

Preface

Islam has been at the center of many events and developments throughout the world since its emergence more than fourteen hundred years ago. In the past several decades alone, it has exerted tremendous influence in the political, social, economic, and spiritual arenas, to name but a few. As the fastest-growing religion in the world, Islam attracts new followers every day, and there is every reason to assume that it will continue to play a leading role on the world stage. It is therefore very important for non-Muslims to know as much as they can about this significant and often misunderstood faith.

The aim of this book is to introduce non-Muslims to the basics of Islam so that they will be encouraged to expand and develop their knowledge of it. The space limitations of this work make a comprehensive introduction to the religion impossible. The six aspects of Islam that are discussed here are central to the faith, and familiarity with them will form a solid foundation upon which to build a more complete understanding of the religion. The list of recommended

resources at the end suggests some books and other aids that will facilitate further study of Islam.

The first edition of this book was written in the shadow of the tragic events that occurred on September 11, 2001, when I was invited to speak to many congregations and organizations whose members sought to understand the possible motivations and causes behind the attacks that took place that day. In the intervening years, many non-Muslims have become better informed about Islam, and that might be the one silver lining that can be found within the enormous cloud that was 9/11. Despite this increased awareness on the part of some, though, there are regular reminders that others remain in the dark about the essentials of the religion or rely on misinformation that perpetuates stereotypes and impedes good relations with Muslims. Only a few of these people grab headlines and become the subjects of discussion and debate, like preachers who wish to burn the Qur'an and politicians who want to ban all Muslims from entering their country. Others are out of the spotlight and remain anonymous, but their distorted impressions of Muslims and Islam can leave their mark nonetheless, and so the work of educating ourselves remains a high priority.

The group to whom this book is dedicated deserves special mention. The Memphis Islamic Center has been tireless and creative in its efforts to improve relations among people of different religious traditions. Its members have hosted and supported many gatherings that have put Muslims and non-Muslims in conversation with one another in ways that have

enhanced mutual understanding and respect. I am proud to call them my friends.

The Qur'an translations used throughout this book are my own. An abbreviated version of this material first appeared in the Winter 2002 issue of *Rhodes Magazine*. I thank former editor Martha Shepard and the staff of the magazine for their fine work on that article. I also wish to express my gratitude to Fortress Press, particularly Michael West for supporting the first edition of this book, and Will Bergkamp for his assistance with this revised edition. A final word of thanks goes to Debra Bartelli for the encouragement and advice she offered while I wrote and revised this book.