

OBITUARY

WILFERD MADELUNG

(Stuttgart 26 December 1930 –London 9 May 2023)

The Arab Spring sprung a leak because no account was taken of the sectarian contours of the Middle East. The Houthies of Yemen are a case in point as they are Zaydis and not Twelvers like the majority in Iran. It was with researching the Zaydis that Wilferd Madelung began his academic sojourn. He edited *Arabic Texts Concerning the History of the Zaydi Imams of Tabaristan, Daylaman and Gilan* in 1987.

Wilferd Madelung obtained his PhD in Islamic History from the University of Hamburg in 1957 in his native Germany. In the late 1950's he spent time in Iraq which he left after the military revolution in 1958. From 1969 to 1978 Wilferd Madelung was Professor of Islamic History at the University of Oxford. For the next twenty years Wilferd Madelung served the University of Oxford as Laudian Professor of 'Arabic. Thereafter, till his death Wilferd Madelung was associated with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London. He collaborated with Paul Walker in writing *An Ismaili Heresiography*, Leiden 1998 and *the Advent of the Fatimids: A Contemporary Shi'i Witness*, London, 2000. He shot to fame and influence with *The Succession to Muhammad*, (on whom, his progeny and companions be peace) Cambridge, 1997, a theme common to all Shi'a sub sects.

In his lifetime he saw the publication of Farhad Daftary and Joseph W. Meri (eds.) *Culture and Memory in Early and Medieval Islam A Festschrift in Honour of Wilferd Madelung*, London, 2003.

Heresiography originated in the Islamic tradition it -self, the most prominent being Abul Fateh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim Shahrastani (d.1153)'s *Ktab al-Milal wa'l Nihal*, Book of Sects and Communities. European scholars discovered Shia Islam during the Crusades when William, Bishop of Tyre wrote misleadingly of them. In English the first publication was Dwight M. Donaldson, *The Shi'ite Religion*, London, 1933, which though hostile was deemed uncritical. S. H. M. Jafri, *The Origin and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, London, 1979 was, as Boaz Shoshan mentioned in his *Poetics in Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Tabari's History*, Leiden, 2004. The precursor to Wilferd

Madelung. S.H.M. Jafri (1938-2019) reduced to order a vast corpus of material, his scholarship lying at the cusp of traditional and critical scholarship.

In retrospect, the most significant contribution of Jafri and Madelung is the rehabilitation of Imam Hasan bin ‘Ali. (Jafri and Madelung show that when Hasan bin ‘Ali was offered the treasury of Kufa and the revenue of Ahwaz as the terms of the truce, he struck them down saying that :”Money cannot become a consideration in a matter concerning the welfare of the Community.”. This account had been forgotten because the original ‘Arabic text of Ibn ‘Atham al-Kufi’s *Kitab ul-Futuh* had been eclipsed, published only from 1968 from Hyderabad, Deccan. However, Madelung goes further than Jafri in dealing with the tradition that Hasan bin ‘Ali had divorced 99 ladies by subjecting this tradition to source-critical scrutiny.

The Succession to Muhammad, (on whom, his progeny and companions) was described as going contrary to recent scholarly trends, scholarly trends of western academia really and the harshest Review came from Patricia Crone: “But there is only so much one can do with information which had spent a century or more in a polemical mill by the time it was recorded and from which one tradition (that of the Syrians) had disappeared almost without a trace” *The Times Literary Supplement*, February 1997. This is quite an exaggeration on two counts. Firstly the Syrian traditions of Husain bin ‘Abd al-Rahman and ‘Awana bin Hakam are cited by Tabari. Moreover the Syrian Christian Tradition of the era beginning with the works of St. John Damascene and collected by R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, New Jersey, 1997 are available in English translation.

A more measured approach was adopted by Jane Dammen McAuliffe in *Religious Studies Review*: “For those who have been lamenting the decline or near demise of solid, historical narratives, this is a book to cherish.”

Wilferd Madelung was responsible for making the sectarian history of Islam a popular *genre* of Islamic History. He was the most influential western historian of Islam to go against the Revisionist canon.

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