

OBITUARY: JOSEF VAN ESS (1934–2021)

CHRISTIAN LANGE
Utrecht University, Netherlands

On 20 November 2021, Josef van Ess, doyen of Islamic Studies, passed away in Tübingen at the age of eighty-seven. He was born in Aachen/Aix-la-Chapelle to Dutch working-class parents, and as a ten-year old he witnessed the destruction of his hometown by Allied air raids—an event he often reminisced about later in life. Despite these difficult beginnings, he had a delightfully dry and warm sense of humor, full of witticisms and subtle irony, which he leveled at others as well as himself. He did not know how to drive a car or ride a bicycle. “I just missed the right moment to learn it,” he quipped, “just like I never got into smoking, watching TV, or using Powerpoint.”¹

His mind was occupied with more important things. At Bonn, he studied Classics, but soon switched to Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and comparative Semitic languages, as these fields seemed to offer him more freedom and greater chances of success. Hellmut Ritter (1892–1971), writing from Istanbul, suggested his PhD topic: the early Muslim ascetic and theorist of the human soul (*nafs*), al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857). This resulted in his first monograph, *Die Gedankenwelt des Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī* (1961)—a work that remains testament to his greatness, fundamental for the study of al-Muḥāsibī. He admired Ritter’s “effortless combination of intellectual discipline and elegance of expression.”² He himself came to embody this combination like no other. A master stylist and orator, he is widely acclaimed as the most brilliant Islamicist of the second half of the twentieth century. Coming full circle with *Die Gedankenwelt des Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī*, his last monograph, *Im Halbschatten* (2013), is a richly colored biography of Ritter, and simultaneously a *tour de force* through twentieth-century European Orientalism.

1. Josef van Ess, *Kleine Schriften by Josef van Ess*, ed. Hinrich Biesterfeldt (3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2018), 3.2407.

2. *Ibid.*, 3.2403.

At first, he thought he would devote his scholarly career to the study of Islamic mysticism, but then Islamic theology, or *kalām*, became his main area of specialization. Again, he appears to have been attracted by the prospect of unfettered freedom, of pioneer research in a field largely unencumbered by disciplinary baggage, such as a set of mandatory methods. As he remembered, in the early 1960s, next to himself there were only three other scholars of Islamic theology in the West, two in the United States, and one in Paris. “Nobody interfered with the other person’s work, and we were all good friends.”³ In his *Habilitationsschrift*, submitted at Frankfurt, he studied the epistemological prolegomenon of ‘Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī’s (d. 756/1355) *Ash‘arī summa theologica, al-Mawāqif* (*Die Erkenntnislehre des ‘Aḍudaddīn al-Īcī*, 1966), meticulously tracing the genealogy of ideas and *en passant* inventing a whole new arsenal of terms to translate the intricacies of Arabic *‘ilm al-kalām*.

During his years as *Referent* at the German *Orient-Institut* in Beirut (OIB) in the mid-sixties, he edited volume 9 (published in 1974) of the OIB’s 30-volume edition of the biographical dictionary of al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1362), worked on al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869) and other thinkers of the “classical” period of Islamic intellectual history, acquainted himself with Druze, Ismā‘īlī, and Sufi traditions (an interest that sparked a number of publications in the 1970s, such as his book on the chiliastic reign of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākīm [386–411/996–1021], published in 1977), and became a keen observer of interconfessional dialogue, a preoccupation he continued to nurture in his later years in exchange with Hans Küng (1928–2021), his colleague at Tübingen, with whom he published *Christentum und Weltreligionen* (1984, with Heinrich von Stietencron and Heinz Bechert).

Having been appointed professor at Tübingen in 1968, he increasingly turned his attention to the beginnings of Islamic theology. Two important early milestones were *Zwischen Ḥadīṭ und Theologie* (1975), in which he elevated what later came to be known as the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis to unsurpassed heights, and *Anfänge muslimischer Theologie* (1977), in which he examined the textual evidence for an early dating (to the seventh century CE) of the activities of the Qadarīs, defenders of free will in Islam’s formative period. However, plumbing the early history of Islam, he rarely ventured beyond the turn of the first century of Islam, and only occasionally wrote about the Qur’ān. Nonetheless, his contributions to Qur’ānic Studies were significant. One thinks, for example, of the chapter on Sūrat al-Najm

3. *Ibid.*, 3.2412.

included in *Les prémices de la théologie musulmane* (2002), translated into English as *The Flowering of Islamic Theology* (2006).

Rudi Paret (1901–1983), the well-known translator of the Qurʾān and his predecessor at Tübingen, had encouraged him to pursue a major project, warning him that it would require patience and stamina. “To write a six-volume work,” he later mused in the foreword to the volume that concluded his *opus magnum*, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra* (1991–1997), “is playing with one’s life; but ... a happy corollary of studying Islamic theology is that one is left alone and in peace.”⁴ In *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, he almost single-handedly reconstructed the thought of a vast array of early Muslim theologians of all stripes and colors, mostly on the basis of the scattered reports preserved in the later heresiographical literature: a mind-bogglingly complex undertaking. The splendid isolation of Tübingen certainly helped, and it is telling that he declined offers of professorships from both Princeton and Harvard, preferring the quiet backwaters of Swabia’s *Insel der Seligen* and its excellent library. Not that he kept out of everything, or that he shunned administrative responsibility. Far from it. By surrounding himself with a stellar line-up of colleagues, he fashioned Tübingen’s *Orientalisches Seminar* into a veritable bastion of Islamic Studies in Germany. At the same time, it is true that he never had more than a handful of students, wasted little time on edited volumes, and never even thought of running research projects and organizing regular workshops and conferences. Instead, he wrote, and he traveled, both zealously.

A life-long singer and one-time member of Aachen Dome’s boy choir, he was deeply imbued with music. At his retirement ceremony in 1999, he spoke about how music had taught him creativity and structure, how he thought about his own writing in terms of exposition, development, and recapitulation, as in the Sonata form, of *crescendos*, *decrescendos*, and *ritardandos*. As emeritus, he continued to sing; if anything, he became more vocal and prolific. In his two-volume *Der Eine und das Andere* (2011), *Theologie und Gesellschaft*’s companion piece, he studied the heresiographers from whom he had so painstakingly gleaned the information that formed the bedrock of *Theologie und Gesellschaft*. In 2018, a massive collection of his “short writings” appeared, curated by himself and edited by Hinrich Bisterfeldt, the three-volume *Kleine Schriften*. *Kleine Schriften* features many gems, including previously unpublished materials and a string of autobi-

4. Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991–1997), 4.vii.

ographical essays. The bibliography of his works, including twenty-three monographs, 138 articles and book chapters, numerous encyclopaedia entries, and over 250 book reviews, serves as a lesson in humility to all. *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, *Der Eine und das Andere*, and *Kleine Schriften* are monuments of brilliance and erudition.

He was not denied the national and international recognition to which his achievements entitled him. The crowning moment arrived in 2009, when he was inducted in the *Orden Pour le mérite für Wissenschaften und Künste*, established in 1740 by Frederick II of Prussia. To this day, he remains the only German *Islamwissenschaftler* to have been decorated with this supreme honor. In Tübingen, his students respected him a lot, and to those who were willing to put in the hard work, he extended his genuine interest and support. His seminars were daunting affairs, but also exquisitely entertaining. His colleagues and friends will miss him immensely, as he meant a great deal to a great number of people. He will be remembered with gratitude and fond admiration. Survived by his wife Marie Luise and three of his four children, he lies buried on the Bergfriedhof in Tübingen.