FOREWORD

to the 35th Anniversary Edition

*Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, from its first appearance in 1975, has become the standard English-language handbook on the subject of Sufism or Islamic mysticism. Readers have appreciated the way the book combines careful and wide-ranging scholarship with a direct and approachable style, making it an excellent introduction to the topic. In the original foreword, Annemarie Schimmel described the dauntingly difficult character of Islamic mysticism as a subject of academic research. At the same time, she acknowledged that it was the repeated demands of her students at Harvard that caused her to put her lectures into book form. What is it about this book that has made it such a classic?

Most academics would agree that no scholar in the last half of the twentieth century had a greater impact on the study of Islamic mysticism than Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003), formerly professor of Indo-Muslim studies at Harvard University. Among her many achievements, she earned two doctorates from German universities, the first from Berlin in Arabic and Islamic studies at the age of nineteen and the second, ten years later, from Marburg in the history of religion. Her work embraced many other languages of Islamic civilization besides Arabic, including Persian, Turkish, and Urdu, as well as other languages of South Asia. She authored over eighty books and countless articles on all aspects of Islamic culture, but clearly Sufism was her first love. She produced auto-
biographical writings in both English and German, and two academic festschrifts have been dedicated to her scholarship.

Schimmel's deep familiarity with Sufism, and her obviously sympathetic approach, clearly distinguished her book from the learned but pedantic publications on the subject that had previously characterized English-language scholarship. While R. A. Nicholson and A. J. Arberry had been careful and dedicated scholars in this field, they had their limitations, including a somewhat remote scholarly perspective based in classical European Orientalism. Unlike armchair scholars, throughout her career Schimmel traveled extensively and had numerous close friendships in Muslim countries. She had an extensive grasp of modern scholarship on Islamic studies in numerous languages, which she combined with an encyclopedic knowledge of texts that she could quote from memory. She relied upon the formidable tools of philology and history for research, and she used the comparative language of the phenomenology of religion to explain her insights thematically. She was able to discuss this complex material in a lively and engaging fashion, which made even the most obscure references intriguing and fascinating. Her discussions of the history of European scholarship on the study of Islam and Sufism were absorbing even as she delineated the eccentricities of her predecessors.

_Mystical Dimensions of Islam_ is particularly rich in its discussion of the spirituality of the Prophet Muhammad, the poetry of Rumi and other Persian Sufis, the feminine element in Sufism, and the extensive presence of Sufism in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. In short, it is an excellent example of how a well-honed classroom presentation can become the basis for a book that will appeal to a wide range of readers—both inside and outside the classroom.

Given the penchant of German Orientalists for daunting dis-

plays of intimidating philological minutiae, it is remarkable that Schimmel not only translated poetry (including that of John Donne) into German verse, but also wrote her own poetry in both German and English. Other European translators of the texts of Islamic mysticism wavered between painfully literal versions intended for students and effusive versions in high Victorian style. Introducing his collection of translations of the poetry of Rumi, for example, Arberry grimly remarked that his versions would be "as literal as possible, with a minimal concession to readability". Such was not the case with Annemarie Schimmel. Moreover, in contrast to the markedly anti-Islamic attitudes that characterized much of European scholarship in the twentieth century, Schimmel had a deeply intuitive appreciation of the spiritual importance of the Prophet Muhammad, which she discussed in many studies. Schimmel's aesthetic and literary approach to Islamic culture drew upon the rich heritage of German Romanticism, going back to Goethe and his profound and underappreciated response to the Persian poet Hafiz in the collection of German poems known as the _West-Eastern Divan_, begun in 1814. She also paid particular attention to the role of the outstanding early German translator of Oriental poetry Friedrich Rückert (1758–1866). No doubt, Schimmel had an extraordinary command over the languages of the Middle East and South Asia, but her poetic sensibility and aesthetic engagement made her work appealing and influential.

I first met Annemarie Schimmel in the spring of 1976, when I was a graduate student at Harvard University (and this book had just been published). In addition to taking her graduate seminars, I sat in on her lecture course on Sufism, where she delivered her remarks much in the same vein as she does in this book. As was her custom, she would begin to lecture by closing her eyes and playing with the bangles on her wrists. She commonly did this in public lectures, confounding listeners who expected her to be following detailed notes, but instead she appeared to be reading them from the insides of her eyelids. Although the generally over-
heated Cambridge lecture halls that she preferred could sometimes encourage the sleep-deprived to nap, these classes were absorbing demonstrations of the erudition and sympathetic approach that she was famous for. I had the privilege of serving as Schimmel's teaching assistant for her Sufism course in 1980, and subsequently I have often taught this book in my own courses. I continue to turn to it for basic references and indeed for many of the conceptual issues that underlie Islamic mysticism.

Schimmel held her students to high standards, impersonally correcting grammatical and interpretive errors while at the same time being thoroughly supportive. At one point I took her seminar on Indo-Persian mystical texts, where we read aloud and translated the discourses of the famous Chishti saint of northern India, Shaykh Nasir al-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i Dihli (d. 1356). The class had reached a section where the author began to comment on certain verses from the Qur'an, which meant that lengthy Arabic passages occurred in the middle of the Persian text. A student who was still in the elementary stage of learning Arabic stopped in confusion. "His Arabic is not yet fully watered," she commented, turning to a more advanced student to continue the text.

What is the relevance of Schimmel's work in the post-9/11 era? Her writings do not address terrorism or the conflicts that followed the end of the Cold War. Instead, she focused on the mystical interpretation of prophecy, the aesthetics of calligraphy, and the expression of spirituality in both the classical tongues of Arabic and Persian and the local languages of the Near East and South Asia. Those subjects in fact are extremely important both historically and today for the way that most Muslims relate to the Islamic tradition. While it seems that, in a post-9/11 world, most journalistic accounts of Islam and public discourse about Muslims in general focus on fundamentalism, most scholars of Islam would agree that Sufi-style spirituality still draws the loyalty of the majority of Muslims today. The difference is that Sufism is characterized by personal connections to God, the Prophet, and the saints, rather than just authoritarian appeals to scripture. Schimmel's coverage of a wide range of Muslim cultures also draws attention to the way in which one needs to break down the notion of Islamic civilization into multiple locations. Especially now, in the current climate of undifferentiated hostility toward Islam, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the example that Annemarie Schimmel provided of the possibility of a rigorous yet sympathetic engagement with Islamic civilization. She was exceptional in providing an example of how to be a bridge between cultures. Her efforts were deeply appreciated by Muslims in many different countries.

Inevitably new advances in the study of Sufism have been made by researchers from many different countries and in a variety of languages, and thus a number of features in Mystical Dimensions of Islam are doubtless subject to improvement. (Schimmel herself produced an expanded German translation of the book in 1985.)

What, then, has been left out of this extensive survey? Characteristically, Schimmel remarked that her work avoided "sociology," perhaps acknowledging that she focused on the poetic and the ideal rather than the realm of society and politics where Sufism has in fact been contested and transformed; her adoption of Evelyn Underhill's highly personal approach to mysticism gave little consideration to mysticism's social history. Reviewers have noted that the book did not cover the extensive history of Sufism in East and West Africa, it provided more attention to Eastern areas (Turkish, Persian, and Indian) than Arab regions, and it did not reflect on problems of Orientalism in Sufi studies or contemporary Sufi groups moving outside of traditional Islamic identifications. Two other introductions to Sufism written in recent years from a historical and scholarly perspective, including one by the present author, have attempted to address some of those issues. Yet it is evident that the rich detail and extraordinary erudition of Schimmel's Mystical Dimensions of Islam, combined with its remarkable aesthetic and even spiritual engagement with the Sufi mystical tradition, make it a classic that will be hard to supersede.

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