

German peace prize goes to orientalist

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Germany's intellectual elites have been racked by a controversy over the past six months, of which the ultimate, happy solution may prove to be one of the decisive events of the year. The fight erupted in April, when it was made known that the German Book Trade Association intended to confer its annual peace prize on a scholar in Islamic studies, Prof. Annemarie Schimmel. The ostensible trigger for the attacks against Professor Schimmel was a statement she had made, in reference to the Salman Rushdie affair, that, while she unconditionally denounced the *fatwa* issued against him by Ayatollah Khomeini, yet she could understand how the blasphemous characterizations of Mohammed contained in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, could "wound the feelings of deeply religious people." Schimmel was immediately branded a "fundamentalist" who "justified" an ayatollah's death sentence against Rushdie, who, after all, was merely exercising his "freedom of speech." For months, critics assembled around Anti-Defamation League-linked Ralph Giordano, Alice Schwarzer, and Günther Wallraff, editorialized against her, and it was expected that either she would withdraw her name, or the Book Trade Association would settle on a more acceptable choice. In a country where more than one politician has been forced to resign for statements considered by opinion makers as "politically incorrect," it was thought by some that a diplomatic settlement would have to be found.

Instead, German President Roman Herzog presented the prize to Professor Schimmel on Oct. 15 in the historic Paulskirche in Frankfurt. No apologies were offered; on the contrary, he explicitly attacked the "political correctness" doctrine, and identified the reason why the hate campaign had been launched, by referencing the "Clash of Civilizations" scenario popularized by geopolitical thinktanker Samuel Huntington. It was precisely to prevent such cultural conflict, Herzog said, that Schimmel's works were most valuable, in providing the public with knowledge of Islamic culture.

Professor Schimmel herself explained in her acceptance speech that understanding between religious cultures can only occur when the foreign culture is known. She explained that she had decided not to acquiesce to the pressure, "because I feel obligated to all orientalists, who dedicate themselves to quiet dialogue, as well as to all men of good will in the Islamic world, and to the work of entente for which I have lived 50 years."

Schimmel presented what her critics would prefer to

deny: the existence of a long, differentiated history of Islamic culture, stretching from Andalusian Spain to the Indian subcontinent and Asia, her particular areas of expertise. Despite the contributions of the Islamic Renaissance to western civilization, Schimmel said, "most Europeans find it foreign" and consider it, as Jacob Burckhardt did, "incapable of transformation," because it had no Enlightenment. How does one educate people of one culture about another culture it considers foreign?

"Man is the enemy of what he does not know," she said, quoting from a proverb common to Greek and Arabic. And, citing St. Augustine, she said, "Man understands something only insofar as he is able to love it." Her speech was a short, effective introduction to Islamic culture. In particular, she explained the special role that poetry, the written and spoken word, have for Islamic culture, from the Koran, through the vast tradition of mystical poetry, which she has researched in depth, to modern manifestations, even in the political sphere, for example, in the case of poet Mohammed Iqbal, considered the spiritual father of Pakistan. "The word," she said, "is that good which man has been entrusted with, that he should protect and that he should not, as often happens, weaken, falsify, or talk to death: because it holds powers which we cannot estimate. In this power of language lies also the extraordinary responsibility of the poet and, perhaps even more, of the translator, who can provide the occasion for dangerous misunderstanding merely by a single false nuance."

A spirit of freedom and tolerance

Schimmel is a living example of what it means to understand a culture by knowing it, and learning about it by loving it. When still a child of a modest family in Erfurt, a family which raised her "in a spirit of freedom, tolerance, and poetry," she had her first encounter with a fairy tale about an Indian wise man in Damascus, which ignited her curiosity about oriental literature. At 15, she started studying Arabic, and was to master it in the following years, along with Persian, Urdu, Turkish, and Pashtu. With this language mastery, she was to translate works, particularly poetical, from all these cultures. After receiving her first degree in Islamic studies at 19, she studied the history of religions, and began teaching. She was invited to teach at the University of Ankara ("at a time when there were hardly teaching positions for women in Germany"), and continued as a professor in Bonn and at Harvard. She is the author of 80 books.

When asked by the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* whether she believed in the "Clash of Civilizations," she replied: "No. Above all, I consider it very dangerous to present such theses, because if someone says something like that, then one is conjuring up, evoking the danger. Thereby the danger grows. I would consider it far more important for people to enter into discussion and slowly, but intensively, cause better understanding."