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Abd el-Kader and Islamic Responses to Suffering

Suffering is an inescapable part of the human experience. Therefore, religions take great care to address suffering – its cause, it purpose, how one should react or respond to it, etc. Sacred Islamic texts, rituals, and experiences serve to deal with the presence of suffering in Muslims’ lives. The story of Emir Abd el-Kader, a Muslim Algerian living during the 19th century, is a telling example of an Islamic response to suffering. In order to best understand Abd el-Kader’s experiences and reactions to suffering, background information about Islam is necessary.

Unlike the Western conception of religion as one aspect of an individual’s life, Islam is a “total way of life” (Welch, 162). The sacred-secular binary recognized in Western practices is irrelevant to Islam. The oneness and power of Allah, the divine, are emphasized greatly. Muslims know about Allah through the Koran, which is the foundation for Islam (Bowker, 99). Belief in Allah’s omnipotence contextualizes the ways that Muslims understand suffering. Because Allah is all-powerful, he is in control of everything, including suffering. Thus, Muslims can be sure that their suffering has some sort of purpose within Allah’s will. Islamic theology describes two different kinds of suffering, as “punishment for sin” and as a “trial or test” (Bowker, 106 and 109). Utilizing this perspective suggests that all Muslims will, at some point, experience suffering. Because suffering comes from Allah, Muslims accept it (Bowker, 114). Submitting to Allah’s suffering, however, can be expressed through a variety of responses. Passive, patient, endurance of suffering can be the proper response. In contrast, contesting, or challenging, suffering is also an acceptable response (Bowker, 116). When suffering comes as a result of injustice, it is necessary to combat it, because Allah is just. As seen by Abd el-Kader’s life of struggle, injustice should be disputed and justice should be fought for. In instances of struggle, Muslims understand that “the power of God and responsibility of men lie side by side” (Bowker, 123). While Allah is all-powerful, he can choose to demonstrate his power through his followers. The countless struggles faced by Abd el-Kader and his intentional responses to them exhibit a Muslim understanding of both the omnipotence of Allah and the duty of his followers to act in ways that will allow his will come to fruition.

Growing up as a Muslim, Abd el- Kader was taught Islamic rituals and the Koran by his parents, which served to shape his life as an adult. His mother, Lala Zohra, emphasized the importance of submission to both God and to human rulers (Kiser, 12). As described by Bowker, Abd el-Kader understood Allah to be in control of everything – including people with political and religious power. Yet, Abd el-Kader knew that the Koran instructed, “if you see evil remove it” (Kiser, 21). At the same time, however, Abd el-Kader was taught by his father “’tests are sent by God to strengthen you’” (Kiser, 26). Thus throughout his life, Abd el-Kader had to discern whether or not it was Allah’s will to actively put a stop to suffering or endure it patiently. As demonstrated by the actions taken during his time as a religious and political leader, Abd el-Kader used his wealth of knowledge of the sacred texts as the basis for upon which he made all decisions.

Emir Abd el-Kader was an Algerian marabout who matured to become “The Commander of the Faithful” for countless Algerian Muslims. As ruler who grew in power to control countless tribes, Abd el-Kader strove to bring about a united Islamic state within Algeria (Kiser, 59). Rather than a smattering of largely self-governing tribal units, Abd el-Kader believed that collaboration amongst the various tribes under a Muslim leader would bring peace and wellbeing to Algeria. As Algeria passed hands from the Turks to the French, Abd el-Kader believed he was called by Allah to challenge the Christian Frenchmen in order to regain Muslim rule in Algeria. He described his goal as emir to “[unite] the Muslim community…[prevent] dissensions among them and…[afford] general security to all the inhabitants of the land, [to put] an end to lawlessness, and [drive] back the enemy who has invaded our country in order to subjugate us” (Kiser, 51). While striving towards this aim, Abd el-Kader experienced suffering as his people died and France refused to relent.

Because the Koran discourages unnecessary conflict or suffering, when the French were willing to cooperate with Abd el-Kader, he was also complicit. Thsu, Abd el-Kader and France ultimately entered into multiple treaties with each other (Kiser, 62 and 107). Essentially, the treaties served as a means to “[show] that the enemy was the first to seek peace. The Koran was clear on two points Abd el-Kader would revisit often in his dealings with both tribes and the French: if attacked, a Muslim must fight to his last breath to defend the faith, yet peace is permitted if the invader sues for peace” (Kiser, 61). Consequently, when, in 1839, France had failed multiple times to uphold their end of the agreement, Abd el-Kader and his chieftains were left with no choice but to declare jihad against France (Kiser, 139). As long as the French were cooperative, Abd el-Kader and his followers sought out ways to avoid physical conflict and encourage peace. Ultimately, the violation of treaties by the French made the pathway of peace an impossible one for the Muslims to maintain. Abd el-Kader was quoted in regards to impending conflict saying: “God be praised. The infidel has broken the peace. We will show them we are not afraid of war” (Kiser, 137). While war was not Abd el-Kader’s preferred means of interaction with the French, he would take the path laid out for him by the Koran.

After years of fighting (??) without any real progress, Abd el-Kader came to the realization that it was no longer Allah’s will for him to battle against the French for control of Algeria. “Nowhere does the Koran recommend the useless shedding of blood” and Abd el-Kader felt that the loss of lives were futile because victory was out of his reach (Kiser, 114). The reasoning for his decision to cease fighting is best described in this excerpt:

“If I thought there were still a possibility to defeat France, I would continue. Further resistance will only create vain suffering. We must accept the judgment of God who has not given us victory and who in his infinite wisdom now wants this land to belong to Christians. Are we going to oppose His will?” (Kiser, 189).

While Abd el-Kader was initially led to believe that entering into war against France was Allah’s will for him and his people, the lack of progress in conflict served as indication to Abd el-Kader that war was no longer Allah’s will. Abd el-Kader knew that prolonging the fight against France would increase suffering and therefore defy the Koranic command to avoid unnecessary suffering (Kiser, 205).

Abd el-Kader’s decision to surrender to France surely decreased suffering for his people, but ultimately became a source of personal suffering. Upon surrendering, Abd el-Kader was under the impression that he, his family, and his closest followers would be granted exile in Egypt (??). This was not the case, however, as the citizens of France felt that allowing him to reside in the Middle East would pose too great a threat. Abd el-Kader suffered greatly in captivity due not only to the loss of his freedom, but also to the loss of the freedom of his family and followers. Throughout his imprisonment, Abd el-Kader found immense strength in the practice of rituals (Kiser, 204). Maintaining a structured scheduled including prayer and discussion about religion allowed Abd el-Kader to find some peace in his deplorable situation. This did not mean, however, that he endured imprisonment passively. Rather, Abd el-Kader was outraged by the injustice of his imprisonment (Kiser, 220). He made the decision to surrender based on the promise that he would be able to reside in Egypt. Thus, he was relentless in the pursuit of forcing France to uphold their commitment to him, his family, and his followers. In this way, Abd el-Kader took a very active stance on suffering (considering the circumstances) by writing countless letters to those in power, meeting with allies and forming new relationships. Abd el-Kader’s striving paid off as he and the others held captive with him were eventually allowed to live in Turkey, a Muslim country.

Abd el-Kader’s experiences with and responses to suffering are important to understanding suffering within Islam. Before responding, Muslims recognize that their suffering comes from Allah for some sort of punishment – punishment or trial. Then, practitioners of Islam appreciate the power of the Koran as the word of Allah. Knowledge of the Koran serves as context with which to discern the purpose behind specific instances of suffering and, accordingly, the appropriate responses. Abd el-Kader’s impressive familiarity with the Koran and other sacred texts demonstrate the effort and care that is required to be able to adequately respond, as Allah would will. At times Abd el-Kader understood that Allah’s will was for him to actively and physically respond to the suffering he and his people were experiencing under non-Muslim rule. However, once Abd el-Kader came to realize that needless bloodshed was occurring, his response to suffering was to submit to France. Specifically then, scholars of religious responses to suffering can conclude that there is not one proper response within Islam, but rather a variety of possible responses that are dependent on the context of the circumstances and on the teachings of the Koran.

Abd el-Kader’s responses to suffering can also enlighten scholars to the more general category of religious responses to suffering. His example serves to demonstrate the importance of close adherence to and relevancy of religious texts in order to respond well to suffering. Abd el-Kader’s structured life during imprisonment represents the power of ritual to sustain a person in the midst of suffering. Additionally, his responses demonstrate that religious responses to suffering can be productive. Through his persistence for justice, Abd el-Kader broke through countless cultural and religious barriers and stereotypes. Leaning on his religion for support, Abd el-Kader was able to endure much suffering and emerge as a person of strength and integrity.