

# In Memoriam

**Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti (26 November 1938–19 September 2020):  
Teacher, Author, and Scholar of Islamic and Iranian Studies**



“Commemorating a Teacher and a colleague is not just our duty, but also a ritual”: that is how Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti remembered her own teacher, Alessandro Bausani. For us, remembering our teacher like she remembered hers gives us the joy of knowing that something has been passed from her to us, something that we might even call mystical, and it also holds fast the bond of gratitude and esteem that passes from a *morshed* to her many *morids*.

It is even more moving to remember how our teacher wished to be regarded as a friend by any student taking the exam in Islamic Studies, given that at that stage the purely academic relationship would soon be coming to an end. After overcoming the bewildered feeling that such an invitation could cause, the student would end up sharing a double complicity with her, on both the human and professional levels, and would continue to learn from her way of seeing the Muslim world, of reading the sources, of enthusiasm for traveling to Islamic countries and, above all, for interacting with their people.

Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti graduated from the Oriental University Institute of Naples on 6 March 1963 with a dissertation titled “Hagiography, Popular Devotion, and Pilgrimages Dedicated to the Eighth Imam, ‘Alī al-Riḍā” (in Italian). Her thesis supervisor was Laura Veccia Vaglieri, and the results of this first research project would lead to the following three articles (in Italian) titled “On the *‘Umdat at-ṭālib fī ansāb āl Abī Ṭālib* and its Author Ḡamāl ad-Dīn Aḥmad ... ibn ‘Inaba,” “A Religious Controversy between the ‘Ulamā’

of Mashhad and Uzbek ‘Ulamā’ in 977/1588–89,” and “A Passage from the *Majālis al-mu‘minūn* on Shi‘ism in Kāshān at the Beginning of the 16th Century.”<sup>1</sup> Later, her expertise on Imami scholars led her to write the entry on “Ibn ‘Inaba” in *Encyclopédie de l’Islam*.<sup>2</sup>

Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti then moved to Rome, where she became assistant professor at the University of Rome “La Sapienza” in 1967, then adjunct professor in 1971, full professor in 1976, and holder of the chair of Islamic Studies in 1985. She was member of the most famous oriental studies societies, including Société Asiatique, l’Istituto per l’Oriente, l’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. She collaborated with scientific journals such as *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, *Oriente Moderno*, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, *Annali di Ca’ Foscari*, *Cahiers d’onomastique arabe*, *Peuples méditerranéens*, *Acta Orientalia*, and *Quaderni del seminario di Iranistica, Uralo-Altaistica e Caucasologia dell’Università degli Studi di Venezia*. She participated in international initiatives including *Onomasticon Arabicus*, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, as well as in numerous seminars and conferences.

The number of her publications, both academic and for the broader public, which could provide an account of her multiple interests and areas of expertise, is too vast to do justice to here. In fact, not even a whole article would suffice. A list of her publications until 2007 is available in her Festschrift.<sup>3</sup> Many reflections arise from looking through this and later writings. However, in order to limit ourselves to those interests we can assume are most relevant to the Iranian studies reader, we will focus here on Biancamaria’s great interest for the study of Iranian Shi‘ism. However, acknowledging one of the themes that were most important to her, we will also comment on her approach to the question of the place of women within the Islamic ecumene.

For Biancamaria, studying Shi‘ism necessarily meant engaging with a broad field of study, which widens from learning about Islamic monotheism to all of its theological, political, and cultural ramifications, to include the study of myths, rituals, and cults of the pre-Islamic Iranian religious *milieu*. Such a broad, ensemble perspective over the phenomenon she studied characterized her approach as a scholar who devoted great attention to those details that appeared to a certain extent to be interchangeable, as well as to all the variables linked to a given issue. She dedicated much attention to the study of the age of the empires—while avoiding any mystification—and in particular of the Safavids, which she saw as instrumental to fully comprehend the resilience of religious forms and practices descending from an Iranic matrix, and still visible in the country’s extant folk religiosity. She was also critical of any conceptualization lacking contextualization in time and space, drawn up instead through a Euro-centric ethnographic lens. The great and widespread interest in her research activities among

<sup>1</sup>“Sulla ‘Umdat at-tālib,” 287–94; “Una polemica religiosa,” 647–71; “Un passo dei *Majālis al-mu‘minūn*,” 263–68.

<sup>2</sup>“Ibn ‘Inaba.”

<sup>3</sup>*Scritti in onore di Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti*, xiii–xlvi.

Iranian scholars and public recently led to a Persian translation of all her articles on Shi'ism, titled "Shi'i Studies in Italy" reprinted in the same publication year.<sup>4</sup>

Her main intellectual interests were centered on the classical and modern periods, but she thought it necessary for any scholar also to engage, when possible, with current affairs, since what happens in the present affects all of us. She would say that, in order to understand today's politics and power structures, it is necessary to start with history, keeping in mind also—if not especially—the sedimented effects of colonialism, so as to avoid falling into the rushed and often superficial formulations offered by the media. It was in light of this attention to contemporary events that she did not shy away from giving interviews, where she would again highlight the importance of looking at history with a gaze that could include both the general and the local and specific.

To better understand some of the characteristics that distinguished her as a scholar of women's issues in the Islamic world, it is also necessary to draw out some elements from her biography. Biancamaria was brought up in a provincial environment, and received a traditional, but not conformist, education. In the years following her graduation, she was influenced by Marxist doctrines, which led her to become interested in the most famous Muslim intellectuals of the time and in their theories on the role of women in society. Her reasoning on the matter is contained in the two following articles, both in the Italian language, titled: "Political Assumption of the Private Role: the Palestinian Woman" and "Woman and Islam: Methodological and Preliminary Notes."<sup>5</sup> Scarcia Amoretti returned to this topic again in 1980, with her article "About the Muslim Woman: Peculiarity and Ambiguity of Her Role" (in Italian) and in the 2000s with "Women's Names in Early Islamic Proshiite Texts on the Genealogy of the Talibiyin" and "How to Place Women in History: Some Remarks on the Recent Shi'ite Interest in Women's Shrines."<sup>6</sup>

Being a woman, and wanting to interact directly with other women, worked as a kind of passport for her, especially among Muslim women. Biancamaria called herself a feminist, but that never hindered her ability to access the female *milieus* of the Muslim world, not even in the most zealous contexts. Her interest in the status of women in the Muslim world was noted by a number of journalists who were particularly attentive to the historical and political contingencies of the time. In 1976 she decided to collaborate with the feminist journal "*DWF: DonnaWomanFemme*." This collaboration in turn informed her academic teaching and made its way into her syllabi. Indeed, one of the last courses she taught in 2008 was dedicated to women's issues. Her teaching discussed methodological bases, such as sources and terminology, the relationship between religious institutions and sexuality, the history of women in Muslim countries, and, finally, the politics and law of women's issues. The Holy Text remained the starting point of her analysis: the verticality and horizontal-

<sup>4</sup> *Motāle 'āt-e shi'ashenāsi dar Itālyā*, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> "Assunzione politica del ruolo privato," 66–76; "Donna e Islam," 55–78.

<sup>6</sup> "A proposito della donna musulmana," 177–89; "Women's Names," 141–65; "How to Place Women in History," 1–12.

ity of women in the *Qur'ān*, in relation to man and to God, and their juridical status, was discussed in detail in “The Creation of Humanity” (in French); later in “Male and Female” (in Italian), written along with G. Barone, and finally in “and lived happily ever after’ on Marital Love” (in Italian).<sup>7</sup>

She would insist that the situation of Muslim women, which today appears similar across the Muslim world, had different causes, linked to the juridical and theological schools of thought, the local ethnic practices, and the socioeconomic conditions that characterized each Islamic country; these conditions in turn influence the instruments that women can draw on in their struggles against social and juridical discrimination. She dealt with the complex theme of women and the *Qur'ān* in “Remarks on the Women’s Issue in Islam Starting from the Koran” (in Italian), and with temporary marriage in “Musings on the Theme of the Temporary Marriage (*nikāh al-mut‘a*)” (in Italian).<sup>8</sup> A more recent and broader treatment is contained in her *Introduction in Women’s Protagonism in the Land of Islam* (in Italian).<sup>9</sup>

A comparison between her academic writing and her publications aimed at a broader audience points to her unquestionable intellectual rigor. At the same time, however, she could draw on a touch of irony, almost unexpectedly, which provided some measure of her practical sense and of the levity with which she took on life’s vicissitudes. That is another reason why we miss her, and already *jāy-ash khāli-st*.

Simone Cristoforetti  and Leila Karami  
Ca’ Foscari University of Venice  
Sapienza University of Rome

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<sup>7</sup>“La création de l’humanité dans le Coran,” 85–99; Barone and Scarcia Amoretti, “Maschio e femmina,” 51–87; Scarcia Amoretti, “... e vissero felici e contenti,” 35–53.

<sup>8</sup>“Osservazioni sulla questione femminile,” 59–66; “Spigolature intorno al tema del matrimonio temporaneo,” 319–40.

<sup>9</sup>Karami and Scarcia Amoretti, *Il protagonismo delle donne in terra d’islam*, 17–66.

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