
In Memoriam: Annemarie Schimmel

Bringing the Reality Of Islam to the West

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The news of the death on Jan. 27 of German Orientalist Prof. Annemarie Schimmel provoked an outpouring of sympathy, not only in Bonn and Berlin, but also in Islamabad, Tehran, Cairo, and many other capitals of the Islamic world. To be sure, as some German commentators have noted, Professor Schimmel was the only contemporary Orientalist of “world class” stature; her publications, numbering more than 100, represent brilliant studies into a vast array of topics, dealing with Islamic philosophy, history, and culture. But, in addition to her scholarly work, she was an indefatigable advocate of “a better understanding among various religions and different peoples,” as she put it, when asked what her life’s “task” was. Professor Schimmel used her extraordinary language skills and cultural knowledge, to bring the reality of Islam to a German, American, and international audience. It is doubly sad that she should depart now, in a moment when the world requires rare persons of her quality.

Professor Schimmel was a vibrant example of what it means to understand a culture by knowing it, and learning about it by loving it. When still a child of a modest family in Erfurt, Germany, a family which raised her “in a spirit of freedom, tolerance, and poetry,” she had her first encounter with a fairy tale about an Indian wise man in Damascus, which ignited her curiosity about Oriental literature. “As a child I once read a fairy tale,” she relates. “I was seven years old—and it took place in the border region between Islam and Hinduism. So it was actually a mystical fairy tale. And I knew then: This is my world. . . . There I felt more at home than in our German world.”

An only child of older parents, the young Annemarie found encouragement from her devoted parents, her father, who was well read in mysticism, particularly Oriental philosophy, and her mother, who came from a seafaring family. At 15, she convinced her mother to let her take Arabic lessons, and she rapidly mastered it. In the following years, she learned Persian, Urdu, Turkish, and Pashtu. (This was at a time, under the Nazi regime, that non-German cultures were considered highly suspect.) With this language ability, she was to translate numerous works, particularly poetical, from all these cultures.

After receiving her first degree in Islamic studies from the University of Berlin, at the age of 19, she studied the history



German Orientalist Prof. Annemarie Schimmel. Her life's task, she said, was to promote "a better understanding among various religions and different peoples."

of religions, and began teaching. From 1941 to the end of World War II, she worked as a translator in the Foreign Ministry, then took a doctorate in the history of religion, in Marburg. She was invited in 1954, to be the first woman and first non-Muslim to teach at the University of Ankara, Turkey, “at a time when there were hardly teaching positions for women in Germany,” she related. There she taught comparative religions, and travelled widely in the country, meeting with outlying Islamic communities as well as the nation’s intellectual elite. In 1961, she moved to Bonn to teach, and then was at Harvard University, from 1967-91, where she taught Indo-Islamic culture. She returned to Germany in 1993, where she continued working as an honorary professor at the University of Bonn.

Professor Schimmel conducted in-depth studies of Sufism, the mystical tradition in Islam. In addition to her standard work, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 1975 (*Mystische Dimensionen des Islam*, 1985), she dedicated special study to the great mystical poet Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-73), with *The Triumphal Sun: Life and Works of Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi*, of 1978, and *Rumi: Ich bin Wind und du bist Feuer*, and translated numerous of his poems. She issued a valuable anthology of poetry in the Islamic tradition, *Nimm eine Rose und nenne sie Lieder (Take a Rose and Call It Songs)*, with her translations of works from seven language cultures, ancient and modern. She also published books meant as preliminary introductions to Islam and its culture, from various aspects. She even wrote a delightful volume, *Die Orientalische Katze*, 1991, which developed the theme of the cat in Oriental literature.

Awarded a Peace Prize

In 1995, Professor Schimmel was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, in recognition of her work promoting what has become known as the dialogue of civiliza-

tions. A massive hate campaign was launched against her, by circles promoting the clash of civilizations, who alleged that she had endorsed the *fatwa* (or death sentence) issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie, author of *Satanic Verses*. Rushdie, a British intelligence asset, had written the book as a blasphemous attack against Islam and its prophet Mohammed. Schimmel had stated that, while she unconditionally denounced the *fatwa* issued against Rushdie, yet she could understand how the blasphemous characterizations, could "wound the feelings of deeply religious people." Professor Schimmel was immediately branded a "fundamentalist" who "justified" an ayatollah's death sentence against Rushdie, who, after all, was merely exercising his "freedom of speech." For months, critics editorialized against her and it was expected that either she would withdraw her name, or the Book Trade Association would settle on a more acceptable choice. Professor Schimmel did not back down, nor did the sponsor of the prize, nor did then-German President Roman Herzog. In his *laudatio* presenting the award, President Herzog explicitly attacked the "political correctness" doctrine, which had animated the witch-hunt against Schimmel. Furthermore, Herzog identified the reason why the hate campaign had been launched, by referencing the "Clash of Civilizations" scenario popularized by geopolitical think-tanker Samuel Huntington. It was precisely to prevent such cultural conflict, Herzog said, that Professor Schimmel's works were most valuable, in providing the general public with knowledge of Islamic culture.

Professor Schimmel elaborated this theme in her acceptance speech delivered at the historic Paulskirche in Frankfurt: That understanding between religious cultures can only occur when one *knows* something about the foreign culture. She explained that she had decided not to acquiesce to the pressure, "because I feel obligated to all Orientalists, who dedicate themselves to quiet dialogue, as well as to all men of good will in the Islamic world, and to the work of entente for which I have lived 50 years." Out of the "soul torture" the campaign had put her through, she said she had learned that "the methods of science and poetry are one, whereas the method of journalism and politics are another. Yet both sides agree what a central role the word 'free speech' plays in our society, in our lives."

Islamic Contributions to the West

Professor Schimmel made use of this freedom, to present what her critics would prefer to deny—the existence of a long, differentiated history of Islamic culture, stretching from Andalusian Spain to the Indian Subcontinent and Asia, her particular areas of expertise. Despite the documented contributions of the Islamic Renaissance to Western civilization, Professor Schimmel said, "most Europeans find it foreign" and consider it, as Jacob Burkhardt did, "incapable of transformation" because it had no Enlightenment. Thus, the issue is, how does one educate people of one culture about another

culture it considers foreign?

"Man is the enemy of what he does not know," she said, quoting from a proverb common to Greek and Arabic. And, citing St. Augustine, she said, "Man understands something only insofar as he is able to love it." Her speech was a short, effective introduction to what Islamic culture is, and an invitation to learn about it. In particular, she explained the special role that poetry, the written and spoken word, have for Islamic culture, from the Koran, through the vast tradition of mystical poetry, which she has researched in depth, to modern manifestations, even in the political sphere—for example, the poet Mohammed Iqbal, considered the spiritual father of Pakistan. "The word," she said, "is that good which man has been entrusted with, that he should protect and that he should not, as often happens, weaken, falsify, or talk to death: Because it holds powers which we cannot estimate. In this power of language lies also the extraordinary responsibility of the poet and, perhaps even more, of the translator, who can provide the occasion for dangerous misunderstanding merely by a single false nuance."

In commenting on the significance of her receiving the prize, Professor Schimmel said she considered it a prize for all German Orientalists. This is a tradition, she remarked in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on Oct. 13, 1995, "of over 200 years of classical Orientalism." Defending this tradition, she added, "When Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, branded England's and France's Orientalists as trailblazers and interpreters of colonialism, he could not say the same about German Orientalists, because they, at least the majority of them, have kept themselves out of political events. The German Orientalist school always was considered the school of Classical philology."

The German Orientalist whose work Professor Schimmel carried forward in the 20th Century, was Friedrich Rückert, who died in 1866. Rückert was a linguistic genius who mastered over 40 languages and dedicated his life to translating the great works of Oriental cultures into German, from Confucius, to the Sanskrit epics, to the Arabic and Persian literature. Rückert undertook this massive task, convinced that only by making known the works—especially poetical works—of other cultures, would Germans (and others) recognize the universality of the language of creativity, which is poetry. Rückert's motto, "World poetry is world reconciliation," is the ideal which guided Professor Schimmel, who continued Rückert's life work.

Professor Schimmel worked with great energy, driven by a passion for her mission. In her last interview, in December 2002, at the age of 80, she said her normal workday was 12-13 hours: "There is nothing more beautiful, than to sit at a desk or at a typewriter or in a library, and to work." When asked about her plans for the future, she replied with a quote from Rückert: " 'If I am to live another ten years, I have enough work to do. If I am to die tomorrow, I have worked enough.' That's very simple."