

A Role Model for Our Time

A Ruler Who Embodied all That is Good in Religion

BY JOHN W KISER, III

LET'S BEGIN WITH THE NAME: Abdelkader, Servant of God. A challenging name to carry in today's world. Nevertheless, Emir Abdelkader al-Jazairi (1808-83) came as close as any human might in fulfilling such a calling. After protecting thousands of Christians living in Damascus during the pogrom of 1860, he received a letter of gratitude from French Bishop Louis Antoine Pavy in Algiers. The emir responded, "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."

Of course, the idea of proposing a devout Muslim as an international role model today would be anathema to many secularists and probably a few Christians. But why? Many of Abdelkader's greatest admirers were Christians: Bishop Adolph-Antoine Dupuch of Algiers, the Dominican Sisters who tended to the needs of his family in prison and, of course, Napoleon III himself.

The emir became a friend of Free Masons and Saint Simonians, was awarded the Legion of Honor and received gifts from President Abraham Lincoln and Pius IX for intervening to protect thousands of Christians in Damascus during the four days of mayhem instigated by the Ottoman governor for non-payment of taxes.

Emir Abdelkader al-Jazairi's behavior followed the now-forgotten foreign policy philosophy of President George Washington, who proclaimed in his 1797 farewell address, "Observe good faith and justice toward all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with

all, religion and morality require it" (www.georgewashington.org/farewell-address.jsp). He didn't say "with democracies" or with "Christian countries" only, but rather echoed

any mention of God in public discourse is frowned upon and religious symbols are prohibited in public schools. Yet this didn't stop the French, when polled throughout the

1990s about who they most respected, from choosing a man of God, namely, Abbe Pierre (d.2007). The French do have a soul, it seems, even if it hasn't yet been scientifically proven.

Looking back at the 20th century, one can also ask whether or not secularism has served Europe and the world any better. Haven't our modern ideological fanaticism — among them communism, fascism, nationalism, capitalism and Americanism — become a form of secular religion and caused as much or even more suffering as religion has in Europe's past? Hasn't Washington's own long-term crusade to remake the world in its image a form of secular fanaticism: Making the world "safe for democracy"?

Yes, both false religion and false patriotism can

produce monsters. Humans in general can become monsters — we read about them every day — and they arise in all nationalities, races and religions. Any human, deranged by anger and bitterness and false teaching, can become a ticking time bomb and degenerate to a level far below that of animals. But what triggers the detonator?

Abdelkader's mother, Zohra, taught him that ritual purity is only half of Islam, a reminder of the harder half — to purify one's inner self. To become a true instrument of God's will, it's necessary to free oneself of egotistical desires and the violent passions of hatred, anger and revenge — what Prophet Mohammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) called the *greater jihad*.



the wisdom of the Quranic verse: "If God had 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" (49:13).

In contemporary Europe, especially in France, religion and religious talk can cause allergic reactions — a result of centuries of violence, persecution and inter-religious warfare all in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Who are the real Muslims? Who are the heretics? Who are simply misguided? The fratricidal killing of Muslims is sadly familiar to Christians who know their own history.

In 1907 (Loi Ferry), France adopted *laïcité* as its official culture. In reaction to its own history of violence in the name of religion,

A CLOSER LOOK

So, let's take a closer look at Abdelkader. Who was he? First, he was a great human being who inspired others with his physical endurance and moral courage, his learning, intellectual and spiritual depth, all capped by an extraordinary ability to empathize and exercise restraint toward his enemies. From where did these traits come? What produced such a person?

- The traditions and teachings of Abdelkader al-Jilani, the 11th-century Persian mystic who taught that Muslims were duty-bound to pray for the well-being of all people, even the Crusaders and Christians in general, and to hold a special respect for Jesus Christ. In this tradition, Jesus is set apart from the other Abrahamic prophets due to his power of love.

- The teachings and influence of his parents, who emphasized the continuous pursuit of knowledge, purity of heart, patience and contempt for material riches.

- His life as a Bedouin hunter and horseman, which taught patience, endurance, courage and warrior skills.

- Sincere piety and a strong moral compass rooted in the teachings of all the prophets.

- A broad education that included, in addition to perfecting one's Quranic recitation, math, history, astronomy, Greek philosophy, plant pharmacology and the art of rhetoric.

- At the age of 24, his father took him on hajj, a two-year journey that brought him to Tunis, Cairo and Damascus, and exposed him to the larger world. He would often say, "the forms of worship may change, but the Master is One. We differ only in the way we address ourselves to Him."

Abdelkader believed that pursuing knowledge was the highest good and life's ultimate purpose, because it leads people to right conduct. His world was one of hierarchy, affecting both social relations and knowledge, which was hierarchical. In his 1856 "Letter to the French," written at the request of the Asian Society of Paris, the emir laid out his understanding of what made humanity different from the rest of creation: Man's love of knowledge and pursuit of truths that transcend the senses — the truths of mathematics, geometry, philosophy and the moral truths.

Yet the most important form of knowledge, he believed, was that which he called "political." Why? Because relationships

matter. We are social animals and therefore need to cooperate with others to survive. For the emir, no knowledge was more important than that needed for living harmoniously in the polis and guiding human behavior justly.

So, why did John W. Kiser, an agnostic product of a New England boarding school and great-grandson of an Ohio pig farmer and bicycle manufacturer, becomes so cap-

to religion, especially the version that people had transformed into a type of nationalism. Abdelkader was simultaneously rational, humble and inclusive: Rational, because he recognized that God is infinitely greater than any one religion can imagine; Humble because the finite can't own the Infinite; and Inclusive because we all are wrong when we think earthlings can comprehend the Higher Power. God is greater than our lim-

“If you think God is what the different communities believe — Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, polytheists and others, He is that, but also more. None of His creatures worships Him in His entirety ... No one is an infidel in all the ways relating to God ...”

tivated by the forgotten Emir Abdelkader al-Jazairi — an affair he has been carrying on with admiration since 2002? The answer? I fell in love with his spiritual inclusiveness, humility and sense of decency and compromise that are so badly needed for living together in a community.

This passage below from his "Spiritual Writings" (1850) explains:


"If you think God is what the different communities believe — Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, polytheists and others, He is that, but also more. None of His creatures worships Him in His entirety ... No one is an infidel in all the ways relating to God ... Each of His creatures worships Him and knows Him in a certain way and is ignorant of Him in others. Error does not exist in this world except in a relative manner..."

I had received this statement on a scrap of paper brought to me eagerly by a Benedictine Sister living in the Centre Culturel Glycines in Algiers as I was finishing research for the publication of "The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria" (St. Martin's Press, 2002). She told me that she had kept a copy of it on her bedside table and was told that a certain American writer was interested in learning more about Emir Abdelkader.

Thanks to this unexpected gift, I understood that the emir had mentally removed all those certitudes that had made me allergi-

ated comprehension.

On that day, Abdelkader al-Jilani shot an arrow into my heart.

Beginning as neither a denier nor a true believer, over the years I have witnessed how the emir's spiritual humility can win the hearts of non-believers, agnostics and even atheists. Why? He professes no exclusive ownership of Truth and no animosity toward other religions, which he sees not as threats, but only as different paths. The emir says it simply, "The forms of worship may differ, but the Master is One." 

John W. Kiser of the William & Mary Greve Foundation is the author of "Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria" (St. Martin's Press) and "Commander of the Faithful: A Story of True Jihad" (Monkfish Book Pub. Co., Inc.).

Advertising Material


Attorney Ismail Laher
Helping Healthcare Providers Deal with Audits, Investigations & Compliance.

Our team has Attorneys who are Certified Coders, Billers, Compliance Officers & Former Federal Prosecutors.

Offering Guidance On Complex Matters, Serious Issues & Major Injuries

Liles Parker, PLLC
2121 Wisconsin Ave., NW, #200,
Washington, DC 20007
(202) 596-7963 (d)
www.lilesparker.com

Sign up for our FREE webinars and newsletters (202) 298-8750 (e)



"Mr. Laher is, ex Jones Day, Harvard & Georgetown grad"
We are available to speak at your next event