treated as a gospel truth worldwide and the present painstaking research once again affixes a seal of confirmation over the notions of importance of human freedom and human dignity.

Saad S. Khan


Ever since Edward Said started his well-argued but all too generalized attacks against Orientalism, people have been prone to overlook the enormous contribution some Western Islamologues have made for a better understanding of Islam. If Said’s allegations were unjustified in regard to conscientious and outstanding scholars like Marshal Hodgson, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Louis Massignon, and Henry Corbin, they were altogether unfounded in respect of the contemporary German Orientalists in general and its doyenne, Annemarie Schimmel (born 1922) in particular. “Ugly” German Orientalism in particular, as represented in the past by Joseph Schacht, Gustave von Grunebaum and Alfred von Kremer, is — thanks to Schimmel and many of her contemporary colleagues — already a thing of the past. While credit to other German scholars would not be denied, this development is largely due to Professor Schimmel’s overall attitude to her subject of study, to Islam and especially Sufism, an attitude animated by her insight that *one can only understand what one loves*.

Schimmel published more than 93 books in all imaginable languages. But it is sufficient to read just a few of them in order to realise that this most gifted lady is hungry for knowledge and adventure, is full of humour and courage, and is anything but conceited. Yet she also comes across as a highly romantic and sensitive poet with strong religious feelings, and strikes one to be a kindred spirit of persons like J.W. von Goethe and Rainer M. Rilke, who are rooted in “God’s signs”: Nature. Even her approach to Islamic mysticism is not neo-Platonic and gnostic as with theosophical minds in the tradition of
Ibn al-'Arabi, Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, but rather unsystematic and emotional.

Schimmel is well known for having devoted much of her research on two bright stars in the literary universe of Islam: Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and Muhammad Iqbal. Indeed, when she first encountered the former’s Divān, she was struck as though by lightning (p. 49); and when she came across Iqbal’s Persian poetry, she swooned (p. 270). From then on she has spiritually and physically migrated from Turkey (where she had taught at Ankara University) to the Subcontinent. True, for 25 years she taught simultaneously at Harvard and Bonn (1867–1992). Yet Pakistan has virtually became her second home (pp. 207, 270). She is now an honorary citizen of Islamabad; and in Lahore — where an avenue is named after her (Khayaban-e-Annemarie Schimmel) — one can obtain an Annemarie Schimmel Scholarship for studying in Britain.

New for me was, however, the discovery of two strong other affinities of hers: to the sevener Shī‘ah Isma‘īlī sect and to the language and culture of Sindh. (Once when she was considered unable to read the Sindhi language, she mastered it within six months) (p. 271). People don’t learn: During the Nazi regime, in a camp they once confiscated Schimmel’s Arab grammar book since “German girls do not learn Arabic!” (p. 42). The result is known.

One thing remains a riddle even in this autobiography: How was it possible that a seven year old girl, raised in a cultured but not very religious Prussian middle class postmaster’s family in Erfurt (Thuringia), could decide to become an Orientalist? How was it possible to realize this plan, right during the World War Two, with Schimmel obtaining a first Ph.D. at 19 and a professorship at 23? All that, to boot, in an academic environment not too friendly to female competition!

Schimmel’s own key to this astonishing achievement looks like a fairy tale involving an Indian sage, living in Damascus, and — above all — an inscription there saying: “People are asleep. When they die, they wake up” (p. 15). I can believe that this Platonic wisdom struck the child like a flash of lightning. But what had her prepared for being struck at all?

Schimmel is an honorary member of the Advisory Board of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany. This reinforces the assumption that she is a crypto-Muslima even though she continues to deny that. In fact, she never shared the opinion of her teacher, Hans Heinrich Schaeder, that “a good Protestant has the only choice of either becoming a Muslim or a Catholic” (p. 48). At any rate, she uses the phenomenological difference between the “incarnation” (in Jesus) and “inlibration”¹ (in the Qur‘ān) of God’s Word

¹ The word “inlibration; was coined by Prof. Schimmel in order to correspond to the term “incarnation”. Both have Latin roots. “Carne” means flesh and “liber” means book. Thus the
(p. 193). To be sure, as a Muslīma Schimmel could have done less for Islam because, strange as it is, the German public trusts Orientalists more than Muslims when wanting to learn about Islam!

Equally disappointed will be those readers who search for intimate confessions and an author’s “love life”. “One does not talk about the many tears, disappointments and human problems”, she writes, “this is nobody’s business” (p. 327).

Also hunters for political judgements cannot score, even though Schimmel remarks that given Washington’s incompetence “it is no wonder that American Middle Eastern policy takes such strange turns” (p. 189) and that Kashmir, should rightfully belong to Pakistan (p. 292). She is worried about her adopted country in as much as “its political system seems to be getting more and more chaotic” (p. 321), but is amused about the fact that Muhammad Iqbal is periodically reinterpreted there as an orthodox Muslim, a Sufi, a socialist, or a revolutionary, all depending on where the political wind happens to be blowing from (p. 277). As far as “Pinkie” (Benazir Bhutto) is concerned, Schimmel seems to be skeptical about her on the basis of the observations she made of her at Harvard. Was not Benazir more interested then in things American and field hockey than in Urdu and Pakistan? (p. 277).

The book in its first part gives a chronological account before adopting cities and countries as an (unchronological) organizational frame. Schimmel’s recollection of the smallest details of her rich life would be stunning if one were not familiar with Schimmel’s habit of reporting to her mother through her daily letters, and also of sending her friends annual accounts of her worldview and activities. Reading them I used to feel dizzy, overwhelmed by so much mobility. The same can be the effect of the last portion of this biography.

If someone else had mentioned all the people — professors, Sufis, diplomats, heads of state — she met, one might have been accused of “names-dropping”. In Schimmel’s case one cannot help but admire her manifold achievements, realized without any assistant, secretary, computer, and the internet. She wrote ceaselessly not only in her flat in Bonn’s Lennée Street (occupied for 41 years now) but also in hotel lobbies and aeroplanes.

A special feature of this autobiography is the happy weaving in of poetry as is typical of Oriental biographies, including those of the Prophet (peace be on him) by Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Kathīr. In the book under review, some poems are by others, including by E. E. Cummings, while some are by Schimmel.

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idea is that God became flesh in Jesus (in-carn-ation) and a book in case of the Qur’an (in-libr-ation). The latter idea obviously is warped, nevertheless the opposition of the two terms is descriptive.
herself. Both her original lyrical poetry, such as the early poem on Samarkand which dates back to 1944 (p. 256) and her sensitive translations of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, or Sindhi lyrics, bring out Schimmel as a bard in her own right. But even there, her humour comes through in satirical ghazals and hilarious limericks.

No less remarkable are the vignette portraits she gives, e.g. of the late Turkish Sufi Samiha Ayverdi and of the late Fritz Meier, a Swiss expert on Sufism for her, like Louis Massignon, a veritable saint.

Notwithstanding these positive features, a second edition would be improved by adding a chronology of Schimmel’s life and by expanding the book in the direction of a spiritual history of the author. As it is, one learns much about her whereabouts and travels but very little about what subjects she had found challenging and which led her to write the books that she wrote? What was the main thrust of her works? Which were her new insights? What were the main “stages” of her intellectual and spiritual development? Or would this, too, cross the threshold of intimacy held by her as taboo?

An “orthodox” Muslim, I have never been happy with Schimmel’s zeal to collect even the most abstruse and trivial customs and superstitions found in the Muslim world quite a few of which are not in tune with the spirit and ethos of Islam. The same concern relates to her biography. For me, such phenomena are human but not “Islamic”. I know, of course, that the author — who even reacts allergically against the normativeness of Bach’s music — is scarcely interested in the normative aspects of Islam, i.e. its jurisprudence, but rather cherishes the Sufis’ all-embracing and limitless, truly borderless way of love.

Corrections seem due at two places only:

- The gigantic mosque in Casablanca (Dār al-Bayḍā’) was completed and inaugurated by King Hassan II, and not by Muhammad V (p. 225).
- The Almohade mosque in the Moroccan Atlas mountains is located in Tinmel (not Timlan) (p. 227).

Professor Schimmel established in her young days that child prodigies exist not only in music, mathematics, and chess but also in social sciences. In the 81st year of her life, still active and constantly travelling, she is an embodiment of another miracle: “the spirit’s victory over the body” (p. 81). May her spirit continue to win for a very long time!

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