws of supply and demand and class conflict? Is he to be regarded as a political animal, with a crude and excessive politicism occupying the centre of his mind, displacing all knowledge, religion, and wisdom? Or does he have a spiritual element which requires him to subordinate the temporal and the merely expedient to the Eternal and the True? Are human beings to be understood in terms of biology, politics, or economics, or are we to take into account their sublime nature, the spirit of God infused in them, and the ultimate ideal which they should endeavour to realize?

The essence of every epoch, age, or civilization, whether ancient, medieval, or modern, lies not in any biological unity of race, material achievement, or political order, but in the values that create and sustain that epoch, age, or civilization. Our achievements in perfecting the material aspects of life has led us to exploit matter instead of informing, humanizing, and spiritualizing it. Our social life has given us the means, but has denied us the ends.

A terrible blindness has afflicted the people of our civilization. The exclusion of the element of spirituality from humanity is the primary cause of the supremacy of matter, which has become so burdensome and oppressive. The defeat of the human by the material is thus the central weakness of the man of today.

Religion is rooted in a sense of wonderment at the eternal mystery of life itself. We feel a sense of awe and amazement at the mystery of the universe (ghayba), and move in an endless quest for answers to the perennial riddle with an eager longing to discover the truth of everything, the truth which is universal and absolute in the sense that it is valid for all men in all places and at all times. The experience of the mysterious is the fundamental quality underlying all religions.

We must, however, make a clear distinction between religion as a personal concern, as man's encounter with the divine, and religion as a part of history, as a social phenomenon, and as the commitment to a group. Religion at the personal level is a commitment to a belief in the conservation of values and is

based on the discovery of the essential worth and dignity of the individual and his relation to a higher world of reality. Thus the crisis comes at a personal level when the forces of evil, hatred, injustice, tyranny, betrayal, and falsehood prevail over love, justice, mercy, loyalty, goodness, and truth.

The supplications of the Imam Zayn al-'Abidin must be read against this background of man's crisis at the personal and individual level. Seen from this angle, they address themselves, in their essence, to the inner problems of the men of every epoch and age, every region and race, every persuasion and religion.

Here was a person, an individual, confronted with hostile forces arising from both within and without, realizing his own limits, crying in the intense passion of devotional prayer, seeking communion with God, and entrusting the secrets of his innermost life to Him. Here was a person who found himself caught up in the din and clamour of life, in the clash of emotions and interests, in the stress and strain of immediate impulses, in the tensions and calamities of existence, and, above all, in the search for spiritual satisfaction, a man who was lonely and helpless, who stood before his Creator in direct communion, and called Him from the very depths of his heart.

Before closing this foreword, something must be said about the translation of something which is untranslatable. Among all the varieties of Arabic literature, supplications, especially those of the Imam Zayn al-'Abidin, are perhaps the most difficult to translate into an alien tongue. Dr. Chittick must be congratulated on his courage and vision, and on his grasp of the inner meanings of such an emotionally charged and subtle Arabic text. He has admirably rendered into English not only the meaning but also the feelings enshrined in these spontaneous utterances of the heart. The Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is also to be thanked for presenting this beautiful treasure of Islamic spirituality.

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Karachi

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