



## Co-Existence Of Civilisations And Its Human Dimension In “The Prince: Paths Of The Iron Gates” By Waciny Laredj

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**Received: 20/11/2024**

**Accepted: 10/01/2025**

**Published: 31/03/2025**

### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the theme of cultural and civilisational dialogue, exemplified by a deep interaction between Islam and Christianity. The central figures are Prince “Abdelkader Ibn Muhieddine Al-Jazairi” and Bishop “Antoine Adolphe Debuch”, who shared a love for Algeria, faced the betrayal of friends and experienced the bitterness of exile alongside the longing to return home. Bishop Debuch’s belief in the Prince’s cause and his conviction that justice transcends religions led him to defend him passionately and to work for his release. This human dimension is evident in the introductory part of the first chapter of “The Prince: Paths of the Iron Gates” by Waciny Laredj, especially in the chapter on the initial difficulties. The prince’s positions, great tolerance and acceptance of the other are highlighted in various parts of the work, which we will try to trace in this article.

**Keywords:** Coexistence, dialogue, civilisations, the prince, Waciny Laredj.

### **Introduction:**

The concept of civilizational coexistence and dialogue among religions and cultures has recently become a trend embraced by many worldwide. Numerous conferences have been held, and articles written on the subject. However, this has never been a mere novelty in our civilisation; as Ahmed Al-Bashir Al-Ibrahimi stated, we are “advocates of dialogue, not based on temporary positions or responses to temporary circumstances, but because the principles of our faith demand it, embodying the unity of the human species and reinforcing the principle of human equality in creation”<sup>1</sup>. This concept promotes cooperation that ensures the happiness and well-being of all, without discrimination based on colour, sex or creed, while fostering coexistence in peace, justice and tolerance.

A century and a half ago, Prince “Abdelkader Ibn Muhieddine Al-Jazairi” championed human rights and interfaith dialogue, establishing a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence even in times of war. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Prince “Abdelkader” is a rare model in his awareness and correct understanding of civilisation, which is not aligned with conflict; for conflict leads to destruction and bloodshed, while civilisation aims at construction and peace. In this essay, we try to reveal this aspect of the Prince’s personality - the human dimension that earned him the admiration of both friends and enemies. This aspect is explored by the novelist “Waciny Laredj” in “The Prince: Paths of the Iron Gates”, in which he defends the Prince from the historical distortions and misunderstandings that have befallen him. Although Bishop “Debuch”, the first French priest in Algeria, admired the Prince’s character and tried to persuade him to convert to Christianity, their

numerous dialogues and closeness allowed their exchanges to go beyond mere religious competition.

This is the basis of our research question: How are the manifestations of civilisational coexistence represented in “The Prince”? What are its human dimensions?

“The Prince: The story of an exceptional man

“The Prince” presents exceptional moments from the life of Prince “Abdelkader Ibn Muhieddine Al-Jazairi”, beginning with his resistance to the French occupation and his loyalty, a reality he did not choose, as he had always been passionate about books. The narrative explores his relationship with others through two facets: the violent confrontational aspect, represented by the image of the leader of the resistance against colonialism, and the emotional human aspect, exemplified by the friendship between Prince “Abdelkader” and the exceptional French Christian religious figure, Bishop “Antoine Adolphe Debuch”, the first bishop of Algeria from 1838 to 1846, among other notable figures.

The novel also highlights the pain and disappointment of the exiled prince, who was forced to fight on several fronts due to repeated betrayals by both close and distant allies, which exhausted his strength and led to his capitulation and decision to go into exile.

The narrative begins with a poignant scene that embodies a significant moment of loyalty, in which “John Mobi”, the companion of Bishop Debuch, dedicates himself to fulfilling his master’s last wish, to throw wreaths of flowers and earth from Bordeaux, eight years after the bishop’s death. This narrative device allows the author to reveal the deep bond between the prince and Bishop Debuch, with whom he had conversed and who “loved him before seeing him”. Debuch tried to secure the release of the prince after he had signed a conditional surrender agreement providing for his transfer to an Islamic country, only to find himself exiled and imprisoned first in the “Henri IV” palace and then in the “Amboise” palace after a coup d’état and the abandonment of all the promises made to him by the officials<sup>2</sup>.

The Prince had to wait five years for his release from prison. When “Napoleon Bonaparte” came to power, he issued a decree to fulfil all the promises made to the Prince, with the considerable help of Bishop Debuch, who wrote a long letter to Napoleon. This letter served as a real defence, revealing the truth and qualities of the prince and exonerating him from the accusations against him. “John Mobi” states: “He was bound to this country and defended it fiercely, defending its great man, the Prince, as one defends a holy book. He fought for him to the point of staking his life on his release... The Prince was his means of attaining the ultimate love”<sup>3</sup>. Together, the Prince and Bishop Debuch formed a paradigm based on tolerance and dialogue, which led to the acceptance of and coexistence with other people.

### **Manifestations of Civilizational Coexistence in “The Prince: Paths of the Iron Gates”**

Cultural dialogue serves as an entry point for civilisational communication and is an important aspect of coexistence. Civilizational communication involves “building bridges between cultures and civilisations by strengthening the ties that bind peoples together”<sup>4</sup>. This means that communication essentially takes place between individuals and groups through the exchange of ideas, the discussion of opinions, and the joint search for solutions to the problems facing nations and peoples. Dialogue is the means and coexistence is the result.

The characters of “Prince Abdelkader”, “Bishop Debuch”, “Napoleon Bonaparte” and the former consul in Algeria, “Dumas”, embody positions with profound human dimensions that the novelist “Waciny Laredj” highlights in “The Prince: Paths of the Iron Gates”. Prince “Abdelkader” understood the concept of coexistence between civilisations and adopted cultural dialogue as both a means and an end, which earned him the respect of his adversary whom he fought for almost fifteen years.

Bishop Debuch comments: "I spent many days under his hospitable roof, in rare intimacy with the most intelligent prisoner known to the palace. I believe that I know Abdelkader better than anyone else and that today I can testify to the truth... If all the French knew Abdelkader as I know him, they would have long since vindicated him. That is why I consider it my human duty to do something while waiting for the opportunity to do something more important"<sup>5</sup>.

This perspective highlights the potential for understanding and respect across cultures, showing that true coexistence is rooted in meaningful dialogue and mutual recognition.

The prince and Bishop Debuch shared nobility in their morals and humanity, and both came into this world at the wrong time—a time of greed, selfishness, and betrayals. The greed of creditors demanding the money that the bishop spent on charitable works, his threat of imprisonment, and his escape from Algeria. Continuous betrayals pursued the prince while he devoted his life to dreaming of uniting the tribes, liberating from colonialism, and building a modern state. The bishop gained nothing but greed and avarice, and the prince harvested only disappointments and the bitterness of betrayal. He expressed his pain by saying, "I too, Monsignor, have not escaped the injustice of relatives. Those I placed at the top have denied me, and those I trusted have betrayed me. More than that, they denounce me. Denunciation is extremely difficult and important. They accuse me of shirking jihad, and do they know what it means to struggle? When we face the vehicle and the war machine. God has given us reason to preserve ourselves and the lives of others."<sup>6</sup> This was the prince's response, which the novelist intended to silence the voices that either questioned the prince's integrity and accused him of loyalty to France or those that accused him of cowardice and negligence.

The Prince and Bishop Debuch loved and cherished Algeria, each having experienced the loss of freedom and homeland, the bitterness of exile and the hope of returning to the warmth of the land and the scent of memories. John Mobi recalls Bishop Debuch's promise: "I wish that God would give me another life to serve this land that was taken from me at an early age. I will give it the remains of my body if the ashes of my soil can silence resentment and awaken the sense of light and love in the hearts of the people"<sup>7</sup>. Little did the Monsignor know that he was making a promise to himself that would bind him until the day he died. The prince suffered in his exile and confided his pain to Bishop Debuch: "Monsignor, you are the master of knowledge; nothing can compare with freedom. If I had to choose between a palace in chains and hunger as a free man, I would prefer to starve and remain a free man"<sup>8</sup>. What led to the harmony between these two characters, despite their cultural and ideological differences? What made the prince trust Bishop Debuch and share his hopes and pains with him?

Accepting the other, with its cultural and ideological differences, means transcending individual selfishness and broadening one's intellectual and cultural framework. It requires looking at the other objectively, free from any prejudice, as Bishop Debuch points out: "Do you know, John, that every time I look at this man, my love for him and his morals grows? Selfishness can sometimes be harmful. At first, I wanted him to be a Christian, to be raised as a brother and to be taught our teachings so that he could spread them among his people. But as time went by, I realised that this man, who is like us in every way, could only be himself, a man who loves everything that brings mankind closer to love and to God"<sup>9</sup>. He acknowledges the strong affection he has for the Prince: "You have all the love that brings us closer together. Even when we differ, our souls rest in the same great divine truth"<sup>10</sup>. The Prince expressed this by saying, "Religion is one; if Muslims and Christians paid attention to it, we could overcome our different points of view and become brothers inside and out"<sup>11</sup>.

The novel features long dialogues between Bishop Debuch, representing Christianity, and Prince Abdelkader, a Muslim, in which many issues are discussed without falling into the trap of fanaticism. The main objective was to discover and understand the other. Through dialogue, the two voices overlapped, bringing together their perspectives and positions on major issues affecting humanity. In this way, the relationship between the Prince and Bishop Debuch was an example of coexistence and integration between the self and the other, Muslim and Christian, not only in religious terms, but on a wider and deeper level - total integration in humanitarian matters.

Bishop Debuch was emotionally united with the Prince during the most difficult moments he experienced (exile and imprisonment) and their thoughts overlapped. Bishop Debuch said: "I do not believe that we have reached this point, O noble Sultan, otherwise we would not speak of a being called humanity. Humanity, oh Sir Abdelkader, is a merit and not an easy inheritance"<sup>12</sup>. The prince confirmed this view: "You are right. Merit requires constant effort to achieve. Our religion says the same thing. A person spends his whole life trying to affirm his humanity, because everything around him is full of pitfalls that he must avoid with nobility and self-respect"<sup>13</sup>. The dialogue contributed to the intimacy and closeness between the two characters and their respect for each other's cultural and ideological differences, which represents the highest degree of coexistence and civilisational progress.

The prince understood the meaning of tolerance and its benefits, and embodied it in his actions to earn the respect of all who knew him and to save their lives. The story describes a scene in which the prince receives Commander Corbi de Conior, a prisoner of the battle of Sidi Ibrahim who became a general and escaped certain death only with the help of Lalla Zahra, the prince's mother<sup>14</sup>. He led a group of former prisoners who had come specifically to visit the Prince and thank him for what he had done for them, followed by women whose husbands or family members the Prince had saved from certain death during the harsh days of the Algerian war<sup>15</sup>.

This great tolerance of an extraordinary character and his infinite willingness to accept others with their differences is confirmed by the narrative and has already been confirmed by historical texts. One of the most remarkable examples of the prince's nobility is his humanitarian attitude towards prisoners, whom he took care of and treated well before returning them to their families. These people saved him in the battle of Khaneqan, where he almost lost his life<sup>16</sup>, as well as his attitude towards Christians and Jews and his support for the Christians during the Syrian revolt in 1860. How could he not, since he was the one who established his state in cooperation with Muslims and others? He appointed the Jewish Miloud Ben Araach as foreign minister - despite the sensitivity of the position - and defended his choice by saying: "We have not seen anything from him that harms us. As for his being Jewish, we have sometimes found more good in Jews and Christians than among ourselves"<sup>17</sup>.

Such attitudes earned him the admiration and respect of senior leaders, who praised his qualities and great tolerance. Colonel Eugène Dumas told Bishop Debuch: "You will find him serene in his solitude, forgiving even those who have caused him great suffering, be they Muslims or Christians, attributing it all to the harsh circumstances that suddenly affect individuals and groups. By visiting this noble and exceptional man, you will add a new humanitarian endeavour to what has already enriched your life"<sup>18</sup>.

Captain de Saint-Hippolyte expressed his admiration for the Prince, whom he described as an extraordinary figure: "The Prince is an amazing man. He is in a moral position that we in Europe do not quite understand. He is ascetic about worldly matters and believes he has a mission from God to protect his subjects. His dream is not to gain fame, and personal ambition is not among his concerns;

the love of money is not important to him. He is bound to the earth only by what God dictates to him; he is His instrument”<sup>19</sup>.

The Prince deserved this recognition for his humanitarian efforts and positions. He leaned towards peace and forgiveness even in the most difficult situations to avoid bloodshed. He sought peace and despised war, even when in a position of victory. He worked assiduously to maintain the armistice and the agreement reached with Dumas. He declared: “I would risk my life and my head to be faithful to our obligations. I know the rights of friendship; this is a debt that will remain on my shoulders. He who initiates the good is always ahead of those who lag behind, but if they lean towards something else, we have no choice, God is the triumphant one”<sup>20</sup>.

In a poignant scene, after winning one of the battles against Trézel, he added: “We won the war, but they forced us to lose the battle for peace. I feel like I have buried a dear friend”<sup>21</sup>.

He also understood the teachings of his religion and the conditions for successful dialogue with others, earning the respect of all who knew him and realised that his inclination towards peace was never a sign of weakness or cowardice, but rather influenced by Islamic teachings. This perspective is expressed in the novel through the Prince’s words: “Islam does not ask a man to be a warrior in order to become a fighter; rather, it asks him to be a warrior in order to become a complete human being”<sup>22</sup>. He was convinced that “Jihad is not carrying a sword and waving it in the face of the first person you meet; Jihad is carrying a sword when the paths of peace are before you”<sup>23</sup>. The prince always despised war and considered it a crime against humanity, even in the defence of a just cause. Through the character of the prince, Waciny highlights the openness of the Algerian cultural system and its great awareness of the changes of the times, an era in which the power of the sword was diminishing in favour of machines and gunpowder. This was a strong reason and motivation for caution and the avoidance of reckless actions. The Prince declared: “We are on the brink of a world on the verge of extinction... and we have no choice but to understand and adapt to its circumstances, or to continue to complain while no one hears our voices, except those to whom we show defeats as constant victories. Jihad has no meaning if it does not guarantee a minimum of instinct for survival, not only for the individual, but for the land and the soil”<sup>24</sup>.

The Prince was characterised by great boldness in self-criticism and criticism of others. He taught Bishop Soucy, and through him Bishop Debuch, a lesson in humanity when he reminded him that virtues are indivisible. Those who want to free French prisoners and alleviate their suffering should do the same for Algerian prisoners in French jails. How noble it was when, despite his deep discomfort, he stood before the painting of Horace Vernet and addressed the participants with a lesson in the ethics of war: “Why do you only paint the victories and forget to paint the places where your troops were defeated? How wonderful it would be if it were accompanied by reason and you showed everything in its balance. No nation always wins, and no leader is ever undefeated”<sup>25</sup>.

The reader of the novel, faced with this outpouring of human emotion between an oppressive enemy and a resistant leader who ended his military career, chose exile and signed an agreement to remain outside Algeria, may wonder about the authenticity of these feelings and their realism. The author seems to anticipate the reader’s reaction, attributing it to the nature of his characters. Bishop Debuch expresses his admiration for the prince: “It is not easy to speak of one’s enemy with tolerance and respect. The Prince seems to be of a different kind”<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, Bishop Debuch confirmed that the Prince was of a different calibre, appreciated their friendship and took up his cause. He tried to convince Napoleon of the need for France to fulfil its promises and commitments to this man in order to maintain its status and dignity.

Admiration for positions is enough to build bridges of communication and overcome any sensitivities that may arise between individuals, putting aside grudges. The Prince says: “True

leaders are known in times of great crisis, not in times of peace. Dumas is a great leader. He burned the crops and imprisoned the peasants, but he has not betrayed the ethics of a leader since he signed the treaty with us"<sup>27</sup>. He adds, justifying his actions by the demands of the war: "I respect this man, I even revere him, and perhaps he is one of the few who has chosen peace over war. But in such harsh conditions, the law of arms and death prevailed. If Dumas had won, everything in the country would have changed and we would have shortened many years of darkness and blood"<sup>28</sup>.

Is it possible for two enemies who have fought each other at arms to become friends, to the point where their resentments are forgotten and they exchange gifts? This is a legitimate question, and the prince explains his reasons: "I thought I did not deserve all this honour from you, I who have been a stubborn opponent of your armies and your leaders for a long time. I accept this gift because the admiration I feel today and the great friendship have given me the opportunity to discover your glorious history at close quarters"<sup>29</sup>. Dialogue served as a means of communication and then acceptance of the other, because it is not easy to admire or earn the respect of your enemy (the other) if there is no channel of dialogue between you, because the other always needs to understand your customs, values and ethics.

## **Conclusion**

To describe the Prince as a "friend of France" has a negative connotation. How can you befriend an enemy who occupied your country and caused your exile? This accusation has followed both the Prince and the narrative, especially as this friendship is depicted in various situations. However, what we observe is that "Waciny Laaraj" successfully conveys the justifications and motivations for this friendship through the characters in the novel, making the issue seem acceptable and logical. He attributes this to the nature and logic of war, which imposes its own rules on everyone, suggesting that reconciliation and forgetting grudges is possible if the right intentions and circumstances are present.

The author also shows that the prince did not surrender willingly; he chose to sign a document promising never to return to Algeria because of the immense bitterness he felt and the surrounding circumstances, both internal and external. These included the betrayal by the Moroccan Sultan and the French colonialists, as well as tribal conflicts and the divided collective identity between supporters and opponents of his struggle against the colonial forces, compounded by a series of betrayals by those closest to him. This made continued resistance seem like a gamble in the face of French military might.

This novel therefore defends the exiled prince and seeks to vindicate him. It is an attempt to overturn and expose the notion of colonial evil embodied in the characters of Bishop Debusch, Napoleon and Dumas.

## **Footnotes:**

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3- The Novel, p. 14.

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5- The Novel, p. 20.

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- 6- The Novel, p. 214.
  - 7- The Novel, p. 15.
  - 8- The Novel, p. 480.
  - 9- The Novel, p. 218.
  - 10- The Novel, p. 43.
  - 11- Abdel Qader Al-Jazaïri: Bruno Etienne, translated by Michel Khoury, Dar Al-Farabi, Algeria, 2nd edition, 2012.
  - 12- The Novel, p. 126.
  - 13- The Novel, p. 126.
  - 14- The Novel, p. 511.
  - 15- The Novel, p. 439.
  - 16- See Mohammed Bouijra: Abdel Qader, Pioneer of Modern Arabic Poetry, Dar Al-Quds Al-Arabi, 3rd edition, p. 150.
  - 17- The Novel, p. 180.
  - 18- The Novel, p. 41.
  - 19- The Novel, p. 130.
  - 20- The Novel, p. 115.
  - 21- The Novel, p. 147.
  - 22- The Novel, p. 45.
  - 23- The Novel, p. 214.
  - 24- The Novel, p. 196.
  - 25- The Novel, p. 513.
  - 26- The Novel, p. 90.
  - 27- The Novel, p. 102.
  - 28- The Novel, p. 131.
  - 29- The Novel, p. 528.