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Comparative Religion

Essay #3

28 November 2012

Suffering and Response : Negotiating Greater and Lesser Jihad

The life of Amir Abd el-Kader was marked by a litany of difficult decisions— questions of whether to respond to violence and oppression strongly or weakly, to remain unyielding in retaliation or to surrender and, in doing so, stop unnecessary death. Upon closer analysis, the challenges and decisions which confronted the Amir are not so drastically different from more modern concerns of international intervention or political upheaval. In reading of the Amir’s life and prior to this, the Ghost Dance of the Lakota people and the development of the Khalsa in the Sikh religion, there has been a desire to identify and separate *religious* responses to suffering from other, equally legitimate but perhaps more seemingly political, economic, or militaristic responses. This categorization is useful for a society that has, since the enlightenment, become increasingly compartmentalized, ever seeking to separate actions and responses according to their perceived motivations. But, when looking to the life of Abd el-Kader, whose actions often seem to defy such categorization, it becomes difficult to see the divides separating religious responses from humanitarian, political, economic, militaristic, or personal ones as anything more substantial than convenient and occasionally, dangerous fictions.

In order to discuss the ways in which Abd el-Kader’s actions complicate notions of *religious* response, this essay will focus on two of the Amir’s responses / actions: the 1847 surrender to French forces and the Amir’s intervention to rescue Christians living in Damascus in 1860. On the most fundamental levels, both actions contest traditional notions regarding the purpose of jihad and the edicts outlined in hadiths; both represent what seem to be personal transformations in the Amir’s reaction to non-Muslin oppressors; both demonstrate a desire to negotiate Muslim traditions and beliefs with a world which was quickly becoming more globalized. In both cases, the actions of the Amir reflect the concerns faced by almost all religious communities:

All religious communities face this tension between religious inspiration and religious action … The troubled waters that need to be navigated in this global age lie between two shores: Respecting the right and reality of religious conviction and motivation and recognizing the problem of religious action in the pluralistic public square, (Heck, 96).

In this manner, the Amir’s life and actions represent a multiplicity of concerns, not all of which can or should be isolated to the causality of religion.

In order to discuss Abd el-Kader’s actions and the possible motivations which incited his response, the role of Jihad within the Islamic tradition and within the life of the Amir needs to be addressed. In more recent times, the mention of jihad brings to mind militant, typically fanatical groups— a perceived threat to western society, whose presence, at times, seems almost corporeal. Such sentiments are reflected in J. D. McClatchy’s 2002 poem, “Jihad,” in which he writes, “Before the mullah's drill on righteousness, / Practice rocks are hurled at chicken-wire / Dummies of tanks with silhouetted infidels / Defending the nothing both sides fight over / In God's name, a last idolatry / Of boundaries,” (311). However, such modern perceptions do not necessarily reflect the religious origins of jihad according to Quranic descriptions. Originally, the call for jihad speaks of “a struggle not to preserve the Islamic message against non-Muslim hostility but to direct one's own soul away from worldly attachments,” (Heck 98). This greater (inner) jihad represents a deeply personal, non-physical purging of that which separates followers of Islam from Allah. Only during the time of Byzantine aggression and under the rule of the Umayyad dynasty, did the lesser (outer) jihad begin to make a more forceful impact on Islamic history.

Alongside philosophical reflection on jihad, another strand of thought emerged out of the practical interest of the Islamic state in establishing its political and administrative authority over its subjects and effectively combating its enemies. Jihad, then, became a convenient tool for dividing the world neatly into two camps: those under the control of the Islamic state and those not, (Heck 106).

While the function / motivations behind jihad may have morphed over time, it seems important to note the distinction between greater and lesser jihad and the origins of jihad as an attempt to bring the self and the community closer to the ideals of Islam. As evidenced by the actions of Abd el-Kader, not all instances of outer jihad were fanatical, heedlessly destructive, or wholly violent.

In 1832, Abd el-Kader became the leader of jihad, following the leadership of his father. Reading his first words upon being named as the “sultan announced by the prophecies,” as anything but an active response to the suffering and oppression of the Muslim people is difficult. He states, “There is no power and no strength except in God … I will recognize no other law than the Koran. There is no liberty except through defending the faith. Paradise is found in the shadow of the sword,” (Kiser 50). This initial militant response to the oppression of the Muslim people, the beginning of the Amir’s leadership of lesser jihad, signifies an early attitude toward the role of active and passive response within the Islamic religion. However, fifteen years later, after years of nearly ceaseless struggle and the loss of many casualties on both the French and Muslim sides, the Amir’s attitude towards the continuation of jihad and the need for active response to suffering undergoes a transformation. He laments the losses incurred, reflects on the vow he had taken to continue in his lesser jihad, and comes to a conclusions regarding the acceptance of suffering and the will of Allah:

“I don’t think any Muslim can accuse me of not doing everything possible to honor [the vow to struggle and endure]. If there is anything more I can do, tell me … Believe me the fight is over … Now Muslims are killing Muslims … Further resistance will only cause 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,” (Kiser 189).

His response to suffering becomes more passive, more focused on the accepting the will of Allah, more centered on addressing the concerns of the Muslim people in terms of the greater jihad. This transformation marks a significant shift from the sentiments expressed in 1832 as well as those outlined in earlier hadiths. In some ways, the Amir’s transformation from lesser to greater jihad is religious— the decision to surrender to French forces is tied to the will of Allah. But, in the same breath, the decision is a political one, “The French kept their word after Ben Salem submitted. I would rather put my trust in those whom we have fought against than those who have betrayed us,” (189). The Amir chooses to surrender on terms which he believes may yield a more trustworthy and potentially more negotiative future for Muslim relations with the French. Yet, seen from another perspective, the decision was also a personal one, the Amir witnessed “Muslims killing Muslims” and was demoralized by the massacre of French prisoners by Mustafa Ben Thami. In a letter to Thomas Bugeaud, following the Ben Thami massacre, the Amir writes, “You forget that the circumstances of life change … We never step in the same river twice. I know this better than you,” (185). In short, it is easy to see evidence of the Amir’s remorse regarding the acts of violence, easy to see how the atrocities of war led him towards more humanitarian views.

The Amir’s progression from an initially active response to suffering to a passive, from a lesser to a greater jihad, has its culmination in the decision to shelter persecuted Christians in Damascus. When rioters came to his house, demanding the Christians he was harboring, the Amir spoke to the angry crowds, “My brothers, your behavior violates the law of God. What makes you think you have the right to go around killing innocent people … If acting against God’s law doesn’t frighten you, then think about the punishment you will receive from men … It will be terrible, I promise,” (298-299). This act, which was at once passive (the Amir sought to preserve the life of the Christians with whom, only a few years before, he been engaged in war and he attempted to do so in the most non-violent manner possible) and active (he made a decision to protect the Christian people in Damascus and was prepared to fight for their lives against the angry crowds, if the need arose), appears complex in its motivations. The response might be called religious in that Abd el-Kader calls the actions of the crowd violations of Allah’s law or the response might be political in that the Amir sought to prevent further contestation between the French government and the local Druze. At the most basic level, the response seems undeniably humanitarian as, in his last call for peace, the Amir invokes the law of humankind, “the punishment you will receive from men … It will be terrible, I promise,” and his cautionary words are made more potent by what might be interpreted as the strong undertones of a deep, personal regret. Regardless of the motivation / category of response, the Amir’s words mark the conclusion of a long progression, from the 24-year-old who claimed that “paradise is found in the shadow of the sword.”

The progression of Abd el-Kader’s method of response to the suffering of the Muslim people, presents challenges to the categorization of religious response and the extent to which divisions between religious, political, humanitarian, and personal responses to suffering, both for the individual and for the community, can be realistically determined. While it seems obvious that there are numerous complex and perhaps even contradictory motivations driving a single response, perhaps the more pertinent question to consider, at least in terms of religious studies, is the way such classifications limit or enable the justification of the response.

Works Cited

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