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Abd el-Kader’s Responses to Suffering

According to Muslim tradition, “each century God sends an exemplary man, known for holiness and learning, to counter the natural tendencies of laziness and neglect among believers” (Kiser 13). From the day he was born, Abd el-Kader’s father believed that his son may be this man; sensing that his son was “destined to have an exceptional future”, Abd el-Kader’s family “gave special attention to his education” (Kiser 13). Whether the man he became was due to the will of Allah, or his family’s special attention to him transformed him into this man, it is obvious that religion played a huge role in the life of Abd el-Kader and the actions he took as “Commander of the Faithful”. Abd el-Kader’s strong faith and understanding of Islam were always in the forefront of his mind, and had a large impact on the actions he took in responding to the French and the suffering that they created in the lives of the Muslim people.

Abd el-Kader’s mother helped to instill strong Muslim beliefs in Abd el-Kader from a young age, teaching him how to read the Koran and perform the daily prayers (Kiser 12). She emphasized that to be a good Muslim it was crucial to believe with your heart, instead of only going through the motions of ritual and prayer, and this was something that Abd el-Kader definitely believed and applied to all areas of his life (Kiser 12). Abd el-Kader’s formal knowledge of Islam is obvious in the ways that he responded to the French; his actions show an understanding and belief of traditional Muslim responses to suffering.

According to John Bowker, suffering is “a part of what it means to be alive”, yet for Muslims “it is almost dissolved as a problem” due to the belief that Allah is omnipotent (101). Allah’s omnipotence is emphasized in many passages throughout the Koran, where statements such as “truly, God has power over every single thing” are made frequently to emphasize that Allah has control over all aspects of life (Bowker 102). Bowker stresses the important Islamic idea that “suffering occurs only within creation, which is *God’s* creation” and is under his complete control; for this reason, suffering “cannot occur as a problem because the omnipotence of God is already established” (Bowker 103). Because of Allah’s omnipotence, it follows that all suffering comes from him and for this reason “suffering must in some sense be purposeful” (Bowker 103, 105).

Muslims understand suffering as instrumental and believe that it occurs for two different reasons (Bowker 106). The first explanation for suffering is that it is “a punishment for sin” and passages in the Koran are used to support this explanation like “If some good befalls them, they say, ‘This is from God’, but if evil strikes them, they say, ‘This is from you.’ Say: Everything is from God” (Bowker 106). The other reason that Muslims believe that suffering exists is that it acts as a “trial or test” (Bowker 109). Because of the existence of innocent suffering, it is concluded that many Muslims go through suffering as a test from God. This trial has two purposes both to “create a faithful disposition and it also helps to discriminate the sincere from the insincere” (Bowker 111).

While it is fairly easy to understand the existence of suffering and the purposes that it serves in Islam, the response that Muslims should take to this suffering is slightly more complicated. Bowker describes the fact that there are two reactions that Muslims can take in terms of suffering: “the hard response” or the active response (113). The hard response follows from understanding that God is in control and as a result, the suffering that exists should be responded to acceptance, patience and endurance (Bowker 114). In instances where the hard response is taken, it is believed that people should not concern themselves with issues such as inequality and the suffering of others because it comes from God and is serving a purpose (Bowker 115). On the other end of the spectrum, the Koran also details that in some instances “suffering should be contested and as far as possible alleviated” (Bowker 116). In order to live in a truly Muslim society as detailed in the Koran, it is believed that positive action is necessary in some instances in order to remove suffering and injustice from society (Bowker 117). While these two attitudes may seem opposite, they are “woven together” through God’s doctrine of creation; Muslims can accept that God is in control, but they also have the ability to take action because it is within the context of his creation (Bowker 118). As discussed earlier, both responses continue to exist within the realm of Allah’s creation due to his omnipotence and as a result are both responses to suffering. It is clear in looking further into Abd el-Kader’s experiences that he was well-educated in these common Islamic responses to suffering; this understanding comes across in both the “hard” and “active” responses that he took against the French and his justification for these actions, which was always connected to Allah and Islam.

When Abd el-Kader younger and was still being taught the fundamentals of Islam, he was unable to completely grasp the concepts surrounding suffering that would later influence his responses to the French. While living in Oran with his father’s friend, he observed the Turks engaging activities “condemned in the hadith” such as gambling, divination, and drinking (Kiser 20). Despite feeling the overwhelming urge to intervene and remove this evil, Ben Khodja told Abd el-Kader “Your time will come, but not yet. Evil is powerful. Removing it requires more than your passion and sincerity” (Kiser 21). In telling him that it was not always his job to intervene and remove the evils of the world, he helped the emir to understand that there were many evils in the world, and Allah was behind them all. Not all of the suffering in the world could, or should be easily solved, a lesson that Abd el-Kader carried forward and applied to the French.

After Abd el-Kader was appointed the “Commander of the Faithful” by his father, his methods and actions were ruled heavily by his upbringing and his Muslim faith. After the French took over Algeria, Abd el-Kader and others refused to be taken under French control and have Christianity imposed on their land and culture. This unwelcome source of suffering prompted action: as described in the Koran, “war against evil is necessary but war in general should be defensive only” (Bowker 117). Abd el-Kader’s knowledge of his faith allowed him to understand that despite this struggle as a creation of God, the French were making it necessary for the Muslims to defend themselves; this was a time for action, not acceptance and passivity. As Kiser describes in the glossary, jihad is defined as “struggle or striving in the cause of God; any moral or spiritual effort either against one’s lower instincts or in the case of justice (xi). As Abd el-Kader saw it, jihad was the response that needed to be taken against the French in order to restore Muslim society. In order to emphasize the religious nature of their cause and unite them under a single goal, Abd el-Kader understood the importance of getting his troops to “think of themselves as part of a greater Muslim community, as a nation of Muslims” (Kiser 54). As Kiser describes, for Abd el-Kader, “the Koran was his constitution. The deeds and saying of the Prophet were his case law. Religion was the common denominator of unity. The sword was his enforcer” (Kiser 54). Abd el-Kader’s role as the leader of the jihad was completely rooted in his faith. His reasoning and actions in war were all connected back to his Islamic beliefs and he was taking to the sword to defend the lives and faith of all Muslims.

While the jihads can definitely be understood as an active response to suffering, Abd el-Kader’s final surrender can also be seen as an Islamic response to suffering, but this time more as a “hard” response. As described above, the actions that Abd el-Kader and his troops took against the French in order to bring relief to their suffering were connected to the understanding of the need for an active response. While Abd el-Kader and his troops believed that they needed to defend themselves and tried to relieve the suffering brought upon them by the French, the fighting also created a lot of additional suffering and death. Even though Abd el-Kader and his troops had originally vowed to “struggle and endure no matter how great the danger and the suffering”, after many years of fighting and a lack of progress, the emir started to have a change of heart (Kiser 188). After all, “nowhere does the Koran recommend the useless shedding of blood”, and at this point, Abd el-Kader felt that they had done all that they could possibly do to combat the French and the fighting was beginning to do more harm than good (Kiser 114, 189). As Abd el-Kader stated, “further resistance will only crate vain suffering. We must accept the judgement 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). Through the understanding of God’s omnipotence and his creation of suffering, Abd el-Kader believed that it was finally time to switch from active resistance to acceptance of this suffering as a creation of God.

After his surrender, Abd el-Kader spent years in exile and once again his Muslim beliefs came through in his actions. Despite being controlled by the French, the emir reacted to his exile with a traditional hard response of acceptance, endurance and patience. He structured his and his followers’ time in exile around study and prayer, and received many visitors who admired him for his “outward serenity…aura of sanctity, determined endurance and unrelenting tactfulness” (Kiser 204, 231). Abd el-Kader’s acceptance of what occurred also presented itself in the way in which he never complained and even offered forgiveness to his enemies (Kiser 231). This mindset and actions taken while in exile once again demonstrate the role that Islam played in Abd el-Kader’s life and his ability to accept the suffering that he was enduring as a creation of God. He did not try to fight against the results of the surrender because he knew that it was in God’s will and this patience and endurance was rewarded with his release.

Through his jihads, surrender and actions while in exile, Abd el-Kader’s strong Muslim faith and understanding of Islamic responses to suffering are clear. Every action that Abd el-Kader took was rooted in his faith and the understanding that the suffering was the result of God. Abd el-Kader’s legacy lies in his strength, patience and endurance in his dealings with the French, and all stem from his deep religious beliefs. Throughout his life, Abd el-Kader demonstrated that all areas of his life were impacted and controlled by his Islamic beliefs and that his understanding of his faith was central to the person that he became. The importance of religion in Abd el-Kader’s life helped give him the strength to deal with whatever circumstances he found himself in. For Abd el-Kader, and many others with strong faith, religion can offer understanding and relief from suffering, with the knowledge that there is a larger purpose and reason behind what is occurring.

Works Cited

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