

# Career narrative

Sabine Schmidtke

My research is concerned with the history of ideas in the medieval world of Islam as reflected in the literary productions of Muslim, Jewish and Christian writers in Arabic and Persian. While the focus of my work is on intellectual history, the wider social and political contexts are as important to me in the analysis of the material at hand.

I was educated at the Hebrew University (Jerusalem), the School of Oriental and African Studies (London), and the University of Oxford where I received my doctorate ("D.Phil.") in 1990 in Oriental Studies with an emphasis on Islamic doctrinal history and rational theology. In 1991 I joined the German Foreign Office to pursue a career as a diplomat, eventually realizing that it was scholarship that I wanted to devote my professional life to. In 1999 I completed my "Habilitation" at Bonn University (Germany) and was offered a position as Visiting Professor of Islamic Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. Between 2002 and 2014 I served as Full Professor of Islamic Studies at this university. In 2014, I was appointed to a permanent faculty position at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ.

One of the principal motivations in my scholarly work is to cross borders wherever necessary and feasible, so as to achieve the highest possible quality in research and to break new ground in hitherto unexplored fields. As a German trained in Islamic Studies partly in Israel and partly in the UK, and since 2014 working in the US, I have from early on developed an intense awareness of borders in every sense, which I have tried to overcome in my work. This led me to focus on the intimate connectedness of Muslim, Jewish and Christian thought and its literary traditions in the lands of Islam. This characteristic of the medieval world of Islam – which has aptly been described as a "whirlpool effect" or "crosspollination" – requires that any study of intellectual history disregard religious borders and that the one-dimensional perspective that still prevails in modern research be replaced by true multi-dimensionalism. A second motivation guiding my scholarly work

is my interest in the rational tradition of Islam, which is most prominently represented in the various strands of Shi'ī Islam (Twelver Shi'ism, Zaydism, and Ismā'īlism), Shi'ism thus being another important focus of my work. In addition to this, I strive to focus on areas and materials that have so far largely escaped the attention of scholarship. This not only determines my choices as to what to work on but also led me to engage with vast corpora of hitherto neglected or entirely unknown manuscript materials in a variety of languages, such as Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Persian.

The rational theological traditions of Twelver Shi'ism constituted the focus of my doctoral dissertation (1990), devoted to the 13th/14th-century theologian al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī (published Berlin, 1991, followed by a Persian translation, Mashhad, 1999). In my "Habilitation" (1999), I explored the intellectual development of Twelver Shi'ism since the 13th century which was characterized by a unique amalgamation of various intellectual strands such as rational (Muʿtazilite) theology, Peripatetic philosophy, Illuminism and philosophical mysticism. For this work, which was published in 2000 (Leiden: Brill) I was awarded "The World Prize for the Book of the Year of the Islamic Republic of Iran" in 2002 and another "Prize for Scholarly Achievement in the Study of Twelver Shi'ism" awarded by the Written Heritage Research Centre, Tehran, in 2006.

In 2003 I co-initiated (with D. Sklare) the "Muʿtazili Manuscripts Project Group" with the purpose of collecting all hitherto unpublished Muʿtazili manuscripts (both Muslim and Jewish), of identifying these materials and of preparing critical editions of key texts, in order to put the scientific research of the Muʿtazili movement on a broader basis. It was again my interest in the rational strands of Islam that was guiding me here — for Muʿtazili theologians, reason provided the epistemological basis to explain the nature of God and of the world. For centuries, the Muʿtazila was one of the most important rational schools in the history of Muslim theology and it again plays a significant role in contemporary Islam as the "Neo-Muʿtazila". The "Muʿtazili Manuscripts Project Group", which was very active for about a decade, consisted of some fifteen scholars from the West (Europe and the US), the Islamic world (Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia), and Israel. The collaborative work beyond political, economic, and religious borders that we were able to pursue during those years is a rarity in today's political reality. Moreover, as the coordinator of the group I was able to receive substantial research grants from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (2003-06), the Gerda Henkel Foundation (2005) and Yad Hanadiv (2006). As a result

of the group's many activities and publications, the rational thought of the Muṭazila is now an object of significant scholarly attention, and the scope and importance of its impact on Jewish medieval thought, which had long been ignored, has by now become an established fact. My engagement in the study of Muṭazilism, both within Shi'ism (Twelver Shi'ism as well as Zaydism) and Sunni Islam, and its reception among Jewish thinkers, has also been the focus of a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Research Grant ("Rediscovering Theological Rationalism in the Medieval World of Islam") (2008-2013). One of the most recent outcomes of my work in this area is a monograph, *Studies in Medieval Islamic Intellectual Traditions* (Atlanta, GA: Lockwood Press, 2017, with H. Ansari).

To promote the largely neglected field of Shi'i Studies, I was granted a Carnegie Corporation Grant ("The Shii Studies Research Project", 2016-2019) and I co-founded a new scholarly journal, *Shii Studies Review*, the first journal devoted to the study of Shi'i Islam, which is now going into its third year (published by Brill, see [www.brill.com/ssr](http://www.brill.com/ssr)). Moreover, to salvage the imperiled manuscript tradition of Zaydi Yemen (which includes the literary tradition of the Muṭazila), I initiated yet another research project, the "Zaydi Manuscript Tradition" (ZMT) project, a collaborative undertaking by the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, in partnership with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML) at Saint John's University, Collegetown, Minnesota. The ZMT aims at bringing together the widely dispersed Zaydi manuscript culture in its entirety in a single digital repository, thus providing comprehensive and systematic open access to its literary tradition to scholars worldwide. To advance this project, I was recently granted a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant ("The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition: A Digital Repository and Portal", 2018-2021).

In the field of philosophy during the post-Avicennan era (i.e. after 1037 CE), I have focused on the earliest generation of commentators of the founder of Illuminationist philosophy, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), viz. Ibn Kammūna, Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī. During my research on the three commentators of Suhrawardī, my focus was on Ibn Kammūna, a Jewish philosopher whose writings had been disregarded by earlier scholars as being less important than those of the two Muslim commentators. With the financial support of a German Israeli Foundation (GIF) grant (2003-2006), I was able to revise this picture entirely and to show that both Shahrazūrī and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī had studied, and were influenced by Ibn Kammūna's works, and that Ibn Kammūna's commentaries

on Suhrawardī continued to be popular among Muslim readers for centuries. My main publication in this area is the monograph *A Jewish Philosopher of Baghdad* (Leiden: Brill, 2006, with R. Pourjavady), followed by an edition of one of his major philosophical works (glosses on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Ma'alim*) (published in 2008, with R. Pourjavady). Shortly before leaving Germany to take up an appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study, I was granted in 2013 the prestigious "Reinhard Koselleck Project" Research Grant by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for a project entitled "The Other Renaissance: Greek Philosophy under the Safavids (16th-18th centuries CE)" to pursue my research on Islamic philosophy, which was discontinued following my appointment in Princeton in 2014. Among my most recent publications in the field of Islamic philosophy is a co-edited volume, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2017, with Kh. El-Rouayheb).

Another area I have been engaged with during my scholarly career is inter-religious polemics, and here again I focused on the lacunae in the field. Muslim apologetical and polemical literature against other monotheistic religions from the first six centuries of the Islamic era has been relatively well studied. However, one repeatedly encounters the contention that in subsequent centuries this type of literature had little new to offer and that relatively few such tracts were being produced to begin with, so that further scholarly occupation with this field would yield few results. This contention is primarily based on a mere lack of information on the relevant material that can be encountered in libraries, public and private, in present-day Turkey and Iran. For this reason, I initiated a collaborative research project entitled "The Position of Religious Minorities in the Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Iran as Reflected in Muslim Polemical and Apologetical Literature", which resulted in a European Science Foundation (ESF) Exploratory Workshop on the topic (Istanbul 2007), as well as numerous publications.

My research on interreligious polemics directed me to another fascinating area, Arabic translations of the Bible and the Muslim perception and reception of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Together with colleagues at Tel Aviv University, I successfully applied for a grant in the framework of the German-Israeli Project Cooperation of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for a project entitled "Biblia Arabica: The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians, and Muslims" (2013-2018). As was the case with the Koselleck project (see above), I was not allowed to continue to co-direct the project following my appointment to the Institute for

Advanced Study. My close cooperation with the group, however, continued uninterruptedly and among the most recent outcomes of this project is a forthcoming monograph entitled *Muslim Perceptions and Receptions of the Bible* (Atlanta, GA: Lockwood Press, with C. Adang).

While still in Germany, I held fellowships at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies, Jerusalem (2002-3, 2005-6), the Scaliger Instituut, Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden, The Netherlands (2007), the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania (2010), the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Wassenaar (2012), a scholarly residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, Italy (2008), and memberships at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ (2008-9, 2013-14). Moreover, in 2011 I was a Sackler Scholar at The Mortimer and Raymond Sackler Institute of Advanced Studies, Tel Aviv University. Since my arrival to the US, I was granted two major research grants, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the National Endowment for the Humanities (for both see above). In addition, I was made member of the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia) and of the Accademia Ambrosiana in Milan (Italy), and I held appointments as Polonsky visiting scholar (Polonsky Academy at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute), Fellow of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities (both 2018), and Directeur d'études invité at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris (2006 and 2018).