

Emir Abdelkader al Jazairy—A Healer for Our Times

A Talk by John Kiser at the University of Lyon, France

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Let us begin with the name, Abdelkader. Servant of God. A challenging name for a man to carry. Nevertheless, Abdelkader came as close as a human might to fulfilling that implied calling. Following his rescue of Christians in Damascus during the pogrom of 1860, Abdelkader received a letter of gratitude from Bishop Pavy in Algiers. The emir wrote in response: “That which we did for the Christians we did to be faithful to Islamic Law, and out of respect for human rights.... The law places greatest importance on compassion and mercy and all that preserves social cohesion.” Abdelkader then ended his letter with an observation whose relevance is obvious today: “Those who belong to the religion of Mohammad have corrupted it, which is why they are now like lost sheep.”

Of course, the idea of proposing a religiously devout individual, even someone like Abdelkader, as a national and international role model is anathema to many secularists, and probably not a few Christians. But why? Some of his greatest admirers were Christians: Bishop Dupuch, the Dominican Sisters who looked after his family in prison and many others. He was a friend of Free Masons and Saint Simonians, awarded the Legion of Honor, received gifts from President Lincoln and Pius IX, praised around the world for saving thousands of Christian lives in Damascus. Muslims and Christians, believers and nonbelievers alike honored him. His most valued accolade came from fellow freedom fighter Emir Chamyl who had finally been defeated by the Russians.

Nevertheless, we know that in France, as well as other countries, religion and religious talk causes allergic reactions ---a result of centuries of violence, persecution and interreligious warfare all in the name of the Jesus, the Prince of

Peace. Who are the real Muslims? Who are the heretics? The killing of Muslims by Muslims is sadly familiar to Christians who know their own history.

For understandable historical reasons France has adopted *laïcité* since 1907 (Loi Ferry) as its official culture in reaction to its own history of violence in the name of religion. Yet this did not stop the French, when polled annually about who in France they most respected, from choosing throughout the 1990s a man of God—Abbé Pierre. So you see, the French do have a soul. It just hasn't yet been scientifically proven.

Looking back at the 20th century, one can also ask—has secularism served Europe and the world better? Has not our modern ideological fanaticisms become a form of secular religion (Communism, fascism, nationalism, capitalism, Americanism) and caused as much or more suffering as religion in the European past? Is not America's democratic crusade to remake the world in its image a form of ahistorical secular fanaticism ?

The emir's behavior followed the now forgotten foreign policy philosophy proclaimed in 1797 by President George Washington during his farewell address “...Observe good faith and justice toward *all* nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all.... Religion and morality require it.” Washington did not say “with democracies” only, with “Christian countries” only. Perhaps he knew instinctively the wisdom of Koranic verses: If God wanted, he could have made us all the same, instead God created different tribes and nations so they might learn to know one another and compete in good works.

Yes, false religion can produce monsters; false patriotism can produce monsters. Humans in general can become monsters—we read about them everyday—and they come in all nationalities, races, and religions. All humans, deranged by anger and bitterness and false teaching can become ticking time bombs and degenerate to a level far below animals. But what triggers the detonators?

Abdelkader's mother, Zohra , used to say that ritual purity is only half the faith, a reminder of the harder half—to purify one's inner self. To be a true instrument of God's will, it's necessary to be free of egotistical desires and violent passions of hatred, anger and revenge. This is what Mohammad called the *greater jihad*, not physical combat, rather wrestling with the demons within.

So, let's look closer at Abdelkader. Who was he? First, he was a great human being who inspired the lives of others with his great physical endurance and moral courage, his learning, intellectual and spiritual depth, capped by a sense of empathy, justice and restraint toward his enemies. From where did these traits come? What produced such a person? There were many influences:

- The traditions and teachings of the 11th century saint Abdelkader al-Jilani that inspired his Kaderiyyia Sufi tradition. Al-Jilani taught that Muslims had a duty to pray for the well-being of all people and to hold a place of special respect for Jesus Christ. In this tradition, Jesus is set apart from other prophets by his power of love.
- The teachings and influence of his parents that emphasized the continuous pursuit of knowledge, purity of heart, patience and contempt of material riches
- His life as a Bedouin hunter and horseman, which taught patience, endurance, courage and warrior skills
- Sincere piety and strong moral compass rooted in the teachings of *all* the prophets (Torah, Psalms, Gospels, Koran).
- A broad education that included, in addition to the Law, math, history, astronomy, Greek philosophy, plant pharmacology, art of rhetoric and recitation of the Koran.
- He got outside his cocoon when his father took him on a hajj at age twenty four.. a two year journey that took him to Tunis, Cairo, Damascus and exposure to the world. He would often say in life, "The forms of worship may change, but the Master is One. We differ only in the way we address ourselves to him."

Abdelkader believed the pursuit of knowledge to be the highest good and the ultimate purpose in life, for knowledge is what leads to right conduct. His was a

world of hierarchy. Social relations were hierarchical, and so too was knowledge. In his once famous *Letter to the French* written at the request of the Asian Society of Paris in 1856 the emir laid out his understanding of what made man different from the rest of creation: That difference is man's love of knowledge, pursuit of truths that transcend the senses –truths of mathematics, geometry, philosophy, the moral truths. The most important form of knowledge is political knowledge. Why? It effects the way people live together. Man is a social animal. He needs to cooperate to survive. No knowledge is more important than that needed for living in the polis and guiding human behavior justly.

Such justice requires access to higher wisdom, transmitted via the prophets who are but vessels for mediating God's wisdom. Nor is there any contradiction between the different prophets. They all subscribe to the fundamental moral rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. They all have a common message--- glorify God and show compassion for His creatures.

Today, non-Muslims around the world and their governments are trying to grapple with Islam—something to be feared or not? But whose Islam? There is no one Islam just as there is one Christianity or Judaism, or Buddhism. There are as many Islams as there are types of couscous, yet we read about only violence in the name of Islam. Such publicity enhances the prestige of terrorists claiming to be Muslims, and distorts its face for non-Muslims. This one-sided narrative becomes, effectively, an unholy alliance between a media culture that loves blood and terrorists who shed it. “ Look, we got coverage in the *Figaro* today! *The NYTimes*. Aren't we important?”

Muslims throughout the world today are struggling for the soul of their faith. The Islam that was once on the forefront of intellectual achievement in the world was, like the emir, an Islam that sought knowledge wherever it could be found. There was no such thing as a “pure” Islam, just as there is no pure Christianity or pure anything. The struggle today is over role models for young Muslims.... And for that matter, youth everywhere.

Abdelkader's life story can, and has, changed people for the good. It can act as an anti radicalization medicine and positive role model for Muslims, but also acts as an anti -Islamophobia medicine for non Muslims who only know Islam from the media. Students in the AEP Global Leadership Essay must explain how the emir's story is relevant to today and for them personally. Conclusions drawn by some winners illustrate the impact of the emir's story:

"... Abdelkader's tolerance, his understanding, his patience, his wisdom and his commitment are attributes I would like to imitate in my own life.

... Reading about his life led me to see Arabs in a totally different light; I now want to be able to share with others the new perspective I have gained.

...The Emir's life caused me to reflect on the way I live my own faith and to try to imitate this remarkable human being."

Abdelkader's life will no doubt be interpreted differently and embraced for different reasons by different groups. Each individual and each religious orientation will find its own handles for grasping the Abdelkader model. There will be no uniform template of acceptance. Abdelkader will also be rejected as a model of enlightened Islam by some Muslims: He should have fought to the bitter end, he was too friendly with France, he was too open minded, or too puritanical. No doubt there are secular fundamentalists who will reject any personality who is perceived as "religious," even someone as rational and inclusive as Abdelkader.

Those in the audience familiar with the struggle for independence from France have probably heard of the Bishop Etienne Duval. And if not, you should. He was France's emir Abdelkader during the 1950s. Like the emir, he too was a morally courageous giant. Like the emir, he stood firm against those belonging to his own faith who condemned, insulted and threatened him. His heresy? He dared preach and act as he believed his Christian faith demanded.... to advocate justice and decency for the Arabs living under French rule. His heresy was to live the Gospels.

Bishop Duval didn't read Arabic. He wasn't interested in interfaith dialogue. He was however deeply committed to living the message of universal fraternal love and demanded of his priests that they treat all Arabs with respect and to respect their faith. He had no patience with the contempt and bigotry of his fellow countrymen toward the Arabs. He served only one authority and it was not the French government.

After the war, Bishop Duval stayed on in Algiers. He was one of a small number of French priests who were honored with Algerian citizenship by the new government. In 1979, Duval came to Tehran to administer Easter Mass to the American diplomats held hostage, part of Algeria's successful intervention in ultimately securing their release. Duval remained a respected voice in Algeria until his death in 1996. In her biography of Duval, Marie-Christina Ray reports that on his deathbed he made a prediction: "One day, Algeria will surprise the world." I have come in the years since the book's publication to believe that Abelkader's model of struggle and leadership *is* that surprise ---indeed, a gift to the world.

In my mind, three elements in his character make him worthy of this becoming a "gift to the world:"

He was "local" and "universal" at the same time. He was deeply and authentically Muslim. He had no identity crisis, yet he also grew spiritually, especially during French imprisonment, where he saw the goodness in France and experienced the goodness of Christians and non believers alike. His religion wasn't a safety belt holding his identity together, but a platform for probing the meaning of God's creation. His religious identity made him bigger not smaller.

He was a unifier not a divider. The plurality of beliefs was, for him, a reflection of the infinite nature of God and the inexhaustible ways to praise God. He didn't see any conflict between politics, religion and science. Politics should be governed by a desire to lead people to live together in harmony, religion should provide a common

moral base of shared values and common origin, and science will teach us to grasp the basic unity of mankind.

His was a life of virtue in action. True leadership requires certain virtues which Abdelkader possessed: intellect, moral courage, justice and self restraint. These were known once in the Christian world as the Cardinal Virtues. Without cultivating these qualities in our youth and in our leaders, there will be little moral progress in the world.

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