

In Memoriam Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003)

I am pleased to have been asked to offer, on behalf of my Islamic-studies colleagues past and present at Harvard University, a word of tribute in memory of our late friend, colleague, and teacher, Annemarie Schimmel, who was instrumental in bringing about the 1987 Amir Khusrau Conference underlying the present volume. In the words of the editor, Habibuddin Ahmed, she was “the main source of inspiration and hard work” on the conference and the related translation project also published by Dr. Ahmed in 2007.

Annemarie Schimmel was a singular figure in Islamic studies across a variety of subfields in the last half of the twentieth century. All of us who knew her well are still a bit surprised, over eight years after her death, that she is not still moving around the globe giving an endless array of lectures on Islamic topics, meeting old friends and making new ones of every nationality, creed, and color, finding new things to love about her feline friends of all stripes, and writing myriad new books, articles, and even limericks.

At home in the intellectual world of Western Europe and equally so in Turkish, Arab, Persian, and especially Pakistani cultural circles, Annemarie gave much of her life to building bridges of understanding between the Muslim-majority world and the Western world (first, that of Europe, and then, in the three decades of her work at Harvard, also that of America). She was religiously eclectic. One could not but imagine her approving fully of the words of the Mughal intellectual and rebel, Bayazid Khan, better known as Pir-i Roshan: “God speaks in every language, be it Arabic, Persian, Hindi, or Afghani; He speaks in the language that the human heart can understand.” It would be hard to know how to approximate more closely what her mystically inclined credo might have been, had she formulated one.

The basis of her eclecticism was her all but incredible intellectual range. She was almost literally born to be a scholar, for she became interested in the world beyond Europe even before she began formal schooling. She was probably the only intellectual whom any of us have known who could remark simply and without provoking resistance, in answer to questions as to how she got started so early in the study of Islam, “Ich war ein Wunderkind.” Which she undoubtedly was, and no one could imagine anything different of her as a child. Her adult range of linguistic abilities was staggering; one had only to see the letters she had already penned stacked up most mornings on her desk in her apartments in Bonn or Cambridge to realize the extent of the regular correspondence she carried on with friends, colleagues, and strangers in German, English, Swedish, French, Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Sindhi, among others. Her remarkable personal letter files have been saved and will be their own kind of treasure when fully available (in Basel)—how many of her contemporaries in academia could show you a series of personal letters not only from academics around the world but from literati such as Hermann Hesse (some embellished with his own watercolor sketches of Tessin)? Her reading was broad and international as well as multilingual, as her varied book reviews attest. She published on and translated from Islamic literary and religious writings across a similarly wide range of regions, languages, and cultures. Known best for her work on Muslim mysticism and Indo-Muslim literary and religious studies, she also wrote on Mamluk history and Ibn Khaldun.

Amir Khusrau, the great scholar-poet and musician of north India, was only one among many past Muslim intellectual giants whom Annemarie loved and studied and wrote about. From

Hallaj or Bistami or Ghazali to Nasir-i Khusrau, Rumi, Ghalib, or Iqbal, Annemarie found spiritual and intellectual giants worthy of her rapt attention and prolonged study, translation, and interpretation. That she worked so hard to see the Amir Khusrau Conference and now, indirectly, the present volume become realities was not surprising; she cared deeply about the truly great spirits of the Islamic past and did all in her considerable power to stimulate others to study and love them as well.

Annemarie Schimmel was our colleague, mentor, and friend, and all of us who were privileged to work with her can only be delighted that even some years after her unexpected death one of her projects is seeing the light of day in a new publication. She would of course have still produced at least three or four books of her own annually over the past eight years had she lived through the surgical procedure that ended her life well before she was ready to stop her relentlessly productive work. At least the present volume offers an echo of her work and interests long after her own pen was stilled.

In closing, let me put forward two brief citations that I think Annemarie might have been happy to offer us herself, given her steadfast expectation of always seeing friends again and her conviction of something beyond death. Fittingly, one comprises three lines from her beloved Goethe: *Von weitenwinkt die Wiederkehr / Und sagt der Seele Freude zu. / Istes so? Ja! Zweiflenicht!*" (From afar beckons the return/ and assures the soul of happiness. / Is it so? Yes! Have no doubt!"). Fittingly, the second is an hadith ascribed to the Prophet, which she sometimes quoted and always recalled as having inspired her when she first read it as a small girl to study the religion of Islam: "People are asleep, and when they die, they awake." We can only hope she has found a happy return and fulsome wakefulness.

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