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Préface

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PREFACE

One year ago, several members of the scientific steering committee for the celebration of IHÉS' 40th anniversary suggested the creation of the present book for this occasion. We liked that idea. Today, as the chairman of the committee, I have the duty and the pleasure to write this preface. Except for a deadline to submitting the manuscripts, no constraints were imposed on the authors. However they were invited to contribute around the general theme of relations between mathematics and theoretical physics. Indeed, for the last thirty years, IHÉS has been one of the places where contacts between mathematicians and theoretical physicists have been the most frequent and the deepest. One may dare to add: quite fruitful as well.

Scientists are very busy with their research and are not used to write for a commissioned work. Most of them dislike it. We – this plural probably includes most future readers – are very grateful to those who contributed to this volume. Their articles are very varied. Some are pure scientific contributions, while others are more devoted to reflections on the relations between these two branches of science; some even relate personal experiences about the general theme. All of them show that mathematics is the best adapted language for expressing results in theoretical physics but many testify that relations between these two domains of science are more complex and symbiotic. That mathematics is an excellent working tool for a physicist and that physics has been, and still often is, a rich source of problems and of inspiration for mathematicians, is an obvious but over-simplified statement. It ignores the present living relations so well described in some papers. For the past two decades, some parts of mathematical physics have been created by scientists of both disciplines. Their different backgrounds do not appear in their common standard of mathematical rigour and their common lack of obsession for experimental testability.

Diversity is expected from papers submitted for a Festschrift book. In this one, dedicated to IHÉS' 40th anniversary, several authors have added an autobiographical touch on their relations with IHÉS. These will be precious testimonials for the history of this institute.

Louis MICHEL

Bures-sur-Yvette, September 13, 1998.