
Professor Annemarie Schimmel¹

(April 7, 1922 to January 26, 2003)

Annemarie Brigitte Schimmel, who died aged 80 on 26th January 2003, was the West's most outstanding expert on Sufism, classical and folk Islamic poetry, Indo-Pakistani literature, and calligraphy.

By the time of her sudden death following an accident aggravated by medical complications, she had written and translated not only 105 works and numerous scholarly and popular articles, but also poetical compositions in the spirit of medieval mystics such as al-Hallaj (d. 922 AD); Hafiz (d. 1380 AD); and Rumi (d. 1273 AD) – on whom she was the foremost western specialist long before he became a best-seller among new-age occidentals. Her impressive output was attributable to a solid grounding in not only the Islamic “tripos” of Arabic, Persian and Turkish but also Urdu, Pashto and Sindhi. For good measure she also added Czech and Swedish to her native German, and also Latin, English, French and Italian. She read and corresponded in twenty-five languages and was able to deliver extemporaneous lectures serenely, in ten languages, with her eyes shut to enraptured audiences for an hour or even longer. After concluding with a memorable verse, she conveyed her audience from the sublime to the mundane albeit mesmerised.

Born in historic Erfurt, also hometown of the German mystic Meister Eckhart, Annemarie Schimmel grew up in a house “permeated with religious freedom and poetry”. She began studying Arabic at 15, finished high school two years earlier than customary, and obtained her first doctorate from Berlin University in 1941 at 19 in Arabic, Turkish and Islamic history. After studying with Hans Ellenberg, Annemarie von Gabain, Richard Hartmann, Ernst Kühnel and the brilliant Hans Heinrich Schaeder, she commenced researches on Mamluk history for her *Habilitationsschrift*. Having managed to avoid getting drafted, she was employed in the translation bureau of the Foreign Office during the war years. The privation of this period was trying with ten hours forced labour a day during the summer but despite this she prepared her dissertation; catalogued an index for a medieval Arabic chronicle; and, being passionately influenced by Goethe and Rilke – and above all, the prolific polyglot and her favourite, Friedrich Rückert – translated Rumi and Hallaj into German verse. She was interred after Armistice Day (having submitted her *Habilitationsschrift* a month earlier), and following an invitation to join the University of Marburg, delivered her inaugural address before her twenty fourth birthday in January 1946. In 1951 whilst teaching at Marburg, as Assistant Professor of Islamic studies (1946–54), she secured her

¹ Some extracts of the above first appeared in *The Guardian* (February 6, 2003): 24 of which copyright permission has been obtained. I thank Francis Robinson and Farrokh Vajifdar for their editorial comments. Annemarie Schimmel's American colleagues, some of whom have been my teachers, shared rich reminiscences: I am grateful to Richard Frye, Merlin Swartz, Wheeler Thackston Jr. and John Williams. The inspiration for this necrology came from my teacher Herbert Mason who peppered my directed study seminar on Islamic history with vignettes of Schimmelia.

second doctorate on Islamic mysticism under Friedrich Heiler. Heiler was a pioneering theologian to whom she dedicated her book *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (1994). This book was based on the *Gifford Lectures* delivered in 1992 at Edinburgh: a signal distinction in Religious Studies. She was also invited to present the *Committee on the History of Religions Lectures* at sixteen Canadian and American universities – a record – in 1980 as well as the *Kevorkian Lectures*, New York University (1982) and, a decade later, the *Bampton Lecture* at Columbia University.

Remarkably for a non-Muslim woman, Schimmel moved to Ankara University's Faculty of Divinity and taught comparative religions, Church History and dogmatics in the medium of Turkish from 1954 to 1959. By now she considered the venerable Louis Massignon as a mentor recalling him as a "figure of white light". She returned home to teach as Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at Bonn University (1961–65) where she jointly founded and edited with Alberto Theile the Arabic journal, *Fikrun wa Fann*. Despite the persuasion of the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Richard Frye, she was initially disinclined to leave Bonn and her journal for Harvard. Frye was chiefly instrumental in arranging with the then Harvard President, Nathan Pusey, for the first teaching position in the world exclusively on South Asian Islamic culture, namely, the Minute Rice Bequest funded from the estate of its inventor, A. K. Ozai Durrani, which she came to hold in 1967 as Lecturer and then as full Professor of Indo-Muslim Languages and Culture (1970–92). Upon her retirement she delivered "The Life of Learning" *Charles Homer Haskins Lecture* to the American Council of Learned Societies (Williamsburg, 1993) before returning home to become Honorary Professor at Bonn University, where the Annemarie Schimmel Chair for Indo-Muslim Culture was instituted on her 75th birthday in 1997. Earlier, two *Festschriften*, a special number of the *Journal of Turkish Studies* (Cambridge, Mass, 1994) and the appositely entitled *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit* (Bern, 1994), consisting of 50 essays were presented to her by colleagues, students and friends. She was felicitated by the city of Bonn and her name registered in the town's Golden Book when she turned 80 last year, an event also celebrated in her "zweite Heimat", Pakistan.

As the *doyenne* of Pakistan studies, Schimmel was an authority on that nation's poet-philosopher, Sir Muhammad Iqbal, and hitherto unexamined aspects of folklore, classical Urdu poetry, and popular devotional life. She came to own presented copies of Iqbal's *Payam-i mashriq* [Message of the East] and *Javidname* [Book of Eternity]; and enthusiastically undertook over 35 visits, one of which included accompanying German President Roman Herzog on his 1995 state visit. Over the years she was awarded honorary doctorates by the universities of Sind, Islamabad and Peshawar – besides Uppsala, Konya and Teheran's Al-Zahra University – and the nation's *Sitara-ye Quaid-e Azam* (1965), *Hilal-i Imtiaz* (1983) and first *International Iqbal Award* (1998). Schimmel, much loved in Pakistan, has had a boulevard flanking Lahore's Canal Bank; an Institute of Languages, Culture and Communication in Hyderabad; and a scholarship for female students pursuing advanced research in Britain named after her. Lahore's *Goethe Institute* has recently been renamed *Annemarie Schimmel Haus*. That a grave was kept prepared for her burial in Makli, Sind, was widely recounted in Senior Common Rooms.

Her significant publications were: *Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (1963); *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975); *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of*

the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi (1978); *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (1980); *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (1985); *A Two-Coloured Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (1992); and an autobiography *Morgenland und Abendland: Mein westöstliches Leben* (2002).

Schimmel was the first female President of the International Association of the Study of Religion (1980); honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Royal Asiatic Society, Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, Royal Dutch Academy of Letters and Middle East Studies Association of North America. Among numerous accolades she also received UCLA's Giorgio Levi della Vida Medal (1987); her nation's highest civil award, the *Grosses Bundesverdienstkreuz* (1989); the Organisation of Islamic Conference's IRCICA Gold medal (1990); the first female recipient of Tübingen University's Dr. Leopold Lucas Prize towards Christian, Jewish and Muslim understanding (1992); Egypt's Order of Science and Art (1996); Arts and Sciences Award of the Turkish Republic (1996); and the Uzbek Order of Friendship Award (2002). Faddists expressed outrage upon the conferral of the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* in 1995 as she did not appear to support Salman Rushdie or condemn abuses within Islamic societies. But Annemarie Schimmel was a multicultural Orientalist long before both terms became tainted. She was a gifted teacher, sensitive interpreter of Islam and a bridge for inter-cultural dialogue between Muslims and Westerners. An *Annemarie Schimmel Forum* has been established in Bonn to foster such discussions.

Herbert Mason, a mystic scholar and colleague of over three decades, reminisces how "she had foretastes of eternity for a long time" and that the part of Shaghab in his play, *The Death of Al-Hallaj*, read by her at Harvard on Ash Wednesday, 1974, poignantly mirrored her "sensitivities and hearbreaks, all healed, all transformed, 'in flight'" – on Gabriel's wing.

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