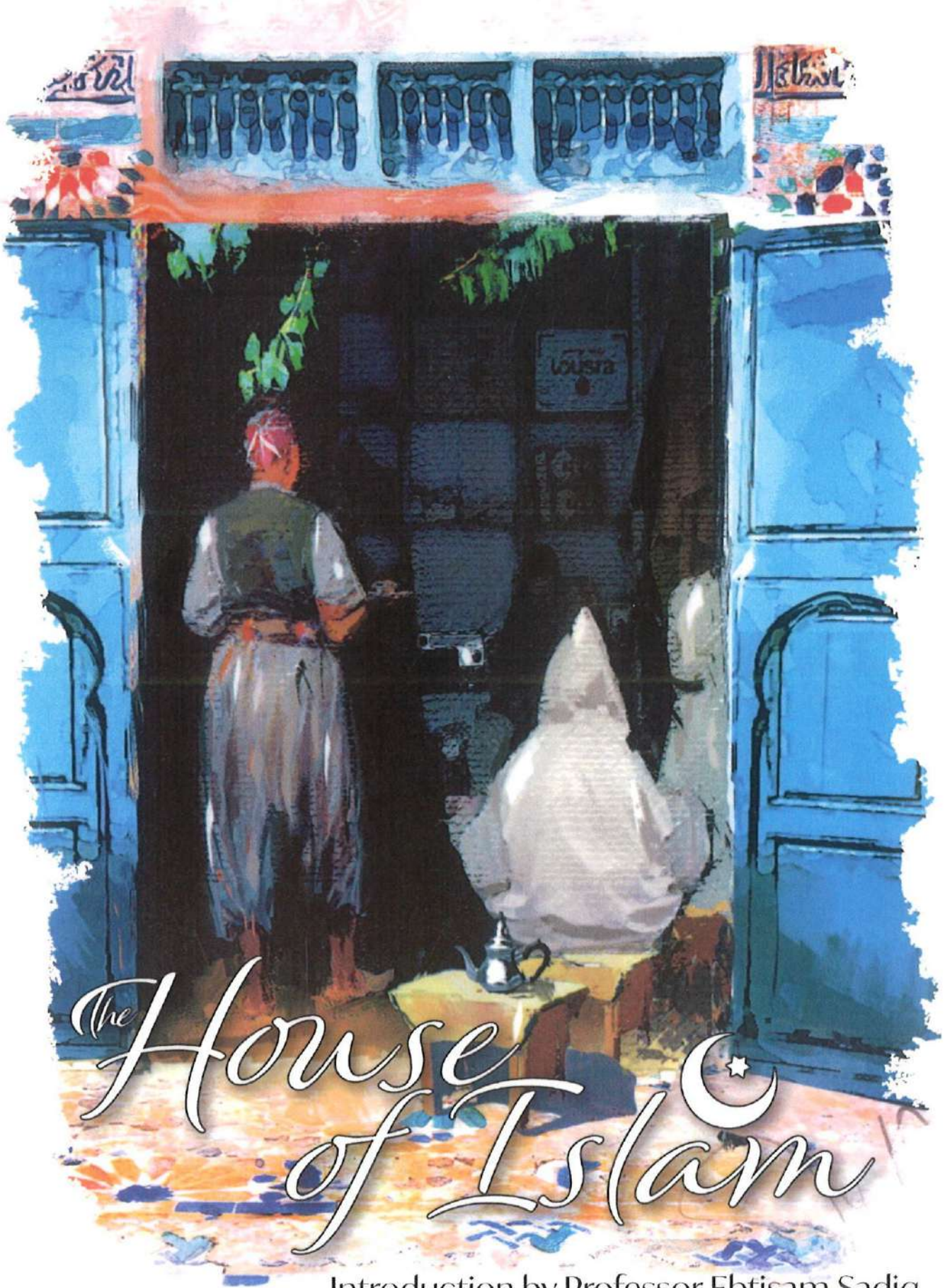
MARMADUKE PICKTHALL



The House of Islam

Introduction by Professor Ebtisam Sadiq

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Man prays for evil as he prays for good,
for man is unthinking.

Quran 17:11

The House of Islam

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The House of Islam

by Marmaduke Pickthall

Introduction by
Professor Ebtisam Sadiq

Glossary of Arabic Words

Afrìt	Evil spirit.
Bakshìsh	Tips, the money used to bribe.
Bawwâb	Doorman; caretaker of a house.
Bedawi, bedu	Bedouin.
Bey	A title of honour, for officials in the Ottoman Empire, superior to Effendi but below Pasha. It can be spelt and pronounced Bek.
Bimbashi	A Turkish military official.
Bishlik	A basic metal coin of lesser value than a mejìdi.
Cadi	Judge.
Caïd	Local administrator.
Eblìs	Satan.
Effendi	A title of honour in the Ottoman empire.
Fellâh	Farmers peasant.
Firmàn	Edict/grant from a sovereign.
Hakìm	A physician using traditional remedies.
Hrìm	Section of a Muslim house/palace reserved for women.
In sh'Allah	Phrase meaning 'If Allah wills'.
Jehennum	Hell.
Jinn, jân	Spirits that can assume human or animal form.
Khan	Caravanserai, where travellers can stay the night.
Khatèb	Preacher.
Khawâja	Gentleman/Sir. In Egypt, it is often used for a foreigner or a Syrian.

Kibleh	The direction of the Ka'bah, which Muslims face during prayer. (Ar. Qibla)
Ma sh'Allah	So be it, literally, 'As God wills'. Used as an expression of surprise or admiration.
Mehkemeh	Court.
Mejìdi	A silver coin.
Mudìr	Local administrative official.
Narghileh	Water-pipe, otherwise hubble-bubble or hookah.
Neby	Prophet. (Ar. Nabi)
Padishah	A chief ruler; Sovereign.
Para	The Turkish word for 'money'. Also spelt bara.
Pasha	Officer of high rank.
Pashalik	The area governed by a pasha.
Piaster	A unit of money in the Middle East, equivalent to one hundredth of a pound.
Sunna	Portion of Islamic law based on the words and actions of Prophet Muhammad.
Tarbûsh	A red hat, similar to the fez.
Teskereh	Ottoman passport.
Tûghra	Seal/signature of a sultan, affixed to official documents.
W' Allah	Literally, 'By Allah'.
Wâly	The governor-general of a province, appointed directly by the Sultan.
Wely	Saint; a friend of God.
Wilâyet	Administrative province.
Y' Allah	Literally, 'O Allah'.
Yezbashi	Turkish military officer.

Introduction

THE DISPARITY BETWEEN THE earliest response to Marmaduke Pickthall's novel *The House of Islam* (1906) on publication and the present-day appraisal of the work begets a need to start an introduction to the author's second Near Eastern novel with a prefatory note on the history of the book's reception, and perhaps its creation. Despite its young author's qualms about the quality of the work, contemporary reaction to the novel on its first appearance was very positive. Pickthall's apprehension of not having performed as well as he did in his first novel, *Saïd the Fisherman*, surfaces in his apologetic statement that refers to his being much steeped in grief over his mother's death while engaged in writing the novel.[1] But his contemporaneous critics like Anne Fremantle, Pickthall's future biographer, and E. M. Forster, an important man of letters at the time prior to having been established as a prominent novelist in the modern literary tradition, seem to share a positive response to the novel as a serious piece of work that transcends the author's frivolous sense of humour.[2] Such initial consensus does not seem to last in more recent valuation of the work that

1 See Anne Fremantle, *Loyal Enemy*, London: Hutchinson, 1938, p. 120.

2 Ibid, 119 and E. M. Forster, "Salute to the Orient," in *Abinger Harvest*, London: Edward Arnold and Company, 1936, p. 258.

dismisses it as an early output of a young author who is not up to handling a serious tragic theme so early in his career.[3]

The author's uncertainty about the value of the work and the present dissatisfaction with its serious content should not detract from the multiple worth of *The House of Islam* and the joy of reading it. For one thing, the book is a faithful mirror of life in the Eastern Mediterranean countries toward the end of the nineteenth century. For another, it is an early piece in the author's literary career and can be useful in tracing his development as a writer who understands the Middle East and profusely demonstrates his knowledge of it by producing no less than eight novels and twenty-eight short stories about its people, history, culture, and religion. Indeed, the work is very revealing of the development of Pickthall's relationship with the East and its dominant faith, Islam, which culminated in his conversion.

Though not a historic novel, *The House of Islam* should be historically appreciated at the present time for its revelations about the Middle East at a particular juncture in history. It depicts the cultural setting and the political situation in the Eastern Mediterranean countries as perceived by Pickthall while travelling in the region toward the end of the nineteenth century. It informs of the cultural multiplicity of the Arab world and the role of migration in its formation by narrating how non-Arab Muslims of Circassian and Georgian origins immigrated to the region in renunciation of the "muscovite" geographical expansion into their native country and subsequent political domination over people's life and religious practices. It recounts of how the Turkish Sultan positively assisted in the process by granting the immigrants official documents for legal

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3 See *Mâsud*. Marmaduke Pickthall: A Brief Biography. http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMM-AHM-pickthall_bio.htm

settlement in the outskirts of Syria and Palestine. It informs of how the cultural multiplicity of the Arab world was enriched by such waves of migration despite initial conflicts between some of the original inhabitants—the nomads to be specific—and the newcomers and of how the clashes dwindled and ultimately proved to be transient and insignificant in the larger context of rich cultural formation. The novel also demonstrates the wise role of the religious figures of Islam in reconciling conflicting parties and inspiring the diverse human races to merge under the Islamic faith into one community, capable of peacefully traversing the desert as one harmonious procession into the holy city of El Cuds in Palestine. This is definitely a vivid historic picture that generates interest in the author's motivation for presenting it.

Categorically, the picture cannot be taken in isolation from other elements in the work nor would the author's intention for engaging readers in its details be revealed without inspecting its relevance to the whole. Indeed, the process of cultural inspection and documentation extends to the British imperial role in the Middle East at that time and recounts its segregating policies that prove to be alien to the collective spirit of the region and disruptive to the cultural multiplicity of its community. One significant example that the novel provides is the establishment of a hospital for Jews in El Cuds and the debarring of other races in the city from benefiting from its humanitarian services even at times of serious health crises. Though a British citizen, Pickthall has no scruples in exposing such unjust politics committed not only against the Arabs—with whose communal warmth he fell in love on first arrival in the region—but are also inflicted against the principle of cultural multiplicity and human co-existence that the author seems to strongly favour. Indeed, the incident of the hospital is not an isolated case

in such imperial context, for the novel has in store more jarring events to recount towards its conclusion. Without overlooking the possibility of dramatic exaggeration in some of them for the purposes of enriching the narrative line, readers can still sense Pickthall's discomfort with British interference in the local affairs of the Muslim community.

Against disruptive intrusion and subversive imperial policies, the novel righteously gives voice to the local inhabitants and allows them to protest. The people's remonstration comes in two forms. On the one hand, there is a commonplace disapproval of the conduct of Western visitors in town that seems to offend the sensibility of the general public. On the other, there is a more serious denunciation of British policy in the region and of the consul's tampering with the judicial system that jeopardizes the safety of the innocent inhabitants for the sake of appeasing the anger of a single British citizen residing in town. In the first case of light disparagement, Pickthall has the local people mock the seemingly odd behaviour of the touring "Franks" and to comically deflate what seems to them unjustified joviality and needless loud laughter in addition to pointless gazing. The second type of objection comes as a more formal case of complaint when the consulate's hegemonic policy becomes life-threatening as to force the battered citizens to send an appeal to the sultan's waazir in Turkey for life-saving intervention.

Despite his objective representation of the whole scenario, Pickthall seems to sympathetically support the voice of the local Arabs. Other signs of his support are discernible in his frequent usage of Arabic words and names of places throughout the novel. By choosing to call Jerusalem El Cuds, Pickthall chooses to preserve its Arabic identity against the English renaming of the city. The judicial court of justice retains the

Arabic name of such structure, El Mehkemeh, in affirmation of the Arabs' right to judicial independence free from imperial meddling. The judge that the British emissary intimidates into unfair judgement against his own people is called El Cadi as a reminder of the oddity of the deviation from rightful commitment to local justice. Indeed, the novel abounds with Arabic words for which English could have been easily substituted. But the use of Arabic in an English text is Pickthall's subtle means of backing up the Arab culture against foreign disorienting interference in its affairs.

It is highly likely that Pickthall's support of the Arab culture in *The House of Islam* is motivated by a personal interest in its dominant faith, Islam, as indicated by the title of the work. The author seems to be acting in accord with the advice of the Imam of the grand mosque in Damascus to inspect Islamic creeds for further ascertainment prior to conversion. The novel actually exhibits its author's thoughtful consideration of Islam as a valuable faith through a significant shift in tone towards the Eastern people from the preceding one. The comic ridicule of Saïd, the errant Arab protagonist of the first novel, *Saïd the Fisherman*, is replaced by a sympathetic attention to a pious Muslim leader who explains Islam to his audience and abides by its principles in his conduct. This is not to indicate that Pickthall's interest starts with this novel. His first novel equally embraces proper Islamic figures who similarly admonish delinquent Muslim characters on their misconduct. However, such speakers are marginal figures in the first work, while in this second one, Pickthall moves one such figure from the margin and places him at the center of the narrative events. The scholar of Islam is the protagonist of this novel and is granted more space to demonstrate his own goodness and that of Islam through central involvement in the action. The novel highlights

his instrumental role in reforming the ignorant laymen in the Muslim community through a mature and learned understanding of Islam's principles. As an enlightened believer, the protagonist, for example, strongly opposes superstitious practices and eradicates unconscious abuses of the Faith. He also manages to generate peace among the multiracial members of the Muslim community who ignorantly give in to discord and aggression against each other. Moreover, the protagonist is made to discuss and reveal the clemency of Islamic doctrines towards peoples of different religious affiliations and to highlight its instruction of its followers to befriend peaceful, non-combating neighbours regardless of their belief and to extend hands of friendship to their enemies. These principles are highlighted through a dialogue between the protagonist and another, less informed, scholar of the faith in the novel. The author's elucidation of the value of Islam becomes well pronounced in this second Eastern novel of his. Anne Fremantle affirms that in its course, Pickthall "came nearer being transfigured by the spirit of the East than ever before or after."[4]

Interestingly, Pickthall's attention to Islam in the novel exhibits a remarkable capacity to transcend the personal to the communal. The author's interest in the Faith seems to go beyond inspecting it for the purpose of conversion. The focus on the cultural multiplicity of the Muslim community in the novel and the elaborate discussions of Islam's regulation of the relationship of its followers with non-Muslims testify to this fact. Such features of the novel suggest an embedded desire for friendly relationships between the Muslims of the East and the Western Europeans. A thematic inspection of Pickthall's other Eastern novels would disclose a lifelong quest of union between the Eastern and Western cultures. The biographical

4 See: Fremantle, p. 120.

fact that Pickthall chose to publicly announce his conversion, in due time later on, rather than keep it a sheer personal matter is most telling about his larger concern with relationships between cultures and interest in generating mutual acceptance between diverse human races.

The House of Islam is a milestone in Pickthall's quest of co-existence between the Eastern and Western peoples that indefatigably underlines all of his Eastern novels. The quest involves both an honest exposure of the circumstances that impede friendship between peoples of diverse cultures for the purpose of eliminating them as well as a diligent search for possible channels of fruitful communication, successful human interaction and ultimate coexistence between the Eastern and Western worlds. The author's critique of the odd behaviour of the visiting "Franks" in town and his protest against the segregating policy of the British representatives in the region are enlightening of some such impediments to fulfilment of his quest. Yet the local citizens are not exempt from the responsibility of hindering smooth relationships too. The common layman's distrust of foreigners and his suspicion of people of different faiths that escalate to riots are also obstacles to fulfilment. The natives' unjustified fear of science as an oppositional force to religious practices and to sincere resignation to Providence is also a deterrent to good relationships.

In the middle of such contending forces, the young, optimistic mind of Pickthall finds fulfilment, no matter how transient, to be possible. It is not a culturally broad one as he would have it, but a friendship between exemplary individuals of the two cultures. The lenient and benevolent sheikh of Islam overcomes the common man's apprehension of and misgivings towards the English people when he trustfully seeks the help of an English physician. The Englishman rises up to

the humanitarian expectations of the occasion and generously grants assistance to this member of the Muslim community that the British segregating policy in the region has denied him. Warm moments of genuine human interaction between the two characters colour the plot of the novel before the anger of the rowdy crowd dispels the charm and puts an end to amity.

In brief, *The House of Islam* represents an important stage in the author's literary development as a writer, his spiritual journeying towards Islam, and the evolution of his relationship with the East. The concept of cultural multiplicity to which he seems dedicated is a vital term in contemporary cultures, literatures and literary criticism, though a rarity during Pickthall's time. To engage these terms is a culturally unprecedented literary act on Pickthall's part and would definitely place him ahead of his time by almost a whole century. He can confidently be classified as a member of the postcolonial discourse long before the emergence of the theory itself towards the end of the twentieth century. In fact, the persistence with which he pursues the theme of amity and co-existence between cultures makes him a precursor of the discourse.

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