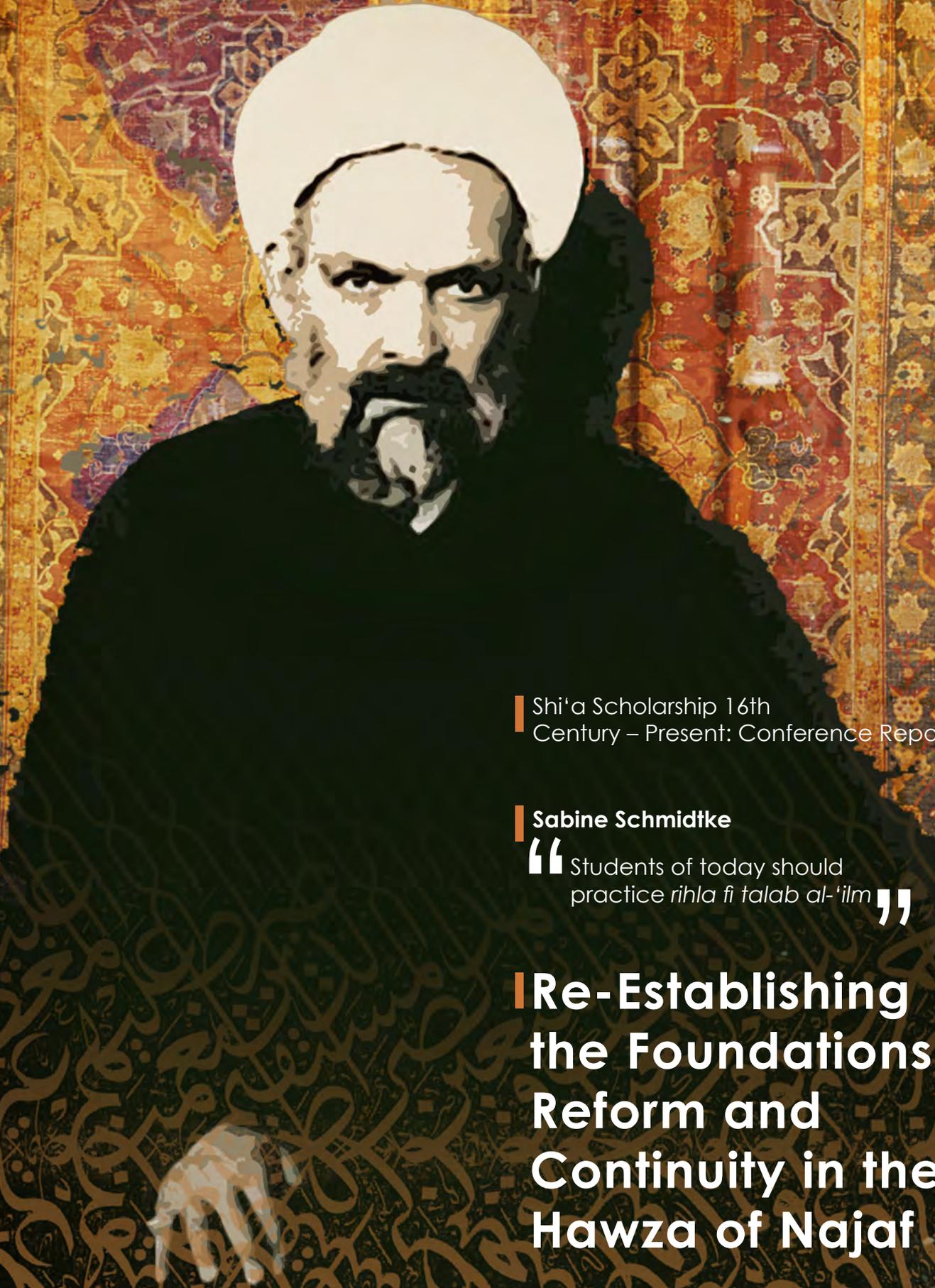


Issue no.1 April - June 2011

# SHI'A STUDIES



Shi'a Scholarship 16th  
Century – Present: Conference Report

Sabine Schmidtke

“Students of today should  
practice *rihla fi talab al-'ilm*”

Re-Establishing  
the Foundations:  
Reform and  
Continuity in the  
Hawza of Najaf

## Professor Sabine Schmidtke: An Interview

Interviewed by Ahab Bdaiwi

Professor Sabine Schmidtke is a professor of Islamic Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin (Free University of Berlin) and director of the Research Unit Intellectual History of the Islamicate World. She has authored numerous books including *The Theology of al-'Alama al-Hilli (d. 726/1325)*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1991 and *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik im zwölfterschiitischen Islam des 9./15. Jahrhunderts. Die Gedankenwelt des Ibn Abi Gumhur al-Ahsa'i (um 838/1434-35 - nach 906/1501)*. Leiden: Brill, 2000. Professor Schmidtke has made invaluable contributions to the fields of Islamic Studies and Shi'i Studies. CISS researcher & Shi'a Studies co-editor Ahab Bdaiwi in an exclusive interview with Professor Sabine Schmidtke discusses recent trends and developments in Shi'i Studies.

**AB:** Thank you for agreeing to do this interview; the Centre for Islamic Shi'a Studies has for a long time now been following your excellent work in the field of Shi'i Studies and it gives us great pleasure to inaugurate our quarterly magazine with such an eminent scholar such as yourself. As you know very well, the field of Shi'i Studies has come a long way since the *Colloque de Strasbourg* held in 1968, which, according to many, broached Imami Shi'ism in Western academic studies. However given the large volume of unpublished and unstudied manuscripts that sit untouched in Islamic libraries across the globe, and despite the voluminous studies in the modern period, Shi'i Studies lags behind other studies concerned with Muslim and Islamic civilisation, culture, and thought. It would be most useful for our readers to learn a bit more about your academic profile and career thus far before we delve into the main topic of Shi'i Studies. Could you tell us a bit about your academic career as a professor of Islamic studies specialising in the field of Shi'i Studies?

**SS:** By German standards, my academic career as a scholar of Islamic Studies may seem rather unusual. My first degree (Bachelor of Arts) is from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, one of the internationally leading universities for Islamic and Arabic Studies and, in particular, Imami Studies, with leading experts such as Etan Kohlberg, author of *A Medieval Muslim Scholar*



*at Work: Ibn Tawus and his library* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), and Meir Bar-Asher, author of *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shiism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). After a year in London where I completed my Master of Arts at the School of Oriental and African Studies, I moved to Oxford where I had the special privilege to write my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Professor Wilferd Madelung, the doyen of all branches of Shi'i Studies, Imamism, Zaydism and Isma'iliyya. It is certainly no overstatement that Professor Madelung influenced me more than any other of my teachers.

**AB:** How would you define Shi'i Studies?

**SS:** By my definition, Shi'i Studies covers a wide spectrum, including the three main branches of Imamism, Zaydism and Isma'iliyya. However, as scholars of Shi'i Studies we should always bear in mind that any intellectual or historical development within any branch of Islam is usually linked to a wider sphere. Despite the relevance of each one of these branches we should strive, to the extent possible, not to be too exclusive in our scholarly engagement with Shi'i Studies or with the study of one of its branches.

**AB:** Who were/are the main pioneers of Shi'i Studies who have made important contributions to the field?

**SS:** Shi'i Studies is certainly no longer a marginalized field within the discipline of Islamic Studies as was still the case in 1968 when the Colloque de Strasbourg took place. For Imami Studies in particular, the participants at the time can certainly be counted among the pioneers of Shi'i Studies, among them Henry Corbin (1903-1978) and Wilferd Madelung, to name only the most influential. Both of them trained entire generations of scholars who likewise engaged in the field of Shi'i Studies. Of equal importance were the leading scholars from Iran and Iraq whose studies provide an indispensable and often still unsurpassed basis for Imami Studies until today, among them perhaps most importantly Agha Buzurg al-Tihrani (1875-1970) and Muhammad Taqi Danishpazhuh (1911-1996). The expansion of the field can be witnessed in the numerous articles, monographs and collective volumes specifically devoted to Imami Shi'ism that have been published since 1968, among them the important volume *Le shi'isme imamite quarante ans après: hommage à Etan Kohlberg* (eds. M.A. Amir-Moezzi, M. M. Bar-Asher, S. Hopkins, Turnhout: Brepols, 2009). As for Zaydi Studies, an enormously growing field of studies of its own in recent years, mention should be made of Rudolf Strothmann (1877-1960), Cornelis van Arendonk (1881-1946), Eugenio Griffini (1878-1925) and again Wilferd Madelung, whose *Der Imam al-Qasim ibn Ibrahim und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968) is still unsurpassed. Henry Corbin and Wilferd Madelung are also among the pioneers of Isma'ili Studies, as were Wladimir Ivanow (1886-1970) and Samuel Miklos Stern (1920-1969). Today, it is mostly thanks to the efforts of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London that the study of the Isma'iliyya is a thriving discipline as well.

**AB:** How did you become interested in Islamic Studies in general and Shi'i Studies in particular?

**SS:** Pure curiosity ...

**AB:** You have written important monographs on Shi'i luminaries of the medieval period, two of which, in particular, have received a great deal of attention. One was on the theology of al-'Allamah al-Hilli (d. 725/1325), whilst the other work dealt with an important Shi'i thinker in the pre-Safavid period, namely Ibn Abi Jumhur al-Ahsa'i (d. after 906/1501). What made you choose these two luminaries?

**SS:** When I first embarked on Shi'i Studies I was mostly attracted by the Imami adoption of Mu'tazilite theology and the intriguing amalgamation of various strands of thought, viz. apart from Mu'tazilite *kalam* philosophy (Peripatetic and Illuminationist) as well as philosophical mysticism. It was mostly this intellectual richness of the later Imami traditions that intrigued me more than anything else.

**AB:** Many nowadays claim that Shi'i Studies fares better in the Americas and whilst Europe has a long history of Islamic Studies it, however, lags behind in standard and quality of scholarship. Is there any truth to such a claim?

**SS:** I do not share this claim and do not find it helpful. Islamic Studies is perhaps more than any other academic discipline a highly international field of studies. Over the past decades the discipline has experienced a proliferation of sub-disciplines, methodologies and source materials that have come to light that is unparalleled in any other academic discipline. What is needed more than anything else is close collaboration among scholars from Europe, the Americas and the Islamic world and in many respects this is the reality in contemporary research. Fine scholars of Islamic Studies, including Shi'ite Studies, and important research centers can be found nowadays in Europe, in Canada and the US, and certainly in the Middle East and instead of competing with each other even more collaborative efforts should be made to advance research.

**AB:** Of course on the positive side, European institutions of learning are becoming increasingly more attentive and interested in Islamic studies and most, if not all, major universities today house an Islamic and/or Middle East Studies department. However some prospective students are hesitant to embark on an Islamic studies course in Europe believing the standard of teaching and research to be less than that of the Americas or traditional Muslim centres of learning. As someone who is familiar with European institutions specialising in Islamic studies, what words of advice or solace would you offer to students reading this magazine?

**SS:** From my own experience, students of today should practice to the extent possible the "duty" of *rihla fi talab al-'ilm*, i.e. travel in search of knowledge. In view of the wide spectrum of Islamic Studies as an academic discipline and the resulting necessity of its scholars to specialize in one way or another in some select fields within

the discipline, there is hardly any institution or teacher that can provide a sufficiently wide range of education in the field.

**AB:** What do you enjoy most about your job as a professor of Islamic Studies?

**SS:** There are many things I enjoy as a professor and scholar but perhaps one of the most gratifying things is to see new generations of scholars evolving from among the students. As scholars we can only contribute some few pieces to the advance of knowledge and all we do is nothing but preparatory work for what future generations may improve.

**AB:** What would be considered a productive week in the life of an Islamic studies professor?

**SS:** A week that brought new insights.

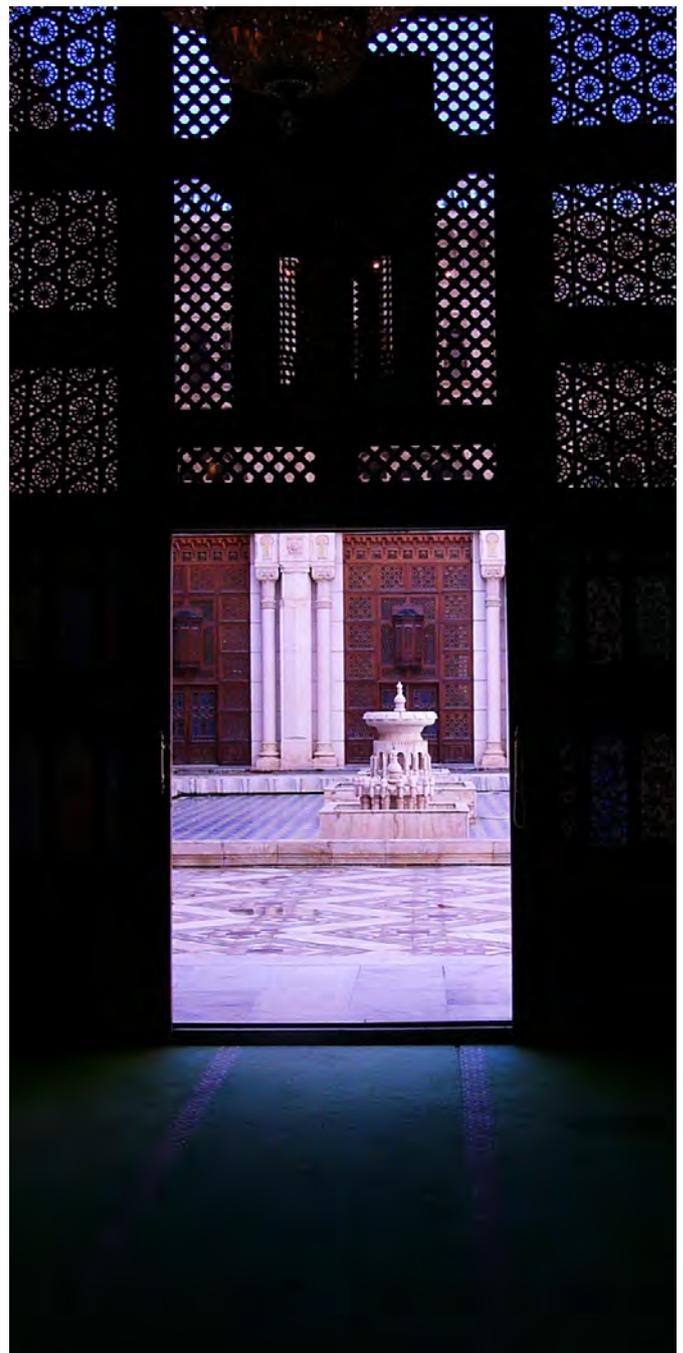
**AB:** Would you support the idea of opening up more research units and centres specialising in Shi'i Studies here in the UK?

**SS:** There is certainly still much to be done in the field of Shi'i Studies, particularly in view of the enormous Shi'i manuscript holdings in Iran as well as in the West, e.g. in London or Princeton. On the other hand I would consider it to be an advantage not to be too focused on only one strand within Islam, be it Shi'ism or any other. As I explained before, one of the fascinating aspects particularly of intellectual history is that any development is invariably linked to a larger context and should therefore not be studied in isolation. To illustrate this, I would like to point to the highly interdisciplinary work of the Mu'tazilite Manuscripts Project Group that was formed in 2003. The aim of the group was (and still is) to collect, record and prepare critical editions of all unpublished material of Mu'tazilite provenance. Given the reception of Mu'tazilite thought among Zaydis and Imamis as well as among Rabbanite and Karaite Jews, and of course, the significance of the movement within Sunni Islam, the group was successful so far because we looked at the materials preserved by all of the above mentioned groups, Sunnis as well as Shi'is, Muslims as well as Jews. Had we focused on one group only, let's say the Zaydis, we would have missed a lot. This is also the guiding motif of the recently founded Research Unit Intellectual History of the Islamicate World at Freie Universität Berlin in that its members systematically study intellectual developments of the Islamic world beyond denominational borders.

**AB:** Finally, what are the main challenges we are likely to face working in this field?

**SS:** Any kind of border, real or imaged, that would prevent us from focusing on the issue at hand in a truly scholarly fashion.

**AB:** Professor Sabine Schmidtke, researcher and professor at the Freie Universität Berlin and director of the Research Unit Intellectual History of the Islamicate World, thank you very much for your time and on behalf of the Centre for Islamic Shi'a Studies we wish you all the best in your future endeavours.



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