

“How are you?” they said, and I said “not too bad,
 one wish is fulfilled but many pass me by.”
 When sorrows crowd out my heart, I say:
 Maybe one day there will be surcease of sorrow!
 My companion is my cat, and the joy of my heart
 is notebooks I have, and my beloved the lamp.
 (translation by Wolfhart Heinrichs) ✂

DOI:[10.1017/rms.2015.40](https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2015.40)

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Annie Higgins **1957–2014**

Annie Campbell Higgins was born and raised in the Chicago area. After receiving a BA in geography from Northwestern University, she entered the University of Chicago’s Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC) in 1988 and graduated with a PhD in Islamic thought in 2001, having been awarded the prestigious Stuart Tave Award in the Humanities. During this period, she taught Arabic language and several Middle Eastern subjects at the University of Chicago, Loyola University, the University of Illinois in Chicago, the College of William and Mary, and the University of Florida. After graduation she held tenure-track positions in Arabic literature and language at Wayne State University and then at the College of Charleston. The key to Annie’s academic career was her love of and commitment to the study of Arabic language and culture. Even before entering NELC, she had spent a year in Egypt (1985–86) studying Arabic and making a point of mixing with Egyptians, learning about their culture and speaking their dialect with enthusiasm.

Annie spent another year in Egypt (1992–93), this time concentrating on studying the Qur’an, its text, and recitation, with specialized Egyptian professors. This sojourn was connected with her PhD dissertation topic, namely the references to the Qur’an in the poetry of an early Islamic sect called by the historians the Kharijites (“the seceders”). Annie did not consider this name appropriate and preferred to call them by the name they called themselves, the Shurat (“people who sell their souls for God’s sake in exchange for God’s pleasure”). This allowed her to dwell

on the issue of identity, both individual and communal, and how the “marketplace” terminology of buying and selling could acquire pronounced pietistic dimensions in the hands of a group with deep conviction, zeal, and idealism. Annie was, unfortunately, still finalizing the revision of her dissertation for publication when she died.

Annie’s choice of this particular group may have had another reason, which might shed light on another dimension of the person she was and the life she led. The Shurat/Kharijites were socially marginalized by society for a number of reasons, and many of them were exterminated. This, however, never made them doubt that they stood for what was right and just: conformity is no measure of righteousness or the truth. And in a way, a reading of Annie’s life and work indicates that she, too, felt very strongly about justice and the rights of individuals and groups—especially marginalized ones—to seek a dignified place in society. An international peace activist and humanitarian, she worked compassionately with Palestinian refugees in camps in the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, physically helped the dying and the besieged there; demonstrated on their behalf in Cairo and elsewhere; and published pieces about their right to decent living. On another level, she, like the Shurat/Kharijites, did not hold the “standard” belief about death. As one of my students remarked lately, Annie would have taken her own death, like everything else, with a spirit of gratitude and acceptance. There are few people who can be described as having had such a generous presence in this world.

The above has not been easy to write; Annie’s premature death is an inversion of the correct order of things, for I was Annie’s mentor throughout her graduate work at NELC. But I and my family were also beneficiaries of her generosity and kindness. I recall that she and another student helped me to open the dozens of boxes of books I brought with me and put them on shelves in my study in the very first week I was in Chicago in 1988. My family and I also visited her family and sang carols with them in River Forest many a Christmas season. Only three months before she died, she sent me a warm hand-written letter in which she reflected on my mentorship. I was so touched by her letter that I jotted down her address, as a reminder that I should answer her. But I never did. Perhaps the above will tell her how meaningful her presence has been to so many of us in Chicago and beyond. Annie is survived by two sisters, Fran and Coleen, and several nieces, nephews, grandnieces, and grandnephews. ✂

DOI:[10.1017/rms.2015.41](https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2015.41)

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