



# Entangled Religions

Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Religious Contact and Transfer

3 (2016)

Book Review 10: LVIII-LXIII

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Johann Gottfried Wetzstein.  
Orientalist und preußischer Konsul  
im osmanischen Syrien (1849-1861)

Islamkundliche Untersuchungen 329.

Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2016.

396 pages, €54.00, ISBN: 9783879974528 (paperback)

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ISSN 2363-6696

*Entangled Religions* 3 (2016)  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.13154/er.v3.2016.LVIII-LXIII>

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# Johann Gottfried Wetzstein. Orientalist und preußischer Konsul im osmanischen Syrien (1849-1861)

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As stated in the author's foreword, this book offers a revised version of her PhD dissertation, originally published in 1989 as *Der Orientalist Johann Gottfried Wetzstein als preußischer Konsul in Damaskus (1849-1861), dargestellt nach seinen hinterlassenen Papieren* (Klaus Schwarz Verlag: Berlin). The version now published claims the benefits of the enlarged possibilities for archival research on Prussian sources after German reunification, making it possible to include not only Wetzstein's private materials but also Prussian administrative documents pertaining to his function as Prussian consul in Syria. The author's aim is to provide "a comprehensive picture of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century conditions in Syria which has not been available like this before" (p. 8).

To do so, she basically provides, after a brief introduction into Wetzstein's biography and the larger political context of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Syria, an account of Wetzstein's tasks and occupations as Prussian consul based in Damascus between the years 1849 and 1861. Local contexts are woven into this description where necessary, but the whole narrative is structured firmly by the person Wetzstein and his consular functions which are described in sometimes minute detail. The main source materials

used are the Wetzstein papers (his own notes, correspondence, and observations, as well as bills and contracts, both in German and Arabic) and some administrative documents relating to him. It must be pointed out here that although the latter provide the reason brought forward for the reissue, their actual amount is relatively small.

Readers interested in intercultural diplomacy, 19<sup>th</sup>-century diplomatic history, administrative history and imperialist politics will find much of interest in these pages. The financial management of the consulate and its activities is particularly illuminating as it becomes clear how unstable these institutions in fact were. As an unpaid consul Wetzstein was only entitled to claim his expenses from the Prussian treasury but had to advance almost all costs by himself. Reimbursement procedures were slow, and the Foreign Ministry to which he had to apply for compensation was not very accommodating. The opinions he formed and his judgements of the Syrians and Ottomans Wetzstein encountered are sometimes critically valid, and sometimes on the verge of blatant racism. It would be interesting to know in how far Wetzstein in this respect is representative either for German orientalists, highly educated 19<sup>th</sup> century humanities scholars (as he is characterized, cf. p. 262) or Europeans in diplomatic service, but comparisons are rare throughout the book. If such are made, they mostly refer to the people Wetzstein encountered in the course of his duties, be they other diplomats or his administrative superiors.

If this would be the only omission it would only be a minor quibble of an overly curious reviewer. Yet unfortunately it is not. To begin with, the issue of religion is very much downplayed, if it is touched upon at all. Surely, religious denominations such as Christendom, Islam, and Judaism are mentioned rather frequently, but only to serve as quasi-ethnic markers to differentiate subsets of the population as Wetzstein himself did in the sources. He obviously saw himself as the advocate of a missionary Lutheran

Protestantism (cf. pp. 38-9), and distinguished the Syrians he encountered as being either Muslims, Jews, Druzes, Catholics, Orthodox Christians or else, with religious affiliation as the prime marker of difference in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society. From belonging to a certain religious denomination essential properties of these respective groups are then deducted and people judged according to the traits they are supposed to possess as being either a Sunnite, a Nestorian, a Druze, a Catholic or a Jew, which superpose those of the equally problematic "Arabian nation" (p. 269). All of these not only Wetzstein but also Huhn endorses without reflection. The conflicts which are reported upon at length, foremost the massacre of Damascene Christians in the burning and looting of the city's Christian quarter in July 1860 which comprises about one-fifth of the whole narrative, thus are not religious conflicts in the sense of having any theological core but rather social conflicts erupting along denominational demarcation lines. Though dispersed references to Koranic regulations of certain matters are made throughout the book, these serve only to provide grounding for what truly are judicial or economic issues. I must confess that I am still not really sure why exactly this volume was published in a series called *Analyses in Islamic Studies (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen)*.

The rather unreflective adoption of such demarcations from the source material points to another weakness of the present study which I (as a historian by profession) am sorry to have to point out: Though the author is to be admired for the diligence with which she worked through her archival materials both in German and Arabic, she succeeds much better in drawing out what is stated as facts than in taking a critical stance towards them. Wetzstein's version of events, of his actions, and his thoughts is seldom called into question (for one rare example see p. 200), as are his judgements. Given the by now vast literature on ego-documents, autobiographies and the problems relating to their analysis this study is drastically under-

theorized. This also holds for the religious contacts, as already said, and, what is more, even for the imperialistic context into which the whole subject is necessarily embedded. I was quite astonished to see that in 1989 one could still write such a study without even ever mentioning Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. Routledge & Kegan: London 1978), and much more so to see that one can reissue it revised in 2016 again without doing so at least once, and without also taking notice of anything else published in the field of colonial or post-colonial studies until now. In a study quoting its protagonist expressing that "the intellectual exploitation of the Orient" ("*die geistige Ausbeutung des Orients*") would be as important as "the [Orient's] material [exploitation] through trade" ("*die 'materielle durch den Handel'*") (p. 39), saying so as a European scholar and diplomat in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Middle East, this seems considerably odd. The rest of the study's literature base is subject to similar restrictions. Many of the works cited as secondary literature (again without visible critical reflection) were already old when it was first published in 1989, some going back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> and even the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and only 6 titles dating later than 1989 and not written by the author herself have been added for the revision. Given the wealth of studies available on interreligious topics, intercultural contacts and diplomacy, Islam, Imperialism, and the history of the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire since then, this is surprising.

The extensive addenda that hold transcriptions and reproductions of some of the primary archival sources used are interesting, but as they have been directly reproduced from the 1989 edition rather than from the originals, are not as good as one could wish for. This holds especially for the handwritten Arabic sources annexed, for which also transcriptions (into machine-written Arabic) are given but in very small font and without the vowel punctuations in the manuscripts. Nonetheless, this is an impressive

trove of material, more than a hundred pages strong, which will be of interest to future researchers dealing with Damascus in the 1850s and '60s.

To sum it all up, this is a work written by a capable Arabist and archival researcher who does not succeed as well either as historian or as a scholar of religion. It deals with a fascinating topic but in a rather outmoded kind of way, on a literature base quite outdated. For those interested in its sources and topic, it nevertheless may well be worth reading and warrant more thorough engagement, as much of the details given here you will not find anywhere else.

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