

Embodying Sufi Principles in Action: Ibn Arabi's Spiritual Legacy and Emir Abdelkader as a Practical Model of Peace

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Abstract. Sheikh Muhyiddin ibn Arabi of Andalusia and Prince Abdelkader of Algeria are two figures who embodied the principles of Islam in religious tolerance and built the edifice of peaceful coexistence. Although separated by time, they are united by spiritual experience. Scholars agree that Prince Abdelkader is the legitimate heir of Ibn Arabi in the sciences of spiritual taste (“dhawq”), as he learned from his master's books and followed his example in pursuing the paths of truth, revealing the veils, and rising in the ranks of spiritual realization. This study examines the intellectual and spiritual relationship between Ibn Arabi and Emir Abdelkader, exploring how Sufi principles of love, tolerance, and ethical responsibility were translated into practical action. Through an analytical-descriptive methodology, the research demonstrates that Ibn Arabi provided the philosophical and metaphysical framework for peaceful coexistence through his doctrines of “wahdat al-wujūd” (Unity of Being) and “al-insān al-kāmil” (the Perfect Human), while Emir Abdelkader embodied these principles as a statesman, military leader, humanitarian, and spiritual exemplar. His protection of civilians, humane treatment of prisoners, and intervention to prevent massacres during the Damascus crisis of 1860 exemplify how metaphysical principles can guide practical ethical action. The study concludes that the union of these two figures reveals the inseparability of theory and practice in the Sufi conception of peace, offering an enduring model for interfaith harmony and ethical leadership in pluralistic societies.

Keywords: Ibn Arabi al-Andalusian, prince Abdelkader, sufism; peaceful coexistence, religious tolerance / spiritual tolerance

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Sufi prinsiplərinin fəaliyyətdə təcəssümü: İbn Ərəbinin Mənəvi İrsi və Əmir Əbdülqadir sülhün praktik modeli kimi

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Xülasə. Əndəluslu Şeyx Mühiddin ibn Ərəbi və Əlcəzairli Əmir Əbdülqadir dini tolerantlıqda İslam prinsiplərini təcəssüm etdirən və dinc birgəyaşayış binasını ucaldan iki şəxsiyyətdir. Zaman baxımından ayrılıqlar da, mənəvi təcrübə baxımından birləşirlər. Alimlər razılaşırlar ki, Əmir Əbdülqadir zövq elmlərində İbn Ərəbinin qanuni varisidir, belə ki, o, ustadının kitablarından öyrənmiş və həqiqət yollarını izləməkdə, pərdələri açmaqda və mənəvi dərəcələrdə yüksəlməkdə onun nümunəsini ardıcıl olaraq təqib etmişdir.

Bu tədqiqat İbn Ərəbi ilə Əmir Əbdülqadir arasındakı intellektual və mənəvi əlaqəni araşdırır, təsəvvüfdə məhəbbət, tolerantlıq və əxlaqi məsuliyyət prinsiplərinin praktiki fəaliyyətə necə çevrildiyini öyrənir. Analitik-təsviri Metodlar vasitəsilə tədqiqat göstərir ki, İbn Ərəbi özünün "vəhdətül-vücut" (Varlığın Birliyi) və "əl-insanül-kamil" (Kamil İnsan) doktrinləri ilə dinc birləşmə üçün fəlsəfi və metafiziki çərçivə təqdim etmişdir. Əmir Əbdülqadir isə dövlət xadimi, hərbi lider, humanitar və mənəvi örnək kimi bu prinsipləri təcəssüm etdirmişdir. Onun mülki şəxsləri qoruması, hərbi əsirlərə insani rəftar etməsi və 1860-cı il Dəməşq böhranı zamanı qırğınların qarşısını alması metafizik prinsiplərin praktiki əxlaqi fəaliyyətə necə rəhbərlik edə biləcəyini nümunə göstərir. Tədqiqat belə nəticəyə gəlir ki, bu iki şəxsiyyətin birliyi təsəvvüfdə sülh anlayışının nəzəriyyə və təcrübənin ayrılmazlığını ortaya qoyur və plüralist cəmiyyətlərdə dinlərarası harmoniya və əxlaqi rəhbərlik üçün davamlı bir model təklif edir.

Açar sözlər: Əndəlüslü İbn Ərəbi, Əmir Əbdülqadir, təsəvvüf, dinc birləşmə, dini tolerantlıq / mənəvi tolerantlıq

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Introduction

Emir Abdelkader of Algeria is considered the legitimate heir of the great Andalusian Sufi, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, in the spiritual journey grounded in ethical principles. The path begins with undertaking spiritual struggle, eradicating blameworthy traits, severing all distractions, and turning with utmost sincerity toward God. When God takes charge of the heart, mercy overflows upon it. This path encompasses embracing coexistence with others in peace.

Sufism has long represented a unique spiritual experience in the Islamic world, one that extends beyond individual purification and ascension toward ethical perfection to encompass broader societal and humanistic dimensions. The Sufi perspective emphasizes the value of human beings and recognizes diversity in beliefs, cultures, and traditions as opportunities for enrichment rather than sources of conflict. Across history, Sufi thought has played a pivotal role in establishing cultures of peace, tolerance, and mutual respect among communities, particularly in multiethnic and multireligious contexts.

The Andalusian society offers a remarkable historical example of this phenomenon. Its strategic location as a bridge between Africa and Europe attracted waves of populations with diverse origins and faiths, including Arabs, Berbers, Slavs, as well as indigenous populations who had converted to Islam or remained Christian, Jewish, or otherwise, living under the protection of the dhimma. These various groups were integrated into a unique social fabric, creating one of humanity's most enduring legacies of scientific, intellectual, and literary civilization.

The Qur'an emphasizes respect for all humans: "O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women" (Qur'an, 4:1). Freedom of belief was also guaranteed: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an, 2: 256). Such principles enabled Arab conquerors to preserve religious freedom for indigenous populations.

Research Problem: How can the spiritual legacy of Ibn Arabi and its embodiment by Emir Abdelkader inform contemporary understanding of peaceful coexistence and leadership grounded in Sufi ethical principles? **Research Aim:** To examine the intellectual and spiritual relationship between Ibn Arabi and Emir Abdelkader, and to demonstrate how Sufi principles of tolerance, love, and ethical responsibility can be translated into practical action for peacebuilding and interfaith harmony.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative, analytical-descriptive methodology grounded in historical and textual analysis. The research examines primary and secondary sources related to the lives, teachings, and practices of Ibn Arabi (560-638 AH / 1165-1240 CE) and Emir Abdelkader (1807-1883 CE).

Data sources include:

1. Primary texts: Ibn Arabi's major works including "Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya", "Fusus al-Hikam", "Tarjuman al-Ashwaq", and his poetry on love and religious tolerance. Emir Abdelkader's writings including "Dhikra al-Aqil" and "Tanbih al-Ghafil".
2. Secondary sources: Scholarly analyses by Claude Addas, William Chittick, Carl Ernst, Ahmed Bouyerdene, John Kiser, and Charles Henry Churchill, as well as historical records of Andalusian society and 19th-century Algerian resistance.
3. Historical documents: Accounts of peaceful coexistence in Al-Andalus, records of Emir Abdelkader's military campaigns and humanitarian interventions, and documentation of his imprisonment and later life in Damascus.

Analytical framework: The study applies a comparative thematic analysis, examining four interconnected dimensions: a) the concept of peaceful coexistence in Islamic Sufism; b) Ibn Arabi's philosophy of love and religious pluralism; c) Emir Abdelkader's formation and embodiment of Sufi principles; and d) the translation of metaphysical concepts into practical leadership and humanitarian action.

Results

1. *The Culture of Peace in Islamic Sufism*

The study found that one of the central tenets of Islamic Sufism (Tasawwuf) is the cultivation of inner and outer peace, extending beyond the individual to society at large. Sufi teachings emphasize that purification of the heart, ethical refinement, and development of divine love (maḥabba) are fundamental prerequisites for establishing harmonious relations among human beings (Chittick, 1989). The Sufi path encourages practitioners to transcend egoistic desires, which are often the source of conflict, and to embody compassion, tolerance, and patience in daily interactions (Ernst, 1997).

Sufi metaphysics promotes the principle of universal interconnectedness, whereby all creatures are seen as manifestations of the divine presence, fostering deep empathy and responsibility toward others regardless of faith, ethnicity, or social status (Cornell, 2007). Historically, Sufi orders engaged in social initiatives such as mediating disputes, hosting travelers, and assisting marginalized communities, demonstrating that spiritual cultivation and social responsibility are inseparable (Trimingham, 1998).

2. *Ibn Arabi's Representation of Peaceful Coexistence*

The analysis revealed that Ibn Arabi distinguished himself as exceptionally erudite, mastering both religious and intellectual traditions. His literary output exceeds 800 works, including "Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya", "Fusus al-Hikam", "Mahiyat al-Qalb", and "Tarjuman al-Ashwaq".

Central to Ibn Arabi's teaching is the concept of the heart as the seat of emotions, inclinations, and divine manifestations. Through purification and spiritual discipline, the heart becomes receptive to divine light and capable of embracing all of God's creation. His famous poem declares:

> "Before today, I rejected my companion if his religion differed from mine...

> My heart has become receptive to every form, a meadow for gazelles, a monastery for monks, a house for idols, a Kaaba for the pilgrims, the tablets of Torah, and the Qur'an. I follow the religion of love wherever its creatures turn; love is my faith and my belief" (Ibn Arabi, 2005, p. 62).

The refined heart perceives only mercy, reflected in a love encompassing all peoples: a monastery for Christians, a house for idols, a Kaaba for Muslims, Torah tablets for Jews—humanity and peaceful coexistence uniting all.

3. *Emir Abdelkader: Formation and Spiritual Heritage*

Emir Abdelkader ibn Muhyiddin al-Hasani was born in 1807 or 1808, growing up within a “zawiya” that functioned as a cultural center and social hub. Following a pilgrimage to Mecca with his father, he devoted himself to books, immersing in the works of Plato, Vitruvius, Aristotle, and prominent Islamic scholars, covering history, philosophy, language, astronomy, geography, and medicine. He deepened his knowledge of Sufism through the works of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi.

After the colonial invasion of Algeria, he was proclaimed Emir on 4 February 1833 to lead the jihad. He achieved several decisive victories, including the Battle of Macta, which led to the removal of French commanders. On 23 December 1847, he surrendered under terms agreed upon with the French commander Lamoricière. After imprisonment in France, he was freed by Napoleon III and eventually settled in Damascus in 1855, where he devoted himself to study, Sufism, jurisprudence, Hadith, and Qur'anic exegesis. He passed away on 26 May 1883 and was interred beside the tomb of Ibn Arabi.

4. *Influence of Ibn Arabi on Emir Abdelkader*

The analysis demonstrated that Ibn Arabi's concept of “al-insān al-kāmil” (the Perfect Human) and the notion that divine love encompasses all creation resonated deeply with Emir Abdelkader, inspiring his inclusive approach to governance, interfaith relations, and humanitarian action (Ernst, 1997; Kiser, 2008). The Emir's commitment to protecting civilians, treating prisoners of war with dignity, and promoting religious tolerance directly reflects Ibn Arabi's ethical vision, which emphasizes empathy, universal responsibility, and the transcendence of sectarian divisions (Chittick, 1994).

Ibn Arabi's extensive literary and philosophical corpus provided Emir Abdelkader with a framework for integrating spiritual cultivation with practical action. The Emir's ethical rigor, combined with strategic and diplomatic acumen, demonstrates how Sufi metaphysical concepts can be actualized in the temporal realm (Bouyerdene, 2012; Morris, 2005).

5. Emir Abdelkader as an Icon of Peace

The study found that Emir Abdelkader's legacy is multidimensional:

Dimension	Manifestation
Statesman and military leader	United disparate tribal groups, achieved victories including the Battle of Macta, demonstrated strategic brilliance and ethical diplomacy
Humanitarian vision	Sheltered approximately fifteen thousand individuals during Damascus civil unrest (1860), protected prisoners of war, allowed freedom of religious practice
Scholar and philosopher	Authored <i>Dhikra al-'Aqil</i> and <i>Tanbih al-Ghafil</i> , fluent in multiple languages, well-versed in philosophy, theology, and sciences
Moral and spiritual exemplar	Internalized Ibn Arabi's vision of <i>al-insān al-kāmil</i> , promoted interfaith harmony and ethical governance

His heroic humanity earned global recognition including France's Legion of Honor, Russia's Order of the White Eagle, Prussia's Order of the Black Eagle, Turkey's Order of the Medjidie, and gifts from England and the United States (Churchill, 1994, p. 287). During the 1860 Damascus crisis between Druze and Christians, he sheltered approximately fifteen thousand individuals, using his homes as sanctuaries, exemplifying Sufi-inspired compassion (Merabet, 2007).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Ibn Arabi and Emir Abdelkader together exemplify a profound synthesis of spiritual insight and ethical action, demonstrating that cultivation of the heart and pursuit of justice are inseparable. Ibn Arabi as theoretician: The Andalusian mystic provided a philosophical and metaphysical framework for understanding the human condition and the ethical imperatives of coexistence. Through his doctrine of "wahdat al-wujūd" (Unity of Being) and the concept of "al-insān al-kāmil" (the Perfect Human), he emphasized that true knowledge of God manifests in love, mercy, and recognition of all creation as interconnected reflections of the Divine. Spiritual struggle (jihād al-nafs), purification of the heart, and refinement of ethical sensibilities are prerequisites for embracing humanity's diversity without prejudice or enmity. He envisioned a heart illuminated by divine light becoming a sanctuary for all peoples, all faiths, and all expressions of human dignity. Emir Abdelkader as practitioner: Inspired by this spiritual heritage, Emir Abdelkader translated these principles into concrete, transformative action in socio-political and humanitarian spheres. While Ibn Arabi offered the compass of inner vision, Abdelkader became the mapmaker of real-world application. Confronted with colonial aggression, inter-communal conflict, and political instability, he implemented the Sufi vision of love, mercy, and ethical responsibility. His protection of civilians, humane treatment of prisoners, and intervention to prevent massacres during the Damascus crisis of 1860 exemplify how metaphysical principles can guide practical decisions in the temporal world. Theoretical and practical inseparability: The union of these two figures—one as theoretician, the other as practitioner—reveals the inseparability of theory and practice in the Sufi conception of peace. Ibn Arabi provides the ethical and spiritual horizon, showing that love and empathy are not optional but