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Rezension von Tom Woerner-Powell, *Another road to Damascus: an integrative approach to ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī (1808–1883)*, Berlin 2017

Brandenburg, Ulrich Jung

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Works about the life and deeds of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī (1808–1883) fill whole bookshelves and exist in a plethora of languages. The first biographies were published during ‘Abd al-Qādir’s own lifetime, and it may therefore come as a surprise that a comprehensive scholarly biography in English has long been lacking. Tom Woerner-Powell’s *Another Road to Damascus* fills this important gap and serves as an accessible introduction to ‘Abd al-Qādir’s eventful trajectory. What makes *Another Road to Damascus* a particularly valuable addition to the research literature is its thorough discussion of how historical research has evaluated and, according to the author, often misinterpreted ‘Abd al-Qādir’s life and deeds. Woerner-Powell is especially critical of what he calls a “mythology of incoherence” (p. 4) that divides ‘Abd al-Qādir’s life into two distinct phases, the first dominated by his military resistance to the French conquest of Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s, and the second marked by his devotion to Sufi learning in his Damascene exile between 1853 and his death in 1883. According to this narrative, the in-between years, 1848–1852, which ‘Abd al-Qādir spent as a prisoner in France, mark a fundamental break in his worldview and a transition from militancy to quietism, or even from hostility toward France to embracing European modernity. For Woerner-Powell, this narrative amounts to nothing less than a story of conversion, similar to the biblical transformation of Saul into Paul referenced in the title of the book. Woerner-Powell understands his biography of ‘Abd al-Qādir as an “integrative approach,” aiming to paint a realistic picture of a “more conventional, more conservative, more human figure” (p. 4). Building particularly on Amira Bennison’s work on nineteenth-century Morocco,¹ he presents ‘Abd al-Qādir as a rather traditional North African Muslim whose worldview was firmly grounded in the principles of Maliki Islam and the sharia.

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¹ See especially Bennison 2002.

The idea of a holistic biography that focuses on continuities rather than ruptures is the main thread running through *Another Road to Damascus*. The main body of the monograph consists of five chapters that trace ‘Abd al-Qādir’s trajectory mainly chronologically. Chapter One examines the protagonist’s early years in western Algeria, his rise to lead an Islamically legitimated polity, his ambivalent relations with the Sultan of Morocco, and his military confrontations with France until he surrendered in 1847. Woerner-Powell emphasizes his religious convictions and the Islamic basis of his polity, arguing in particular against Raphael Danziger’s thesis that ‘Abd al-Qādir primarily used Islam in a functional sense.² Chapter Two continues this discussion through a detailed analysis of ‘Abd al-Qādir’s treatise on the duty of emigration (*hijra*). This treatise is contained in the Arabic biographical work *Tuhfat al-zā’ir fī ma’āthir al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir wa-akhbār al-Jazā’ir*, composed by ‘Abd al-Qādir’s son Muḥammad, and has hitherto received little scholarly attention.³ Establishing Muslims’ obligation to emigrate from lands ruled by non-Muslims, it attests, according to Woerner-Powell, to ‘Abd al-Qādir’s conservative views shaped by the Maliki tradition. Chapter Three deals with ‘Abd al-Qādir’s imprisonment in France, his release by Louis Napoleon in 1852, and his subsequent exile in Bursa in the Ottoman Empire. Woerner-Powell here emphasizes that the idea of ‘Abd al-Qādir’s developing loyalty to France was deliberately promoted by the French state to justify its imperialist interests. He demonstrates that in reality, ‘Abd al-Qādir persistently expressed his desire to return to Muslim territory and refused to settle in France. Chapter Four focuses on ‘Abd al-Qādir’s relocation from Bursa to Damascus in 1855, and the anti-Christian riots of 1860 and their aftermath. While contemporary Euro-American observers and later historians have commonly represented his intercession to protect and save thousands of Christians from a violent mob as a sign of his religious tolerance, Woerner-Powell situates ‘Abd al-Qādir’s actions in conventional Islamic principles, most notably the concept of *dhimma*, Muslims’ duty to protect Jews and Christians after their acceptance of Muslim rule. Chapter Five deals with ‘Abd al-Qādir’s final years in Damascus and his activities as a Sufi master. Woerner-Powell here critiques the narrative that a deeper engagement with Sufism facilitated ‘Abd al-Qādir’s reconciliation with France, pointing out that Sufi ideas had also been at the core of his earlier warfare against the invading French armies.

Altogether, *Another Road to Damascus* is a well-written, accessible, and overall compelling account of ‘Abd al-Qādir’s life and deeds. It is an excellent introductory and reference work for the classroom that also raises intriguing questions about entanglements between political interests and historical scholarship in appraising the life of a prominent individual. Woerner-Powell rightly

² Danziger 1977.

³ See, however, Verskin 2015, pp. 114–19.

critiques notions of ‘Abd al-Qādir as one of the “great men” of history and succeeds in locating his thoughts and actions in a social context shaped by Maliki Islam (p. 152). The reader furthermore receives a solid impression of the major scholarly works on ‘Abd al-Qādir, most notably those by Raphael Danziger, Amira Bennison, Bruno Etienne, and Itzhak Weismann.⁴ Its thorough discussion of this research literature makes Woerner-Powell’s work a particularly solid piece of scholarship. On the other hand, the book occasionally reads more like a critique of previous studies than a stand-alone biography, remaining in a certain sense dependent on the narratives it seeks to replace. This self-imposed constraint may also have led the author to over-emphasize aspects of consistency in ‘Abd al-Qādir’s worldview and his “unshakable faith in Islamic revelation” (p. 207). In my opinion there are two risks here: first, Woerner-Powell is particularly critical of what he identifies, building on Talal Asad,⁵ as an Orientalist tendency to depict ‘Abd al-Qādir as a “hyper-rational” (p. 50) political leader employing Islam in a largely functionalist manner. Danziger and others’ emphasis on ‘Abd al-Qādir’s rationality was, however, itself a reaction to Orientalist notions of Muslim irrationality and so-called fanaticism. Woerner-Powell’s insistence that ‘Abd al-Qādir’s worldview differed markedly from Western rationality may thus inadvertently revive older ideas of Muslim Otherness. Second, Woerner-Powell’s representation of ‘Abd al-Qādir as a conservative and immutably devout Muslim seems to be grounded in a curiously conservative understanding of biography. Woerner-Powell shows himself largely uninterested in postmodern approaches, which have questioned the “biographical illusion” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s expression) of a coherent and consistent self.⁶ Woerner-Powell’s search for “one ‘Abd al-Qādir rather than several” (p. 206) underpins the – in my view, dubious – claim that approaches stressing biographical incoherence and fragmentation are applicable solely to Western cases.⁷ These critical remarks, however, are not meant to diminish the author’s achievement, as his work is undoubtedly the most accomplished biography of ‘Abd al-Qādir to date.

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⁴ See especially Danziger 1977; Weismann 2001; Bennison 2002; Étienne 2003.

⁵ Asad 1993: 210–11. Woerner-Powell gives identical quotations from this book in Chapter One and in his conclusion (pp. 19 and 215).

⁶ Bourdieu 1986.

⁷ Lässig 2008: 7–8.

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