



## ABU'L-ḤASAN EŞFAHĀNĪ

**ABU'L-ḤASAN EŞFAHĀNĪ**, ĀYATALLĀH (1284-1365/1867-1946), an Iranian *mojtahed* who was a leading religious authority in the Shi'ite world for more than thirty years. He was born in a village near Isfahan into a family of Behbahānī origin that had traditionally produced religious scholars. His grandfather, Sayyed 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd, had been a prominent student of Shaikh Mūsā b. Ja'far Kāšef-al-ġeṭā' early in the 19th century. After his elementary education, he moved from his native village to Isfahan, completing there the *soṭūḥ* and *dars-e kārej* stages of the traditional *madrassa* curriculum. His major teacher in Isfahan was Shaikh Moḥammad Kāšī (or Kāšānī), a master of philosophy and mathematics as well as the religious sciences. In either 1307/1889-90 or 1308/1890-91, Eşfahānī went to Naǰaf, where he joined the circle of one of the principal *mojtaheds* of the day, Mīrzā Ḥabīballāh Raštī, pursuing the study of *feqh* under his guidance until the latter's death in 1312/1894. He then became one of the closest associates of the celebrated [Āḳvond Mollā Moḥammad Kāzem Ḳorāsānī](#), assisting him in both his scholarly and political activities until he passed away in 1329/1911. Thereupon Eşfahānī became a religious authority in his own right, although for many years he shared the position of leadership with another student of the late Ḳorāsānī, Mīrzā Ḥosayn Nā'inī (q.v.), and an Iraqi *mojtahed*, Shaikh Aḥmad Kāšef-al-ġeṭā'. Shaikh Aḥmad passed away in 1344/1925, and Nā'inī a little more than ten years later; thereafter, until his own death in 1365/1946, Abu'l-Ḥasan was virtually the sole *marǰa'-e taqlīd* (q.v.) of the Shi'ite world, with an extensive following in Iraq, Lebanon, and India, as well as in Iran.



Āyatallāh Eşfahānī exercised a political role of some importance at different stages of his career. As a follower of Āk̄vond Ḳorāsānī, he belonged to the group of Shi'ite 'olamā' that supported the Iranian constitutional movement; and he participated actively in the movement of protest against the Russian invasion of Iran that Ḳorāsānī organized from Kāzemayn in December, 1911. His role was, however, more marked in the militant opposition of the Shi'ite 'olamā' to the imposition on Iraq of the British mandate and the Hashimite monarchy. Early in 1922, Eşfahānī and Nā'inī together invited the major leader of the Iraqi Shi'ites, Shaikh Moḥammad Mahdī Ḳāleṣī, to a meeting in Karbalā in order to coordinate anti-British activity. The meeting resulted in a protest demonstration in Karbalā by about 300,000 people. Soon after, the three religious leaders issued *fatwās* prohibiting participation in the forthcoming elections to the Iraqi constituent assembly. In June, 1923, Ḳāleṣī was deported to the Ḥeḷjāz, and Eşfahānī, together with Nā'inī and a number of other Iranian 'olamā', was constrained to leave for Iran. En route to Tehran, Eşfahānī and his party were enthusiastically received in Kermānšāh, where they exchanged friendly telegrams with Aḥmad Shah and his minister of foreign affairs, Dr. Moḥammad Moşaddeq (then Moşaddeq-al-salṭana). They took up residence in Qom, where Shaikh 'Abd-al-Karīm Ḥā'erī was engaged in restoring the religious teaching institution, and began offering courses in *feqh* at his invitation. Negotiations with King Fayṣal of Iraq made it possible for the deported leaders to return to Naḷaf, but shortly before their departure, on 26 March 1924, they had a meeting in Qom of some significance with Reżā Khan, the later Reżā Shah, who was the minister of war (*sardār-e sepah*) at that time. They asked him to quell rumors of the impending substitution of a republic, under his auspices, for the Qajar dynasty, republicanism being regarded with abhorrence because of its association with secularism it had acquired in neighboring Turkey. Reżā Khan complied soon after, in a telegram he addressed to the 'olamā' of Tehran. In October, 1924, a *fatwā* was published over the signatures of Eşfahānī and Nā'inī declaring obedience to Reżā Khan a religious duty for all Shi'ite Muslims. Since the alleged *fatwā* contains the misquotation of a Koranic verse, doubts have been cast on its authenticity; but neither Eşfahānī nor Nā'inī repudiated it, and it is probable that they agreed with its contents. In any event, after returning to Naḷaf, the two men had a further meeting with Reżā Khan, in which they renewed their support for him. According to one account, their support was conditional on Reżā Khan's implementation of the provision in the constitution that called for the establishment of a supervisory committee of five *mojtaheds* (Moḥammad Ḥerz-al-dīn, *Ma'āref al-rejāl* I, p. 49). There is no record of political activity on



the part of Āyatallāh Eṣfahānī after the establishment of Pahlavi rule.

Much of his time and energy during the last two decades of his life was consumed by the giving of *fatwās* in answer to the numerous requests he received; it has even been estimated that his correspondence with Shi'ites throughout the world accounted for half of the incoming and outgoing mail of Najaf every day (*A'yān al-šī'a* III, p. 50). Possibly the most controversial subject on which he ruled was the traditional self-flagellation and mutilation practiced during Moḥarram. He denounced the custom as impermissible, but found himself in the minority; and such were the passions aroused by the issue that at one point even his physical safety was endangered in Najaf, despite all the prestige he enjoyed.

A vast amount of revenue, deriving from *zakāt* and *koms* payments that totaled as much as 20 or 30,000 Iraqi dinars a month, passed through his hands. Much of the money was spent on providing a bread allowance for students at the *madrasas* of Najaf as well as for the poor throughout Iraq, particularly during the period of near-famine that occurred during the Second World War.

Āyatallāh Eṣfahānī died in Kāzemayn on 9 Du'l-ḥeǰǰa 1365/4 November 1946, and he was buried in Najaf next to his master, Āḳvond Ḳorāsānī. His death occasioned universal mourning throughout the Shi'ite world; in Tehran, the bazaar was kept closed for three days.

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