Book Reviews

Review Article

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The political economy of the Middle East has remained an academic enigma. Economic development, or rather the lack of it, in the region in the post-World War II era, is indeed a mystery. It is partly so because the development patterns defy all conventional logic, and largely, because so little information is available from the ‘information-shy’ regimes of most of the countries about their economic structures and indicators that it is all the more difficult to make sense out of these development patterns or to draw verifiable conclusions. For instance, during the regime of President Chadli Benjaidid (r.1978–92), Algeria’s Ministry of Planning used to produce three sets of data: a “prudent” one for the President, an “approximately sincere” one for the internal use in the Ministry, and a “highly manipulated” one for the other ministries (p. 107). In such cases, it becomes all the more difficult for external economic analysts to ascertain the ‘relative reliability’ of different data coming from the same official source, especially when there are hardly any independent sources of economic information.

The available literature about the Middle Eastern economies has not only been sketchy and tentative, but is mostly found in works devoted to individual countries. This is the case with the works of Aburish (1995),\(^1\) Amin (1995),\(^2\)

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Amuzgar (1993), Carapico (1998) and Crystal (1990), to name but a few. A survey of the broader region of the Middle East has been the focus of fewer works. El-Ghonemy (1998) restricts himself to the wealth distribution patterns in the region. Harik and Sullivan’s (1992) edited book is concerned with the failure of the experiments with the socialist economy in many countries and the resultant processes of privatisation therein. Owen and Pamuk in their *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of Modern Middle East*, however, go beyond a restrictive analysis and give a survey of the emerging economic patterns in the Middle East from the colonial economies of earlier 20th century to the present. The work of Richards and Waterbury (1996) is likewise another exhaustive study of the Middle Eastern economy. Barring these few titles, there are hardly any enterprising researchers who have succeeded in digging into the complex economic realities of the region as a whole. Two other works that have meaningfully contributed to the understanding of political economy of the Middle East, Bill and Springborg (2000) and Henry (1996), have been, not coincidentally, produced by the two co-authors of the present volume.

It is easy to write on the politics, both intra- and inter-state, of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) where conflicts, irrespective of their nature, intensity and dynamics, are aplenty. Much information about military strengths, arms balances and strategic assets are available from open sources such as the annual year books of institutes like the Sweden-based Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS). Likewise, the exiled opposition movements of the region as well as international human rights groups provide information about the internal political structures of different

states of this region. But the economic management of these states is such a secretive and fishy affair that even the IMF and World Bank statistics about them are, at best, no more than reasonable approximations. This makes the fishing for information about the state of the region’s economy sufficient to enable an analyst to develop general theories and make reasonable predictions, a herculean task indeed. The present study, however has to a considerable extent, accomplished this task.

This work is the first title in the Cambridge University Press series entitled ‘Contemporary Middle East’. The Press had commissioned two well-qualified scholars to undertake this endeavour. Of the two, Clement Henry is Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin with specialization in Middle Eastern politics while Robert Springborg was, till recently, Director of the American Study Center in Egypt. Both are prolific writers on the politics of this region but the present work is probably their crowning achievement which reflects “a cumulative total of seven decades of intermittent teaching and field research” in the region, as they have put it. The Macquarie’s Award of a Visiting Research Scholarship complemented the dedication of the co-authors to complete the work in due time.

This work comprehensively explores the internal equations of the domestic economies of the region, the strengths and weaknesses of the financial institutions especially commercial banks, and the mechanisms of economic decision-making. The economic networks in these states are basically “patronage networks”, p. 11 the capital available for investment is largely “crony capital” (p. 134) and the state assets are surprisingly controlled by a rather unlikely state agency, namely, the armed forces (p. 152), as the present research emphasises. The extent of the incidence of these factors may, and often does, vary from case to case, but the generalizations largely hold true for all MENA States — monarchies, democracies and the praetorian republics alike.

The book provides insight into the economy of the region in general and of a few selected countries in particular. The authors have taken globalization, or ‘awlamah (the newly-coined Arabic term for globalization), as the starting point of discussion since they believe that it is the primary thesis against which all countries of the region are struggling to form a response and thus is the basis for an understanding of economic change in the region. It has been argued that the countries with a relatively greater democratisation, a robust civil society, at least a reasonable extent of freedom of information and some progress towards strong institutions, are more likely to absorb the shocks of ‘globalization’. Other states may form economic textbook responses that are
likely to prove dead letters in the absence of the implementation capacity which only a vibrant civil society is able to provide.

In a region where Murphy’s Law applies with a vengeance, globalization cannot be described as necessarily a negative phenomenon. Notwithstanding the current thought trends obtaining among the people of the developing world who tend to equate the globalization of the present with the imperialism of the yesteryears, the process has the potential of improving the general economic conditions in the Middle East. The observations contained in the present work, such as the one mentioned just above, shall remain a topic of academic debate among the scholars and policy-makers of the region until such time as they are eventually proved or disproved by the time itself.

The first chapter of the book begins with recalling that in the immediately post-World War II period, the region appeared to be as promising as could be. The cosmopolitan high society of Alexendria and the prosperity of Algiers were comparable to that in mainland France; the picturesque coastline of Casablanca was called the European California; and the polyglot Beirut, all appeared as indicators that Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Lebanon, respectively, were heading for an economic take-off. There was also little doubt about the fertile crescent where the economy of Syria was booming with new manufacturing and agricultural developments while Iraq was endowed with huge oil deposits, alluvial soil and more water than any other country of the region could boast of. But none of these states can be ranked in the top 50 on HDI scale.

The MENA region presently gives a dismal picture. The elite society of Alexandria has probably moved to greener pastures across the Mediterranean. The urban ghettos in Algiers, the breeding grounds for Islamist politics, do not bear even a remote resemblance to the urban structures of present-day Paris. The city of Beirut, comparable in beauty with Geneva in 1945, was reduced to rubble by internecine civil war of the 1970s and 1980s. The quality and standard of living of an average Iraqi is no match to that of an average Spaniard. True, Iraq and Spain were never receiving the same attention from the world, but the same cannot be said about Turkey and Greece. In 1945, the per capita income of an average Turk and a Greek was almost the same and both the States were selected for special assistance under the ‘Truman Doctrine’ (March 1947). Now the gaping distance in levels of development between the two is far too obvious.

The over-grown and inefficient state structures in the MENA States and their relative involvement in and control over the economies are comparable to those of the erstwhile Communist states of Eastern Europe prior to the fall of the Berlin wall. The fact that political considerations took precedence over
economic ones in those states point to a dismal economic future for them as seen from the fate that overtook them in recent years. The ruling elites seek legitimacy by manipulating symbols and finding scapegoats for the troubles that obtain. Instead of adopting the interactive and riskier approach of taxing people directly and becoming, in turn, accountable to them, these regimes distribute favours by (mis)allocation of resources among the competing social forces while brutally repressing the ones that are left excluded. And the most disturbing reality is that the downward slide is continuing unabated, given that the entrenched political elite is not willing to forego its privileges in the interest of long-term macroeconomic gains. The ability, or rather inability to tax the people in a State like Egypt is borne out by the sad fact that of the 19 million strong workforce only 200,000 tax returns are deposited each year, and those too mainly from the civil service employees whose tax is deducted at source from their salaries (p. 98).

Globalization as well as the prospects of a lasting Arab-Israeli peace are presenting new challenges and opportunities for the existing economic order in the MENA. But the legacy of defensive mentality is ingrained by the two centuries of interaction with the same Western powers, wherefrom the thrust of globalization appears to be coming. Many still view globalization as an assault over the national, religious and cultural identities of the peoples of MENA (p. 6).

These apprehensions did not appear in a vacuum. When during the preceding couple of centuries the MENA region became a competing ground for influence among rival European powers, the colonial rule was hardly ever benign. No power was interested in encouraging local self-government in the colonies, being rather too preoccupied with the plundering of resources (p. 9). The French troops literally decimated Muslim populations in many parts of Algeria. The Italians followed suit in Libya, while the British ravaged Sudan. The only parallel to such savagery in recent history could be found in the Spanish exploits in Latin America against the non-Christian natives during the 17th through 19th centuries. Behind the curtain of this macabre dance, crude mono-culture economies were established in the colonies where the promotion of the twin concepts of transparency and accountability was neither in the interest of the colonial masters nor of their local collaborators.

But coming to the long-term impact of colonialism in the MENA region, one can identify it in the protection given to selective ‘minorities’ of the region by the foreign powers at the expense of the majorities. Ironically, the same pampered communities were later to become highly vulnerable when their “imperial protectors” left the region (pp. 9–10). As a consequence, sectarianism became more pronounced when, for instance, the Maronite
Christians allied themselves with the French, the Greek Orthodox with the Russians, and the Druze with the British. Consequently, external influence-peddling in the Middle East became a routine when the powers-that-be tried to continue maintaining linkages with their former allied communities. Ultimately, the rise of transnational Arab and Islamist movements further confounded the problems. The last nail was the establishment of Isreal which contributed to the militarization of the whole region. In turn, the resultant pattern of alliances and the arms races fomented a variety of local and regional armed conflicts. The cold war fuelled these conflicts further as the super powers fought proxy wars all over the globe. The Middle East had, by default, presented itself as a fertile ground for the often-violent ideological battles.

This geo-strategic and geo-political state of affairs was the primary factor that shaped the economies of the region in the following decades. The Arab-Israeli conflict alone, for instance, created many vested interests in the political and military-bureaucratic establishments on both sides of the divide that flourished on the continuation of the military build-up. Hence, the increased importance of the military in the decision-making that transformed the military into a “State within the State”. The loyalty of this organ of state had to be ‘bought’ by the governments concerned (p. 152).

In Egypt, the military became the biggest commercial enterprise commanding, besides substantial land, labour and capital, around half of the manufacturing sector by 1998, which was relatively profitable due to the skilled manpower and the subsidized inputs at its disposal (p. 152). Thus there came into being an institution, which was above accountability since military matters are always ‘highly confidential’ affairs even if they are related to a cement plant run for the benefit of the retired soldiers and servicemen. The vital stakes involved made the military a factor of inertia against any economic reform in the country. Similarly, in Algeria, which had a bloated corps of 140 Generals for only 124,000 uniformed personnel, the army became a separate mafia ruthlessly guarding its agricultural and real estate interests even when that meant deliberately and routinely killing civilians under the garb of fighting the Islamist opposition during the Algerian civil war (1992–98). 12

The monarchies, it may not be out of place to mention, also employ a parallel method, to keep a check on the military — through retaining top posts with the scions of the royal families. King Hassan of Morocco remained the Chief of Staff before ascending the throne in 1961, while King Abdullah II of Jordan was the Commander of the Special Forces. Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is the Commandant of the Saudi National Guards. In praetorian

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12 Habib Souaidia, *la Sale guerre* (Paris: La Decouverte, 2001), quoted in the study (p. 120).
republics where rulership is *de facto* hereditary like in Syria, Libya and Iraq, commanding positions in the armed forces are entrusted mainly to the sons, sons-in-law and cousins of the rulers.

Another direct impact of the cold war was the ‘strategic rents’ coming from the rival centres of power in pursuance of political interests. When money was in cheap supply, the regimes concentrated on grandiose projects, such as the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, which had high media value but debatable economic rationale. These economic policies eschewed the wider need for institutionalisation of economic decision-making in favour of propaganda gains for myopic regimes finding themselves in “legitimacy deficit” (p. 11).

The principal hypothesis of the book can be summed up as “bad politics begets bad economy”. This blasts the hypothesis that the reasons for the underdevelopment of this part of the world are cultural in nature. Even there cannot be an economic justification of this crisis of development. The mire that MENA finds itself in is thus a function of the nature of politics in the region. Wrong political decisions and subservience of economic objectives to political ones have caused and are still causing an economic chaos. The worst political manoeuvre that stifled any chance of robust economic growth had been the destruction of civil society such as liquidating the intelligentsia in the Syria of Hafez al-Asad (r.1970–2000) and “pre-emptive torturing” of political activists in the Tunisia of Habib Bourguiba (r. 1956–87).

The lack of economic opportunities for the common man and the absence of legitimate channels to air grievances has created a deep-rooted disappointment with the present system and the Islamist opposition is now making its presence felt in the region, especially in countries with no or scant democratic tradition. No wonder that between 1990–95, over 400,000 Algerians emigrated, many of them professionals and intellectuals. So the largest civil society of Algerians is now located in Switzerland (p. 103). The removal of this buffer may eventually lead many bully states to become engaged in war with their own people. Now the most rapidly expanding sector of civil society on the home soil appears to be the moderate Islamists (p. 163). The negative effects of brain drain have been exacerbated by the flight of capital to the tune of $350 billion to $700 billion of Arab capital in European banks while the home governments continue to cajole the MNCs (Multi-National Corporations) to make investments.

Contrary to the Western allegations against the Islamists that they have no economic alternative other than the ‘hollow’ slogan: “Islam is the solution”, the present work argues that Islamic parties have a clear idea of the new economic order for the region. The pace of privatization was greater
under the Islamist Welfare Party government in Turkey (1995–97) than under any leftist government in the recent past. Similarly, the economic agenda of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) that had romped home in Algeria’s first ever multi-party parliamentary elections in June 1992 hands down, called for a transparent economic system based on due respect for property rights. Cheated of their thumping victory with 188 of the 230 seats out of the declared results of the 430-member parliament, it is worth mentioning that two thirds of their MP's-elect were professionals (engineers, economists, etc.). They could have thus presumably better managed the economy than the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), though lagging far behind with 15 seats only, whose returned candidates were mainly ex-guerrilla leaders.

The ‘Islamic order’, according to the authors, is more akin to the Anglo-American laissez faire system which, in turn, requires transparency and accountability — the two common anathemas to all authoritarian regimes. Thus the ruthless repression of Islamist opposition in many states owes in part to the economic threat posed by these forces, rather than the political one. In any case, the political and economic stakes of the ruling cliques are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to identify them independent of each other.

It is the considered view of the authors that the longer the region stagnates, the more probable it is that the Islamic model will have the last laugh as it is less threatening to the local traditions and cultures, yet more akin to a free and fair market economy. The book had been written prior to the recent stunning electoral performances of the Justice and Development Party (AK) in Turkey (November 3, 2002) and of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in Pakistan (October 10, 2002). In the former case, AK have a near two-thirds majority in the parliament, while in the latter, MMA have captured power in two out of the four federating provinces of Pakistan. The economic performance of these governments will be keenly observed in the coming years.

The spectre of the Islamists forming the governments is not the sole impelling factor for reforms. As the present work also points out, because the strategic importance of the region has diminished in the wake of the end of the cold war, the rents accruing to it in the form of aid and concessional loans as well as supply of military hardware have also been depleted. The share of Middle East in the total world development assistance has dropped from an all-time high of 30% in 1977 to 17% in 1990 and finally to a meagre 9% in 1997. The ‘strategic rents’, — the euphemism used by the authors to name these politically-motivated money transfers — had kept the region insulated from the need to reform. However, this is no longer the case, the WTO/GATT
regimes having left no nation with a choice about reforms to adjust to new
global economic realities.

The principal areas of reform obviously lie in the political set-up of what
might be called Police States patterned after an East European model of the
period of US-Soviet rivalry. But the rivalry of the cold war period and its
attendant compulsions do not exist any more. The countries with a poor
showing in the realm of economics are precisely those with a low rating on the
Human Freedom Index (HFI) scale. Then there is the problem of overstaffing
in the government sector, as the State is the principal employer in most of
MENA. The State doles out jobs to the people as a bribe to keep their mouths
shut against the non-provision of essential utilities like clean drinking water,
etc. Egypt’s public sector employs 5 million people against hardly 2 million
vacancies. The unsustainable levels of public sector employment range from
around 20% in the Palestinian Authority to roughly 50% in Saudi Arabia. The
chronic budgetary deficits in most MENA states dissuade them to inflate the
public sector any further. There is thus no alternative to a viable private
sector.

Due to the not-so-impressive standard of education, the private sector of
the region remains reluctant to hire indigenous workers in most of the cases.
Thus the realm of reforms has to incorporate massive overhaul of the
education system. The emphasis has to be on technical education rather than
concentrating on religious instruction as the situation of Saudi Arabia amply
demonstrates. The number of highly indoctrinated unemployed youth with
diplomas in Islamic theology in Saudi Arabia are a threat to the Saudi polity.
So more than any other factor, the States are feeling uneasy about the large
legions of their unemployed youth, around 46% of the adult male population
in Saudi Arabia alone, who have little choice like their Algerian counterparts
to cross the sea into Europe (p. 179).

Reform also needs to be made in the bureaucratic procedures which make
it unattractive for foreign investors. In the face of drying up of Overseas
Development Assistance (ODA), the MENA states look forward to Foreign
Direct Investment (FDI) as a way to inject money into the system, to create
jobs and to sustain the economy. But the dismal performance in attracting FDI
except in the petroleum sector that promises high dividends and in the fast
food chains warrants a re-thinking of the strategies. In fact, the FDI in food
chains like the KFC and McDonalds directed at local consumption, results in a
reverse flow of capital to corporate headquarters from the local investors who
buy the franchise. Substantial direly-needed foreign investment in the cash
strapped areas of economy is hampered by the worn-out bureaucratic culture,
one of finding ‘personal contacts’ with influential persons to get things done,
rather than standard operating procedures, the requirement of ‘too many official permissions’ for small assignments and the crony capitalism of favouring capitalist ventures owned or operated by those linked to the ruling cliques, all of which are various facets of the malaise that needs to be eradicated.

The extent of institutional weakness of Arab bureaucracies can hardly be exaggerated. In 1998 alone, 32 million suits were filed in the courts of Egypt, meaning thereby that, theoretically speaking, every Egyptian has to approach the courts for seeking justice each year, since each case has to have at least one plaintiff and one defendant (p. 148). The less said about the chronic delays and cases’ backlog, the better. On the executive side, the Algerian example may be quoted where many junior economists at the Ministry of Planning were entrusted with the sole task of spying on the activities of other economists in the office (p. 107). What initiative could come from such a suffocating environment?

Furthermore, the free access to information is another requirement of the present that shall become an inevitability in the not-too-distant future. Internet was banned in most of the MENA states till the late 1990s. Now there has been some opening up under strict regulations and restrictions. Tunisian government has allowed limited internet access facilities to the people. The company licensed for the purpose is run by President Ben Ali’s daughter. The situation is not different in Iraq where the only ‘privately-owned’ newspaper is owned by President Saddam Hussein’s son. How can a multi-national company be expected to invest in countries where State-sponsored information famine does not allow it to acquire enough knowledge about the profitability or otherwise of the proposed venture. Without information, neither the market, nor the institutions, nor the public opinion can check the economic descent. Qatar has been bold enough to allow an independent news channel, *al-Jazeera*, though this has left her at odds with Iraq, Tunisia and Libya (p. 193).

A so far less exploited area of economic reform is in the domain of foreign policy. Few MENA states have realised that the economic competition between the three rival centres of the USA, the European Union and the East Asia (primarily Japan and China) provide as much room for manoeuvre as the contest between the USA and the Soviet Union provided during the cold war.

Given that many of the economies are dependant on and integrated with the world trade to various degrees, the study explores the level of structural reform already in place on the basis of seven indicators, namely, the proportion of manufactured goods to total exports, average tariff rates, low inflation rates, reduced budgetary deficits, low but positive interest rates,
degree of coincidence between the official and kerb foreign exchange rates, and finally, seignorage. The study finds almost all the MENA states to be poorly, if at all, reformed.

In view of the fact that the states feel threatened by the tide of globalization on the one hand and the Islamist opposition on the other, most regimes are trying to control the pace and content of globalization, lest they be swept away by it. In any case, as the tide gets stronger many incumbent regimes may fail to contain it and may eventually fall victim to it.

The process of normalization in the Arab-Israeli conflict may in the end reduce military expenditures and consequently the role of the militaries as well. The nations may then have more energy and money to spare for the welfare of the people. The decimated civil society may then re-emerge as a potent force in the de-militarised MENA states.

The study also points out the various paradoxes that characterise the MENA political economies. Firstly, the political force perceived as most antagonistic to the West (i.e. the Islamist political parties), are the most committed to the free market economy, albeit within the parameters of Islamic financial values. Secondly, the nominally modern Arab states are less capable of responding to the challenge of globalization than the conservative ones since these self-proclaimed progressive states like Egypt and Syria have such an overgrown state structure that they are incapable of introducing reform without risking serious social disturbances. Thirdly, while being geographically closest to Europe, the MENA region has lagged behind East Asia and Latin America in responding to globalization. Fourthly, the banking sector in MENA has failed to fulfil its primary function of equitable allocation of scarce resources. And the final paradox is that instead of preparing the MENA to respond effectively to globalization, imperialism has militated against effective responses because it had created brittle regimes that are unable to respond flexibly and dynamically to the economic challenges.

True, not one MENA country has embraced all the pre-requisites of a free market capitalist economy, but this has been so at considerable costs including low standards of living for the people, poor economic indicators and unstable and increasingly vulnerable political dispensations.

The book concludes by emphasizing that the challenge posed by the Islamic model to the existing order is potent and serious and that the dialectic of globalization shall be determined by the contest between the globalisers and Islamic moralizers. One is free to dispute the conclusions but this does not detract from the fact that the book is a must read for any serious student of Middle Eastern politics.
There are several theses in the book with which one may disagree. For instance, it suggests three principal economic models and tries to fit each country into one of them in view of her present economic system, namely, the German model of oligopolies, the French model of heavy state intervention, and the Anglo-American model of free enterprise.

Moreover, the work talks about the dialectic of imperialism and globalization with respect to three moments. The first moment, that of synthesis, is the emergence of the pro-Western elite in the MENA states that admire Western values and adopt them before taking up cudgels for the rights of their own community. The second moment or the anti-thesis comes in the form of rejectionists or the moralisers who hate almost everything Western and take pride in the native culture, religion and traditions. And finally, the third moment or the synthesis emerges when a new elite encompasses the Western values without essentially parting ways with their own culture and traditions. Depending on the length of the colonial experience and direct interaction, the authors argue, the three moments shape the response to the phenomena such as imperialism and now globalization.

Significant from the theoretical point of view is this book’s classification of the MENA states into four types: the traditional monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Morocco; the Bunker states such as Iraq or Libya ruled from the bunker, i.e. by massive state repression; the Bully states such as Egypt which are totalitarian regimes but are less brutal and represent broader social coalitions; and finally, the ‘qualified’ democracies like Turkey, Lebanon and Iran, that have some formal non-violent mechanism for change of government, albeit a discontinuous one in most cases and also exclusionist against certain minorities like the Kurds in Turkey and the liberals in Iran. The study has placed all the MENA states in one of these categories and generalised the expected response and capacity to respond to globalization for each of these categories. Though the space here does not allow a detailed discussion on the stance taken by the authors on this account, it would suffice to say that many of the contentions made may generate interesting argument.

The book is cogently argumentative and makes a crisp and interesting reading. It throws new light on the impact of globalization on national and regional economies of the MENA. It explains the economic structures and capacities of the respective economies. It also highlights the potential of the Islamic alternative to the current economic order and relates the efforts of Islamisation of economy and the banking sectors in various states. The work also underscores the importance of education, free flow of information, transparency and accountability for a healthy growth of the economy. The importance of civil society for the over-all prosperity of a nation is now being
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