



# KĀŠEF-AL-ĠEṬĀ', MOḤAMMAD ḤOSAYN

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**KĀŠEF-AL-ĠEṬĀ', MOḤAMMAD ḤOSAYN** B. 'ALI B. REZĀ B. MUSĀ (b. Najaf, 1877; d. Karand, 1954), one of the most illustrious descendants of the great Shi'ite jurist of the early Qajar period, Sheikh [Ja'far Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā'](#) (d. 1227/1812). A prodigious and versatile author, teacher, and lecturer, Moḥammad Ḥosayn Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā' exerted himself steadfastly throughout his life both for the welfare of the Shi'ite community in Iraq and for Sunni-Shi'ite rapprochement and solidarity in the face of Western imperialism.

Born in Najaf in 1294/1877, he benefited from instruction by all the luminaries of the day resident there. With Mirzā Ḥosayn Nuri (d. 1903), he studied Hadith; with Mollā Rezā Hamadāni (d. 1904), *kalām* (theology); with Mirzā Ḥosayn Ḳalili (d. 1908), jurisprudence; and, from 1894 onward, with "the two Kāžems," [Āḳund Moḥammad Kāžem Ḳorāsāni](#) (d. 1329/1911) and Sayyed Moḥammad Kāžem Yazdi (d. 1919), again, jurisprudence. He was particularly attached to the last-named, who towards the end of his life would often refer problems to him for solution. According to Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā's own account, he went beyond the limits of the conventional curriculum by studying the works of Mollā Šadrā and [Ebn 'Arabi](#) and learning Persian well enough to acquaint himself with the writings of Rumi, [Jāmi](#), and Šabestari and to translate into Arabic the *Safar-nāma* of Nāšer-e Ḳosrow (autobiographical note prefaced to his *al-'Abaqāt al-'anbariya*, p. 16).



It was a work of entirely non-traditional nature that marked his entry into the political sphere. The precise title and contents of the book are difficult to discern. According to his own account, it was called *al-Din wa'l-Eslām*, with the subtitle *al-Da'wat al-Eslāmiya elā madḥab al-Emāmiya* (“An Islamic invitation to the Imami School”). The first part had already been published and the preparation of the second was underway when the Ottoman authorities, on the orders of Nāẓem Pasha, governor of Baghdad, raided the Dār al-Salām printing press and confiscated all copies of both parts (autobiographical note prefaced to his *al-'Abaqāt al-'anbariya*, p. 16). Other sources give the title as *al-Din wa'l-Eslām aw al-Da'wat al-Eslāmiya*, with the crucial mention of the Imāmi [= Shi'ite] school omitted (Nakash, p. 54; Naef, p. 59). If the original title of the book was indeed that mentioned by Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' himself, it is perhaps understandable that the Ottoman authorities should have found it objectionable, even though for Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā'—like others after him—conveying an accurate understanding of Shi'ism was essential to Sunni-Shi'ite rapprochement. It is also possible that after the misadventure in Baghdad, he modified the title and perhaps even the contents when he had the work published outside of Iraq. The gist of the book is said to be that Muslims should overcome their divisions in the face of the political and cultural threat posed by Europe, and that the scholars in particular should extend their aid to the “just ruler”—by whom, under the circumstances, the Ottoman sultan must be intended (Nakash, pp. 54, 60).

In 1911, Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' went on the Hajj, traveling by mule from Kāẓemiya to Damascus and then on by train to Medina. Instead of returning to Iraq immediately after performing the pilgrimage, he spent a total of three years in Damascus, Beirut, Sidon, and Cairo, making the acquaintance of a number of scholars, Sunni and Shi'ite alike, as well as Amin al-Rayḥāni, a Maronite proponent of Arab nationalism. In Cairo, he met with Salim al-Beşri, the rector of the Azhar, discussing with him in friendly fashion the salient differences between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam, particularly with respect to matters of law. Less harmonious were the debates Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' held with the Christian missionaries who gathered every night at an American church in Cairo: he put into writing the arguments he made in refutation of the trinity and the crucifixion in a short book, *Tawẓiḥ fi bayān mā howa al-Enjil wa mā howa al-Masiḥ*. Especially important during his threeyear absence from Iraq was a sojourn in Sidon. Two years before his arrival there, a local Shi'ite scholar, Aḥmad 'Āref al-Zayn, had established a publishing house called al-'Erfān, which published a journal of the same name. He agreed to print Kāşef-al-



Ġeṭā's *al-Din wa'l-Eslām*, and Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā' thereafter contributed regularly to the journal, as well as marrying a cousin of its publisher.

In late 1913, shortly before the outbreak of World War I, Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā' returned to Najaf. In common with other Shi'ite scholars, he regarded the defense of Ottoman Iraq against the British to be an instance of *jehād* ( jihad, on which, see [ISLAM IN IRAN xi](#)), and in 1917 he went to Kut al-'Amāra to participate in person in the attempt to ward off an advancing British force; he was accompanied by, among others, Sayyed Moḥammad Yazdi, son of Sayyed Moḥammad Kāžem Yazdi. Not long after the end of the war, Yazdi the senior died, and Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā' inherited part of his following, initially in tandem with his own brother, Aḥmad, who died in 1926. He never attained the position of foremost *marja' al-taqlid* (source of emulation) for the entire Shi'ite world, being in this respect overshadowed by Abu'l-Ḥasan Ešfahāni (d. 1946), but he had a demonstrably large number of followers in India, Persia, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Qatif, and East Africa. His influence was most marked, however, in Iraq itself, not only in Najaf but among the Shi'ite tribes of the mid-Euphrates; he counted, indeed, as the most prominent Arab *mojtahed* throughout the period of the Iraqi monarchy. He worked tirelessly for a representation of the Shi'ite community in government organs reflecting its majority status, an issue which became particularly acute in 1935. Sunni opposition groups led by Rāšed 'Ali Gaylāni had encouraged tribes along the mid-Euphrates to revolt in order to advance their own purposes; the summons was followed by some of their number, while others remained loyal to the government.

Both groups appealed to Kāšef-al- Ġeṭā' for his guidance, and he made use of the occasion to press for increased rights for the Shi'ite community as a whole. On 23 March 1935, assisted by a group of Shi'ite lawyers from Baghdad, he drew up a list of twelve demands, submitted it to the government, and, at the end of the month, issued a *fatwā* calling on all Shi'ites to sever their connections with the political parties. The government proved unresponsive to the demands, and in May a tribal revolt began, leading to bombardment of the region by the Iraqi air force. Appeals by Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā' and his colleagues for negotiation were ignored until the uprising threatened to spread more widely; it was only then that the government declared its readiness to engage in discussions. At the same time, however, the Iraqi military succeeded in suppressing the tribes of Rumaytha, seriously weakening the revolt, with the result that Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā' found it advisable to call on tribes still fighting to



desist (Nakash, pp. 121-24). Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' himself summarizes his role in the events of 1935 by recalling that he spent six months attempting, day and night, to restore security and stop bloodshed along the mid-Euphrates (autobiographical note prefaced to his *al-'Abaqāt al-'Anbariya*, p. 13). By contrast, when Gaylāni came out in open revolt against the Iraqī government in 1941, Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' issued a fatwā in support of the movement (facsimile of his declaration in anon., "al-Marja' al-Mojāhed al-Emām Moḥammad Ḥosayn Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā'," p. 64).

His exertions on behalf of the Shi'ite community in Iraq were complemented by an effort to correct misunderstandings of Shi'ite beliefs and history widespread not only in Iraq but elsewhere in the Arab world. In 1928, the Egyptian historian Aḥmad Amin (d. 1954) published in Cairo his *Fajr al-Eslām* ("The dawn of Islam"), a widely read work in which, *inter alia*, he denounced Shi'ism as a Persian conspiracy designed to exact vengeance on the Arabs for the overthrow of the Sasanid empire; it served, he claimed, as the receptacle for remnants of various pre-Islamic beliefs—Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and even Hinduism—that were being insidiously propagated in the early Muslim community in order to corrupt its faith (*Fajr al-Eslām*, 9th printing of 2nd. edition, pp. 266-78). The book was at one and the same time an expression of Sunni particularism, Arab nationalism, and receptivity to the theories of orientalist such as Carl Brockelmann and Gotthelf Bergsträsser.

Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' had acquired some familiarity with the mentality informing Aḥmad Amin's work during his three years in Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, and the book caught his attention immediately after its publication. In 1931, it so happened that Sāte' al-Ḥoşri, Iraqī prime minister of the day, invited a delegation of professors from Cairo University to visit Iraq, and Aḥmad Amin was one of their number. This provided Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' with the opportunity to upbraid the visitor in person for his errors of fact and analysis and to debate with him, in front of a large audience in Najaf, the questions of *ejtehād* as varyingly interpreted by Sunni and Shi'ite jurists and the *'eşma* (inerrancy) of the Twelve Imams. More importantly, the encounter with Aḥmad Amin impelled Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' to write one of his most lastingly influential works: *Aşl al-Şi'a wa oşulohā* ("The origin of Shi'ite Islam and its principles"). Constantly reprinted and translated into a wide variety of languages, the book opens with a lament concerning the general ignorance of Shi'ism among Sunni Arabs before taking issue with Aḥmad Amin's portrayal of Shi'ism as subversive: he identifies as Shi'ite or proto-Shi'ite numerous members of the first two



generations of Islam, the Companions and the Followers, and stresses the role played by Shi'ite scholars and statesmen in serving Islam precisely during the period examined by Aḥmad Amin. Then comes a vindication of the principle of the imamate, based on Traditions found in Sunni sources, and an exposition in turn of the *oṣul al-din* (creedal bases) of Shi'ism: *tawḥid* (the divine unity), *nobowwat* (prophethood), imamate, *ʿadl* (the inherent justice of all divine acts), and *maʿād* (resurrection and judgement). The longest section of the book details Shi'ite rulings on major topics of law, and its conclusion explains the belief in *badāʿ* (the appearance of change in the divine will) and the practice of *taqiya* (prudential dissimulation). In a separate work, *al-Āyāt al-bayyənāt* ("Clear signs") Kāšef-al-Ġeṭāʿ also took issue with what he called "al-Omawiya," i.e., the tendency of Aḥmad Amin and his like to idealize the Omayyad period as the apex of both *ʿoruba* (Arabism) and Islam; Baha'ism, Wahhabism, and materialism (*al-ṭabiʿiya*; meaning in this case Darwinism) also come under attack in the same work.

In 1931, Kāšef-al-Ġeṭāʿ traveled to Jerusalem to participate in the General Islamic Congress that was intended to foster unity among Muslims, address the threat of Zionism, and discuss methods of educational reform. The speech he delivered in the twelfth session of the congress calling for Muslim solidarity in the face of imperialism, the defense of Palestine, and the disregard of sectarian differences was enthusiastically received, and its text was printed and distributed by the organizers. At least equally significant was the fact that he was chosen, on the suggestion of ʿEyāz Eshāqī, a delegate from Kazan, to lead congregational prayers at the Masjed al-Aqṣā on the night of 27 Rajab 1350 (6 December 1931), the anniversary of the date on which the Prophet had departed from that location on his night journey to the heavens (see [MEʿRAJ](#)). In addition to the 150 delegates to the congress, some 25,000 Palestinians also participated in the prayer, according to Kāšef-al-Ġeṭāʿ' s own reckoning. This was certainly the largest gathering of predominantly Sunni Muslims ever to have been led in prayer by a Shi'ite scholar, and Kāšef-al-Ġeṭāʿ said of the occasion, "the seed of Islamic unity had been planted" (autobiographical note prefaced to his *al-ʿAbaqāt al-ʿAnbariya*, pp. 12-13).

Controversies, however, persisted in the immediate aftermath of the prayer and beyond. Rašid Reżā (d. 1935), the well-known disciple of Moḥammad ʿAbdoh who had chaired one of the committees of the congress, found himself at odds with ʿAbd al-Ḥosayn Nur al-Din, a Lebanese Shi'ite scholar who took him to task with some vehemence in the pages of *al-ʿErfān* for his critical



attitude to Shi'ism. Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' distanced himself from his Lebanese colleague, but not, in the view of Raşid Rezā, decisively enough, who also condemned him for alleged arrogance in claiming to be the pioneer of Islamic ecumenism (Brunner, pp. 99-102). Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' nonetheless continued his involvement in efforts for Sunni-Shi'ite rapprochement. In 1938, he even gave his cautious approval to a chimerical scheme for a renewal of the caliphate, modified to accommodate Shi'ite sensibilities, while warning that the project might well be an imperialist-inspired attempt to divert Muslims from the supreme cause that was Palestine (Brunner, p. 113, n. 119). His devotion to that cause inspired an invitation to Ḥāġ Amin al-Ḥosayni, the *mofti* of Jeruslaem, to deliver a sermon during Moḥarram at the shrine of Imam 'Ali at Najaf, a development as remarkable and unprecedented as had been his leading of Sunnis in prayer at the Masġied al-Aqşā (Moḥammad Ḥerz-al-Din, *Ma'āref al-rejāl* II, p. 276; no year is given for the event). The year 1947 witnessed the foundation in Cairo of the Jamā'at al-taqrib bayn al-maḍāheb al-Eslāmiya ("Society for rapprochement of the Islamic schools of thought"), an attempt to provide an institutional basis for Sunni-Shi'ite dialogue. Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' welcomed the initiative, became a corresponding member of the society, and, beginning in 1949, contributed frequently to its organ, *Resālat al-Eslām*. He gave further evidence of his devotion to Islamic unity when he attended the Islamic Congress held in Karachi in 1952, giving numerous speeches that focused, again, on Palestine and the need for a united front against Anglo-American imperialism. After its conclusion, he gave lectures in Lahore, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, and Muzaffarabad.

By contrast, Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' declined an invitation to a conference held two years later at Bhamdun in Lebanon under the auspices of the American Friends of the Middle East, a propaganda organization founded in 1951 with financial support from the CIA and Aramco. The declared aim of the Bhamdun conference was to unite Muslim and Christian believers in solidarity against atheistic communism, in the hope that the Muslim world, laying aside all other issues, would align itself unconditionally with America in the Cold War. Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā' was indeed disquieted by the appeal held by communism for many Iraqi Shi'ites, and he had condemned it in a fatwā as *kofr*, but he regarded the Bhamdun initiative as deceptive. He expounded his reasons at some length in a work entitled *al-Moṭol al-'olyā fi'l-Eslām, lā fi Beḥamdun* ("The supreme ideals are to be found in Islam, not at Bhamdun"). The essence of his argument was that the Arab and Muslim worlds were beset by three demons (*afārit*)—communism, Zionism, and imperialism; of the three, it was



imperialism and its offshoot, Zionism, that needed immediate attention, for it was their depredations that made communism—in itself a thoroughly empty creed—appear attractive to some Muslims (*al-Moṭol al-‘olyā*, p. 73). The American pretense to be concerned with spiritual values was simply a veil for deep-seated materialism (*ibid.*, p. 14).

Much of Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā’s attention was focused, then, on the Arab world and its problems; although ideologically distant from the Arab nationalists, even those of religious bent, he did not hesitate to invoke the concept of *‘oruba* (Arabism) beloved of them. He nonetheless took care to learn Persian, and visited Persia at least three times. He first went there in 1933, spending roughly eight months in the country, leading the prayers and delivering lectures and sermons—in Persian, he is careful to point out—in Tehran, Hamadan, Shiraz, and Mashad. The leitmotiv was, as always, the need for Islamic unity and rejection of the decadent culture of the West. He paid return visits to Persia in 1947, 1948, and 1950.

It has been suggested that, within Iraq, Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā’ led a group of Arab *mojtaheds* that sought to dislodge Persian *‘olamā’* resident in Najaf from their positions of pre-eminence (Nakash, p. 86). The evidence for this is slight; the most that may be said is that he was engaged in the politics of Iraq and other Arab countries to a considerably higher degree than his Persian colleagues. Virtually all of his teachers had been Persian, and he collaborated with Abu’l-Ḥasan Ešfahāni, supreme *marja’ al-taqlid* of the day, on a variety of matters, primarily educational. One of his closest associates in Iraq was, moreover, a Persian scholar. [Āgā Bozorg Ṭehrāni](#) (d. 1970), the great bibliographer of Shi’ite literature, first made the acquaintance of Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā’ in the circle of Mirzā Ḥosayn Nuri when he arrived in Najaf in 1895. After Nuri’s death, both men decided to study with Ākund Moḥammad Kāzem Ḳorāsāni and Sayyed Moḥammad Kāzem Yazdi. They remained close friends until Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā’s death (reminiscence by Āgā Bozorg, dated 1964, included in prefatory matter to *Kāšefal- Ġeṭā’*, “*Šahā’ef al-abrār fi waṣā’ef al-ašḥār*,” pp. 187-90).

Kāšef-al-Ġeṭā’s exposition of the reasons for his refusal to attend the conference at Bhamdoun came to serve as his political testament. For soon after, he was hospitalized in Baghdad for a prostate infection, but fearing that for political reasons he would be denied adequate treatment, his relatives removed him from the hospital and took him to Karand in southern Persia. There he died, on 19 July 1954. His body was taken first to Baghdad, and then, accompanied by a massive cortege, to Najaf for burial.



His legacy was twofold: a vast body of writings, only some of which appeared in his lifetime (for partial lists, see the relevant pages of *al-Ḍari'a*; and Özel, “Kâşifulġitâ, Muhammed Huseyin,” p. 20), and an example of militancy that was influential both in Iraq and in Persia. Foremost among those inspired by him in Iraq was Moḥammad Bâqer al-Şadr, put to death by the regime of Şaddâm Ḥosayn in 1980. Two of his major concerns were taken up forcefully by Imam Khomeini: an emphasis on Islamic unity in the face of Western imperialism and a firm commitment to the struggle against Zionism. In his seminal work on Islamic government, Khomeini cites Kâşef-al- Ġeṭâ' as one of those who had preceded him in articulating the doctrine of *velâyat-e faqih* (the governance of the jurist; *Ḥokumat-e Eslâmi*, p. 172). It may also not be coincidental that one of the slogans of the Islamic Revolution, *lâ şarqiya, lâ ġarbiya, jomhuriya eslâmiya* (“neither east nor west; Islamic republic!”) echoed a formulation of Kâşef-al-Ġeṭâ', *lâ şarqiya, lâ ġarbiya, ommaton eslâmiya* (“neither east nor west; Islamic nation!”).

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