

Annemarie Schimmel: A Study of her Life and Academic Quest for understanding Islam and Muslim Culture

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Abstract

This article discusses the autobiography and contributions of the famous German Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel. It is a systemic study of the life history of Annemarie Schimmel by dividing her academic endeavor into different phases, like early life, her life in Germany, Turkey then her life in the Orient and Occident, and later life. She studied various aspects of Islam through the lens of the phenomenological approach. While studying Islam she documented her broader understanding of Muslim Culture and Civilization in numerous academic writings, seminars, papers, and conference presentations. We tried to shed light on her quest for the search for authentic and actual spirit and the essence of Islamic tradition. A descriptive and analytical study approach was used for this study so that Annemarie Schimmel's life history and her academic contribution could be well studied.

Keywords: Annemarie Schimmel, Academic Quest, understanding Islam, Muslim Culture

Introduction

Autobiography plays a vital role in understanding perceptions and thoughts and gives the necessary details about the whole life of any personality, as it



gives reliable information and helps explore someone's life experiences. Autobiographies are also helpful in studying someone's approach to and understanding of a topic. Likewise, the Autobiography of Annemarie Schimmel is quite helpful in learning about her life and educational background. Her autobiography also shows how she thinks about phenomenology in general and Islam in particular. The ensuing paragraphs, therefore, present the different salient features of her life in chronological order:

Early life

At an early age, Schimmel was lucky enough to get a caring environment at her home, as she depicted: "thus, I grew up in a beautiful atmosphere, I never noticed tensions among my parents; I enjoyed my loving environment."¹ Looking at Schimmel's interest in orientalism, her parents sent her to famous journalist Elleberg for the Arabic language in 1937, when she was only fifteen. Her teacher gave her proper time for Islamic Studies and history apart from Arabic grammar, and he allowed her to take home two specialist books her parents read, which remained helpful for her studies. She also learned Persian at age 17, and while studying the university course, she studied *the Safar Nama (Travelogue)* of the famous Ismaili philosopher Nasir-e-Khusrow (d. 1072).² In short, at an early age, she succeeded in having unique command of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish languages, Islamic history, and mysticism, proving her keen interest, sincere engagement, and commitment to the East and Islam. Her autobiography shows that Annemarie Schimmel had a keen interest in Islamic Art which her search for Islamic arts can better realize. Whenever she visits, she always keeps an eye on them and tries to highlight the neglected area of Islam. e.g., Once during her visit to Geneva, she met Prince Sadr Uddin, Aga Khan³ when she saw the collection of Islamic art there, she documented it in her autobiography as she describes: "could I ever forget to mention Geneva, where the precious collection of Islamic art of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan is housed, which holds the finest Indian and Persian miniatures – a collection, which counts one of the best private ones of Europe or maybe, of the world."⁴

Teaching in Turkey (1952-1959)

Schimmel was appointed full professor of the history of religions at the Islamic theological faculty of Ankara University in Turkey from 1954 to 1959, even though she was not a Muslim.⁵ While staying in Turkey for five years (1954-59), she developed her attachment with the famous Sufi Poet Mawlana Rumi (d.1273) by frequently visiting the mausoleum of Maulana Rumi in Konya. During this time, she worked on her favourite subject, the Indo-Muslim thinker and poet Muhammad Iqbal (d.1938). She also prepared an annotated translation of Iqbal's famous book, the *Jawednama*, which is in high demand by her Turkish friends. This resulted in an invitation in 1958 to visit Pakistan, which was the starting point of a new research interest that ultimately brought her to Harvard. Schimmel was inspired by Maulana Rumi as, in her autobiography, she described Maulana Rumi's arrival in Konya like this; "... Among those who came from the East was also Maulana Jelaluddin Rumi, a youth whose father was a famous scholar who had brought the family from Balkh through the Central Asian regions to Anatolia. The family settled in Laranda- Karaman, till in 1228, they were called to Konya. His father died in 1231, and his son followed him to teach theology in one of the numerous, rich theological schools, the madrassas. He is seized by mystical love for itinerant dervish Shams-i-Tabrizi, a love that changed the learned teacher into an ecstatic poet of the Islamic world."⁶

The Other side of the Atlantic (1967-1992)

While teaching at Harvard, she visited different parts of North America to participate in different conferences. Meanwhile, she adored the phenomenological approach to religion, saying, "When I learned how to handle the phenomenological approach to religion, which seems to facilitate the understanding of the external manifestations of religions and slowly guides the seeker into the heart of each religion."⁷ She was convinced that such an approach could lead to much-needed forbearance without losing oneself in sweeping, dangerous "syncretistic" view that less distinct differences. She had more than 100 writings in different languages as she

could read and correspond in twenty-five languages and efficiently deliver ten-language impromptu lectures.⁸

Touring through the Orient and Occident

Schimmel had a rich experience of the Orient as she was very fond of visiting different places and utilized the opportunities to get an in-depth understanding of Muslim customs and traditions. It is, therefore, she had to present the real essence of Islam by investigating and going beyond the outer world of any ritual practice. She visited more than thirteen countries to deliver lectures at different universities, meet with ambassadors, and visit Islamic historical and religious places. In Bahrain, she visited the Bait ul Quran Museum. She then went to Syria and Jordan, where she visited the university of Damascus, the Mausoleum of Ibn-Arabi, the theosophist-mystic, and the grave of Suharwardi, the Sufi master of enlightenment. In Amman, she visited the Institute of interfaith studies founded by Prince Hassan, a philosopher, and admired his concerns and efforts for understanding among religions. She also visited Afghanistan, and in her book, she discussed historical events, prominent philosophers and poets of the region, including Khushahal Khan Khattak (d.1689), the father of Pashto literature, Rehman Baba (d.1709), Nasir-e- Khusraw (d.1072), the philosopher, traveller, poet and Ismaili scholar. Annemarie Schimmel had a great interest in studying Islam. So, she gradually got attached to Islam, Pakistan, and Iqbal. She was introduced to Iqbal by an article written by British Orientalist Reynold A. Nicholson.⁹ In the magazine *Islamica*. She also translated the *Javednama* into German and Turkish, which became a source for her to get invited to Pakistan.

Schimmel was inspired by Iqbal's religious consideration and his fascinating combination of classical, traditional forms of Persian poetics with daringly modern ideas and described it as: "Iqbal was strict Muslim, at the time a socialist, even a socialist critic cum revolutionary messenger, at the time a Sufi, or anti-Western. In short, the interpretations changed according to the political weather, year by year."¹⁰In India and Pakistan, she met famous people from different walks of life like S.A. Vahid (her host in Karachi), Pir

Hassamuddin Rashdi, a member of one of the Sufi family of Sindh, the Pir Pagara, Pir Ali Muhammad, G.M Syed and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Piyar Ali Alana, Benazir Bhutto, Justice A.K Bruhi, Allani Kazi, Hassan Dani, Hakeem Mohammad Saeed and Hamid Abdul Hamid in India. She was fond of singers who sang Sufi songs and music. In particular, she had a great love for the voice of the flute (musical instrument) and the voice of Alan Faqir (d.2000), whose talent she appreciated a lot. ¹¹Pakistan remained her main field of work after she left Turkey. She visited Pakistan almost thirty times and came to know the different parts of the country, not only the prairie lands of Sindh, scattered with little mausoleums, but also, in her later years, the mountains in the Northern Areas, which are presently known as Gilgit Baltistan. She was awarded Hilal-i Pakistan, the country's highest civil distinction, in a ceremony in which Aga Khan VI participated. She went on a drive to the Khunjrab Pass.¹² Moreover, sometimes she travelled by flight along the Nanga Parbat into the valleys of the young Indus. She visited southern Baluchistan to Lasbela in a small helicopter. She used to go to the sacred cave of Hinglaj in the Makran Mountains, a Kali sanctuary on camel's back. In Pakistan, she saw the political changes; had long chats with Mr Bhutto and General Zia ul-Haqq; saw industrialization, the old life patterns gradually vanishing, pressures between various groups escalated, pastors and pastors and heads of states changing or being executed. Be that as it may, the multi-hued social patterns and the fellowship of such a large number of individuals who generally knew her from her continuous chats on National Television made her especially feel at home in Pakistan. She was awarded an Honorary degree in Ph.D. by Sindh University, Quid - e -Azam University, and the University of Peshawar. So, she was delighted and felt proud of it. Moreover, a significant avenue was named after her in Lahore due to her sincere attachment to Pakistan and to recognize her extraordinary services to Pakistan. After 1992, Annemarie Schimmel visited European counties like Rome, Paris, and London. She was selected for the Gifford lectures series on the history of spiritual development in humans in 1992. Based on these lectures, her book *"Deciphering the signs of God."*¹³ It was compiled and

published. She always tried her best to present the peaceful dimensions of Islam, but when the terror act of 9/11 happened, she felt in great trouble as she wrote in her book: "But, in between all, was the September 11. After a poisoning, which paralyzed my right arm, came the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York. ... I had to give innumerable lectures and talks to try to convince people, or at least, to make them aware that Islam has nothing to do with terrorism and that not everyone, who emphasizes the positive aspect of Islamic culture, sympathizes with the terrorists."¹⁴ While she criticized the U.S. policies and said: "One should not forget that the USA initially, to protect the planned oil pipeline, and as a defence against Russians, has supported Taliban." She also comments on the Taliban "that the Taliban followed the unusual, narrow-minded interpretation of Islam, which is rejected by most of the Muslims."¹⁵

Later life

Annemarie Schimmel's autobiography was completed in 2002, while on January 26, 2003, she passed away due to complications following her surgery. Though there is no immediate living family of her except a well-loved son of a cousin in California and New Jersey, there is a large number of friends, colleagues, students, and many Muslims from all walks of life and the coming generation in academia who will never forget this well-known scholar of Islam. Her autobiography shows that she was delighted with her life and was always thankful for everything as she said: "I need to be thankful, endlessly thankful, that I have reached this point of my life, that I without a secretary, without any assistant, without a computer, without a car, without leaves or sports activities, I can do much as I wished; that I have good friends, loving human relationships, successful students all over the world, and that so far I have been spared from illness."¹⁶ She had a great love for Islam and thought that until and unless you do not love something, you cannot understand that correctly, as she quotes St. Augustine: "One can understand something only to the extent as one loves it."¹⁷ She claimed that she had a great love for the world of the Orient since her childhood. She could understand a little bit about them. Finally, one can say that it is not only a

legend of a great orientalist of her time, but there is a lot to learn from such a personality who dedicated her whole life to bringing in the peaceful and mystical dimension of Islam there is the great lesson of commitment, hard work, sincerity and devotion for the knowledge society. Her books motivate and inspire readers to read about Islam in general and Sufi Islam in particular.

Annemarie Schimmel's Academic Contribution

In the Encyclopedia of Religions, she is introduced in the following words:

"Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) was a German Orientalist and historian of religions. She was born in Erfurt to a Protestant family and started learning Arabic at the age of fifteen and studied Persian and Turkish in 1939 in Berlin, where she completed her Ph.D. in 1941 at the age of nineteen, with a doctoral thesis on "Calif and Cadi in Late Medieval Egypt [i.e., in the late Mamluk period]."¹⁸

She wrote many books, including *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* in 1975, on mystic poetry (*As Through a Veil* in 1982 and *A Two-Colored Brocade* in 1992), on mystic writers (*I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi* in 1992 and *Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* in 1963), on Islamic forms of worship (*And Muhammad Is His Messenger* in 1983), on everyday Muslim practice (*Islamic Names*, 1989); and another cultural expression, such as calligraphy (*Islamic Calligraphy*, 1970; *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 1984); as well as on surveys on specific literature (*Islamic Literatures of India*, 1973; *Sindhi Literature*, (1974); *Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal*, (1975) and on Islam in India and Pakistan (*Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*, 1980; *Islam in India and Pakistan*, 1982). Similarly, there are some other books, are as *Islam: An Introduction* (1989),¹⁹ *The story of Numbers* (1984), *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (1995)²⁰, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaluddin Rumi* (1978), *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (1994), *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture* (2000), *Islamic Names: An Introduction* (1989), *Islam in India and Pakistan (Iconography of religions, Section XXII, Islam; 9.)* (1982), *A Dance of*

*Sparks: Imagery of Fire in Ghalib's Poetry (1979), Islam in the Indian Subcontinent (1980)*²¹ *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India (1976)*²², *We Believe in One God: The Experience of God in Christianity and Islam (1975)*²³, *Sindhi Literature (A History of Indian Literature, Vol. 9 Fasc. 1) (1974), Islam and the Wonders of Creation: The Animal Kingdom (2003).*

Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal (*A History of Indian Literature, Vol. 8 Fasc. 3*) 1975, *Rumi 2001, Islamic Literatures of India (A History of Indian Literature, Vol. 8 Fasc. 1) 1973, The Poets' Geography (2000)*, moreover she has translated some Selected Poems of Mevlana Jaladuddin Rumi (2007), *Look! This Is Love by Rumi (1991), Make a Shield from Wisdom: Selected Verses from Nāṣir-iKhusraw's "Divān (2001)*. She also authored many books in collaboration with other scholars of her time, like *Celebrating Muhammad: Images of the Prophet in Popular Muslim Poetry* with the collaboration of Ali S. Asani and Kamal Abdel-Malek.²⁴ She also contributed many articles to different journals about Islam, and there are several books of hers in the German language about Islam. Some of her books have been translated into English and other languages, including *Orient and Occident (My life in the East and West)*.²⁵

The study of the life history and academic contribution of Annemarie Schimme makes it quite clear that she had approached Islam without any biases. On receiving the peace award, she even faced criticism from other orientalist, but she never got discouraged. She responded that she had never seen anything about Islam that promotes terrorism or any compulsion, but Quran says there is no compulsion in religion.

She always enjoyed her research on Islam, which enabled her to develop many pieces of literature on Sufi Islam. She has contributed a lot in academia by translating books into German, English, Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. She has also written forwards for scholars besides translating selected poems of Muslim mystical poets like Rumi, Nasir Khusraw, Mir Dard, Iqbal, and Abdullah Shah Bitai. Her books; *Islam: An Introduction, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, Deciphering the Signs of God, And Muhammad his*

Messenger are best sellers' books. Finally, it can be said that she had entirely devoted her life to teaching and learning. From an early age, she learned different languages and earned her first Ph.D. at 19. At the same time, later in her life, she received many honorary degrees and awards from different universities worldwide. For her, learning is a continuous process as she said, "Learning is, to me, transforming knowledge and experience into wisdom and love, to mature as according to Oriental lore, the ordinary pebble can turn into a ruby provided it patiently takes into itself the rays of the sun, shedding its blood in a supreme sacrifice."²⁶She also wrote some poetry once after visiting Rumi's mausoleum in Konya can express what learning means to her: "Never will you reach that silver mountain which appears, like a cloud of joy, in the evening light. Never can you cross that lake of salt which treacherously smiles at you in the morning mist."

Conclusion

This study shows that Annamarie Schimmel was an enthusiastic and hardworking research scholar who contributed her life to academia. In her early life, she started to learn oriental languages; at 15, she learned Arabic, and at 17, she learned Persian. From early life, her parents provided her enabling environment, and she remained hardworking and continued her studies even during World War II. Her autobiographical book *Orient and Occident* is full of her educational engagement. She never discusses her personal life in this book. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that she was an expert in using the phenomenological study approach and applied it in the study of Islam. She believed that religion was not studied as a religion. Instead, it was studied through economic, psychological, and societal lenses. She contributed to the phenomenological study of Islam and always tried to present the peaceful image of Islam as she argued that the opponents of Islam had misrepresented Islam. She had a great interest in Islamic Mysticism (Tasawuf). She highlighted the contributions of Muslim Sufi personalities like Rumi (d. 1273), Iqbal (d.1938), Shah Abdul Latif Bitahi (d.1752), and Mir Dard (d.1785).She was awarded many awards and degrees that show that she was highly committed, sincere, and hardworking in her scholarly work.

She had more than five honorary Ph.D. degrees, proving her academic achievements.

After thoroughly reading her autobiography, I thought her life could be divided into three stages, i.e., her early life in Germany, her professional life in teaching as a professor, and her later life as an independent researcher.

She travelled the globe, and the purpose was only research and learning, not entertainment. After completing her 2nd Ph.D. at the age of twenty-three, Schimmel was appointed full professor of the history of religions at the Islamic theological faculty of Ankara University in Turkey. There she served for five years. Then taught Islamic languages at the Universities of Marburg for two years and the University of Bonn for nine years. After that, she served at Harvard University USA for 25 years and held the newly established Chair of Indo-Muslim Cultures.²⁷ While staying in Turkey, she started studying Sufi Islam. She got inspired by Rumi's contribution to Islamic literature and gradually led her studies toward Iqbal's contribution to Sufism. During serving at Harvard University USA, she adopted the phenomenological approach to studying religion. Later she applied this approach to study Islam, and this study shows that she successfully applied the phenomenological approach to studying Islam. In her writing, she tried to present the peaceful face of Islam by negating the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. So, some other writers also recognize her contributions as Qamar ul Huda in his article published in the *Journal of Islamic Studies* mentioned that Annemarie Schimmel was one of the few academics with a comprehensive understanding of Islam, philosophy, theology, poetry, mysticism, languages, history, and literature.²⁸ Web ology a research journal published an article *Critical Study of Dr Annemarie Schimmel's "And Muhammad Is His Messenger"*. While concluding they stated that it is a unique contribution for ordinary readers about the Sirah of the Prophet peace be Upon Him and this is a beautiful contribution of an orientalist.²⁹ Her later life shows that she was satisfied by her contributions to academia, and she believed in hard work and always preferred academic work over domestic issues.

While talking about her life, she quoted from her revered poet Orientalist Friedrich Rucker:

If tomorrow I should die —
I have worked enough.
If hundred years or more, I'd try—
There is enough work.³⁰

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⁷ Annamarie Schimmel, “A LIFE OF LEARNING,” *ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER*, no. 21 (1993).

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⁹ Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (born August 18, 1868, Keighley, Yorkshire, Eng.—died August 27, 1945, Chester, Cheshire) was an English orientalist who exercised a lasting influence on Islamic studies: Accessed December 3, 2016.

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¹⁰ Schimmel, *Orient and Occident: My Life in East and West*, 241.

¹¹ Schimmel, *Orient and Occident: My Life in East and West*, 256–261.

¹² The place, which is at an altitude of 15,000 feet at the Chinese border on the Pakistan side.

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¹⁵ Schimmel, *Orient and Occident: My Life in East and West*, 294.

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