

6 Sufi and Freemasons in the Ottoman Empire

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6.1 ‘Abd Al-Qādir Al-Jazā’irī

The Algerian Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī (1808-1883) is a key figure of his days:¹ an erudite Muslim, a Sufi of the Qādiriyya order, he led the struggle against the French occupation of Algeria and fought for many years before surrendering in 1847. At first imprisoned in France, after an agreement with Napoleon III, in 1852, he was released on committing himself to avoid hindering the colonial enterprise, and spent the rest of his life in Damascus. There, in 1860, after riots based on religion broke out, he protected and saved over 10,000 Christians from being lynched, and this gesture won him respect and approval from French Masonry.

The lodge Henry IV at the Orient of Paris invited him to join the masonic brotherhood, but because of unspecified difficulties in doing so in France, they asked the lodge Les Pyramides of Alexandria in Egypt to carry out his initiation. The lodge accepted, and ‘Abd al-Qādir was initiated there in the first degree on June 18, 1864.

The correspondence between the emir and the two lodges has been carefully studied by Bruno Étienne. It has already been seen how difficult it was for French masons to grasp the esoteric Islamic universe, since their approach to Muslims was dictated mainly by in-

1 Cf. Étienne, *Abdelkader and Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*; Yacono, “Abd el-Kader Franc-maçon”; Abd el-Kader, *Ecrits spirituels*.

terests which were strategic (spreading Masonry) if not political (facilitating the colonial enterprise). Especially, the French approach was conditioned by a deterministic approach to history which gave the Europeans primacy of civilisation and the mission of exporting it to the rest of the world, an approach which was not exactly helpful for understanding that world without prejudices. For example, the French, praising 'Abd al-Qādir's heroism in defending the Christians of Damascus, called him "supérieur aux préjugés de caste et de religion", without suspecting that the emir was simply applying the Islamic principles of *dhimma*, protecting recognised minorities.

Especially, the French scholar shows how a large part of 'Abd al-Qādir's doctrinal horizon must have escaped the French, who misunderstood the nature of several of his statements;² while the Sufi interpretation which the emir gave, when answering the questions for his affiliation, reveals how he associated Freemasonry with the esoteric dimension of the Sufi orders. The following is a fragment of his answer to the second question:

Quel sont les devoirs de l'homme envers ses semblables?

Réponse. - Il faut qu'il leur donne de bons conseils en les dirigeant vers les avantages (*intérêts*) de ce monde et de l'autre; qu'il les aide en cela, en instruisant l'ignorant et en avertissant l'indifférent (*le distrait*), ne les protégeant, en respectant le grand sans lui porter envie, en compatissant eu petit et pourvoyant à ses besoins, amenant à eux les choses utiles et repoussant d'eux le mal.

Toutes les lois reposent sur deux bases: la première de glorifier Dieu, la seconde d'avoir compassion des créatures de ce Dieu Très Haut, l'homme doit considérer que leur âme et la sienne ont une même origine, et qu'il y a entre elles d'autre diversité que leur enveloppe et leur extérieur; car l'âme entière provient d'un esprit entier qui, comme Eve provenant d'Adam, est l'origine de toutes les âmes. L'âme est une, elle n'est pas multiple, la multiplicité n'est que dans les enveloppes par lesquelles elle se montre, et dans les formes par lesquelles elle brille. C'est que les corps sont des maisons obscures, de noires régions qui, lorsque les lumières de l'âme entière les enveloppent, brillent et luisent par ces lumières qui débordent d'elles.

These few lines show both the ethical heritage of the mystic *futuwwa* and the emanentist teachings of Ibn al-'Arabī (*wahadat al-wujūd*), which 'Abd al-Qādir had taken up and which, as a Sufi master, he understood well.

2 Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 20-33, 50-67.

Unfortunately, the speeches celebrating the masonic affiliation of the emir by the brethren of the lodge Les Pyramides of Alexandria again show their paternalistic attitude towards the Algerian Sufi, and absolute ignorance of his important doctrinal and philosophical references, thus appearing - perhaps unintentionally - offensive and humiliating. According to the French masons his answers (which are actually fully part of the Islamic mystic tradition), “révèlent un libre penseur, élevé aux idées de la plus parfaite civilisation”, his definitions “sont frappées au coin de la logique la plus serrée”, emphasising how “Votre haute intelligence vous a fait apprécier la base de notre doctrine”. However, the speakers did not hesitate to remind him of his defeat by the French, and that the purpose of his initiation was to: “déblayer les ruines de la barbarie, et faire fructifier dans ces pays hostiles et ignorant les germes de la vérité universelle”.³

This dialogue shows the difficulties in interacting for both parts, beyond expressing a shared faith in a single God (at the time, the theist tendency still prevailed in French Masonry) and besides the reasons for each to converge. Masons of the time were generally unaware of basic principles of Islamic law, such as the status of *dhimma*, or of the ideas of Ibn al-‘Arabī or of the nature of Sufism, and found it difficult to understand ‘Abd al-Qādir’s esoteric lexicon. But above all, their relations with the emir were strongly prejudiced by the imperialist and Orientalist spirit of the age, which implicitly defined the Muslims as backward barbarians. French masons saw the Algerian Sufi as a tool for masonic penetration to dissipate darkness, “le coin d’entré dans le roc de la barbarie”.⁴ The Sufi emir too probably overestimated the philosophical and mystic quality of his European brethren, and may have decided to be initiated for reasons of conviction (as Étienne believes)⁵ or out of personal interest.⁶ In any case, when masons and Sufis first met in the Middle East, in the wake of European imperialism, it would have been hard to escape from the political context. This leaves us with some doubts about the sincerity of the emir when, during a trip to France, he pronounced the following words before two masonic delegations (the Amboise speech):

3 Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 41-9.

4 Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 34.

5 According to the French Islamologist, ‘Abd al-Qādir might actually have placed moral and spiritual trust in Masonry, “peut-être parce que le langage codé en tant que subculture de la franc-maçonnerie était ce que l’Occident produisait de moins éloigné de la culture musulmane”. Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 70.

6 Some believe he did so to prove his loyalty to France, which was paying him a pension of 150 million francs a year, or because he needed French protection against the Ottomans who repeatedly demanded his expulsion. Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 68-9.

Je considère la franc-maçonnerie comme la première institution du monde. A mon avis, tout homme qui ne professe pas la fois maçonnique est un homme incomplet. J'espère qu'un jour les principes maçonniques seront répandus dans le monde entier. Dès lors tous les peuples vivront dans la paix et la fraternité.⁷

Once back to Syria, 'Abd al-Qādir never attended masonic gatherings in Damascus or in Bayreuth (although he had mason friends), which seems to prove the predominantly strategic nature of his affiliation – perhaps also confirmed by the later initiation of his two sons. However, it is certain that his Sufi formation, as well as the progressive Salafi vocation of the Algerian Emir determined an intellectual contiguity with Freemasonry. Maybe the Amboise speech did not fully reflect his thinking, but he certainly did not consider Masonry incompatible with his spiritual, cultural and political beliefs.⁸

6.2 Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Afghānī

Another example of the meeting between the esoteric Sufi dimension and Masonry is that of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī.⁹ Due to his progressive and rationalist intellectual approach, together with his open opposition to imperialism and to his political activism, al-Afghānī is considered to be one of the most effective actors in cultural and ideological change in the Levant in the late nineteenth century. He is mainly known for his political commitment, but his reformist efforts probably also found fertile ground for rationalist renovation in his personal Sufi dimension.

Al-Afghānī was not of Arab origin, and, notwithstanding his name, he was not born in Afghanistan but in Iran¹⁰ (and was not a Sunni but a Shiite). Various Persian sources say he received education in Islamic disciplines, in Muslim philosophers and in mysticism. After having stayed in India and in Istanbul, he spent the years from 1871 to 1879 in Egypt where he started his political activity against imperialism and in favour of liberal reforms. In Cairo he began teaching religious sciences, philosophy, logic, Sufism and Arab literature at al-Azhar, the most prestigious Islamic university of the Middle East, enchant-

⁷ Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 71-2.

⁸ Zarcone, *Le mystère Abd al-Kader*, pos. Kindle 211, 467, 535-9, 780.

⁹ Cf. Keddie, *An Islamic response; Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*; Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*; Pakdaman, *Djamal-Ed-Din Assad Abadi*.

¹⁰ Al-Afghānī was born in 1838-39 in As'adābād. He would claim the event took place in the town of that name in the province of Kunar in Afghanistan; however it is far more likely that he was born in another of the same name near Hamadan in Iran.

ing many of his students with his charisma, students who would play a decisive role in the history of the country, like the reformist intellectual Muhammad ‘Abduh¹¹ or the nationalist Sa’d Zaghlūl. However, his reformist ideas led to his expulsion from the institution.¹²

It is not known whether he became a mason before 1876, but in the years before, he certainly encouraged masonic publications and supported the organisation, which he saw as a tool for modernist reform and change.¹³ After 1876, various documents prove al-Afghānī’s masonic affiliation. First of all, the minutes of a letter found among his private documents discovered in Tehran in 1963, contain a request in Arabic to be admitted to an unnamed lodge, dated March 31, 1875:

I the undersigned, a teacher of philosophical sciences, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Kābulī, aged thirty-seven, ask the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-safā’*), call on the faithful companions (*Khullān wafā’*), guides of the sacred masonic organisation, [...] to be willing and favourable to accept me in that pure organisation, and to let me enter the body of the affiliates of that glorious association.¹⁴

Another of these documents says: “I entered the lodge on April 7, 1876”, without specifying the name of the lodge. It is hard to understand which lodges he joined during his sojourn in Egypt, since the documents found in Tehran show a sort of ‘masonic frenzy’, which has led to many hypotheses.¹⁵ It is known for certain that, in 1877, al-Afghānī was initiated in the lodge *Star of the East*, under the Grand Lodge of England,¹⁶ and as certified in a letter in Arabic, on December 1877 he was elected Grand Master of the same lodge.¹⁷

Studies have emphasised how al-Afghānī joined Freemasonry for political reasons, but Elie Kedourie was determined in associating al-Afghānī’s Sufi dimension, always pre-eminent in his human and spiritual career, with his masonic affiliation.¹⁸ This can be seen in the nearly idolatrous adoration of his disciples, closer to that for a mystic master than for an ordinary teacher; or the esoteric character attributed to definitions such as ‘perfect sage’, ‘the true science’ or ‘Truth

11 Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 130-60.

12 Kudsi-Zadeh, “Afghānī and Freemasonry”, 25-35.

13 Shalash, *Al-Yahūd wa-al-māsūn*, 224-6.

14 Afshar, Mahdavi, *Documents inédits*, doc. 16, repr. 40.

15 De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 112.

16 De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 112.

17 Afshar, Mahdavi, *Documents inédits*, doc. 17, repr. 41; Shalash, *Al-Yahūd wa-al-māsūn*, 226-7.

18 Cf. Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 9-17; Keddie, *An Islamic Response*, 8.

personified' which 'Abduh used when speaking of him.¹⁹ Also the formulas used by al-Afghānī in his request for affiliation to Masonry, such as 'brethren of purity' (*Ikhwān al-safā'*), and 'faithful companions' (*Khullān wafā'*), bring unmistakably to mind the Brethren of Purity who in the eighth century wrote treatises accused of heresy. This at least shows that al-Afghānī associated Masonry with a clear philosophical and esoteric dimension. Investigating his private papers, Kedourie sees that the intellectual read and taught works of philosophy and Sufism all his life, and continued to be interested in esoteric topics, such as mystic alphabets and numerical combinations.²⁰ While al-Afghānī found in Masonry a tool for political action, its esoteric dimension was not foreign to him, and probably not entirely marginal.

However, convergence between al-Afghānī's intellectual and spiritual universe and Masonry should not be sought so much in Sufism, as in what Kedourie calls the passage from the mystic pantheism of Sufism (*wahdat al-wujūd*) to rationalism (with sources in Greek thought, but tied to Western positivism), through a philosophical approach, arriving at "a new rationalist religion".²¹ This intellectual path made him a "French style freethinker", as his Indian friend Syed Hussein put it.²² The belief that, if Scripture contradicts reason and science, it is Scripture (in this case the sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet) which must be reinterpreted,²³ is perfectly compatible with the most progressive masonic spirit of the epoch, especially French and Italian. For al-Afghānī, Masonry must have appeared to be the best soil for receiving and spreading the new reformist ideas - not always favourably accepted in his days.²⁴

An enthusiastic modernist, the Persian intellectual propagate the idea that appropriation of Western sciences and techniques was the fundamental key to renew Islam in order to oppose Western imperialism. He believed that after centuries of substantial hermeneutic sclerosis,²⁵ it was necessary to reopen efforts to interpret the sacred

19 Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 9-10.

20 Keddie, *An Islamic Response*, 8.

21 Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 16.

22 Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 17.

23 Keddie, *An Islamic Response*, 38.

24 After being driven out of al-Azhar, al-Afghānī continued teaching at home, and - as one witness told it - when students came to his house, the neighbours would throw stones at them and curse him. Kudsi-Zadeh, "Afghānī and Freemasonry", 25.

25 The tenth-eleventh centuries, in the Sunni Islamic world, saw the closing of the 'gate of *ijtihad*', that is the esoteric effort aimed at interpreting the Texts (the Qur'an and the Sunna which includes the sayings, the deeds and the silences of the Prophet), in order to establish the legal corpus of the *shari'a*, but also of theology. Since then, interpretation was replaced by *taqlid*, imitation of the ancients, leading to a substantial immobility of Islamic sciences.

texts of Islam against every superstition, conservatism and obscurantism. On this base, inside the *nahda*, he introduced a philosophical and political movement called *islāh*,²⁶ ‘reform’, later consolidated by his disciple Muhammad ‘Abduh and, at least initially, by Rashīd Ridā. Here, al-Afghānī’s thinking converged with that of other Turkish reformists: Mustafa Reşid Pasha and Midhat Pasha (the latter author of the liberal Ottoman Constitution of 1876), among the most important modernising and secularising reformers who changed the laws, institutions and culture of the Ottoman empire in the nineteenth century, masons too, or the writer Nāmık Kemāl, Sufi (perhaps Bek-tashi) and mason, who tried to deduce the spirit of the reform from verses of the Qur’an.²⁷

His positions met with hostility from religious institutions but also from the political establishment, and al-Afghānī was repeatedly accused of impiety and heterodoxy.²⁸ Masonry too began to consider his opinions ‘heretical’: when al-Afghānī was expelled from Egypt in August 1879, the British consul general wrote: “He was recently expelled from the Freemasons’ Lodge at Cairo, of which he was a member, on account of his open disbelief in a Supreme Being”,²⁹ a sign that anti-theist rationalism at the time was also poorly tolerated in many Western milieux, even masonic (especially in British Freemasonry) – although in this case it was probably a mere pretext.³⁰

It can be seen here how the link between the Sufi universe and Masonry arose when both sides espoused liberal principles, which in those years of rapid and profound change for the Middle East saw cultural and religious reform built on the foundations of science and freethinking. In this case, Sufism evolved by accepting rationalism which, especially in Italian and French lodges promoted progressive thinking in Europe and around the world throughout the nineteenth century.

26 *Islāh* identifies itself with reformist and modernist Salafism, an attempt to modernise Islam starting from the reinterpretation of the original sources. Merad, *Islāh*; De Poli, *Riformisti, conservatori, radicali*; Bori, *Il pensiero radicale islamico*.

27 Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 98.

28 This was basically the reason he had to leave Istanbul in March 1871. Pakdaman, *Djamal-Ed-Din Assad Abadi*, 45-9.

29 Archive document quoted by Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 20.

30 The reasons appear to have been eminently political, since al-Afghānī had personally expressed to the French consul the idea of deposing the Khedive Ismā‘il, provoking a dispute among masons. In revenge, and because of his public interventions against the new Khedive Tawfiq, some two months later, on August 26, 1879, al-Afghānī was expelled from the country. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 127-31.

6.3 Rizā Tevfîk

It has been seen how, in Turkey, politics, Sufism and Freemasonry came the closest together at the dawn of the twentieth century, when many Young Turks, often Bektashi affiliates, joined masonic lodges. In this context, a figure of special note was the politician and intellectual Rizā Tevfîk (1868-1949).

Born into a family hailing from northern Albania, Tevfîk spent his youth at Edirne, Istanbul, Izmir and Gallipoli (Gelibolu); in this last town, as a youth, he first came into contact with the Turkish mysticism of the bards (*aşık*) of popular brotherhoods and, thanks to the whirling dervishes he met at the convent of Hüssameddîn, he read Rumi's *Masnavi*, the great Sufi poem in Persian on which the Mevlevi order was founded.³¹ His education was complicated: he studied at the Galata high school in Istanbul, then proceeded to the School of Political and Administrative Sciences (the well known *Mekteb-i mülkiyye*, where some of the most brilliant Ottoman intellectuals of the *fin-de-siècle* studied), then finally enrolled in the Imperial School of Medicine, but was expelled from each school for indiscipline. After obtaining a diploma, he became a doctor at the customs of Istanbul, but in 1907 he joined the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) becoming a strong supporter of the Revolution and after the Constitution was proclaimed in 1908, he started on a political career, being elected to parliament. Of a progressive and liberal bent, in 1911 he began to strongly criticise the authoritarian policies of the CUP and a few years later became one of the founders of the opposition Freedom and Accord Party (*Hürriyet ve İtilâf*, also known as Liberal Entente or Union), which rose to power after the fall of the Young Turks following defeat in World War One. He was twice a minister (of National Education and of Post Telegraph and Telephone), President of the Senate and author of the political and social reforms in Turkey of those years; but he was also one of the signatories of the Treaty of Sèvres, which led to the dismemberment of Ottoman empire, bringing him harsh criticism and personal discomfort. Since he also opposed the rebellion led in Anatolia by Kemal Atatürk, after the victory of the latter, he was put in the list of the 'One Hundred and Fifty' politicians, writers, artists, and intellectuals accused of having betrayed the country and sent into exile in 1922.³² As a consequence it is hardly surprising that his name has remained marginal in the history of contemporary Turkey; the complexity of his figure, rarely dealt with by Turkish scholars, appears in the work of Thierry Zarcone who, starting from a thorough examination of his

³¹ Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 339-40, 350.

³² Exile left a deep mark on Tevfîk, whose intellectual activity declined sharply.

works and of many sources in Ottoman and modern Turkish, devoted a considerable part of his study on mystics, philosophers and masons in Islam to him.³³

Little is actually known about the masonic career of Tevfîk. According to a Turkish historian, he was initiated during a trip to Great Britain in 1909. On his return home, together with other masons, he made efforts to emancipate Turkish Masonry from the guardianship of such foreign orders as the French and Italian Grand Orient and the English Grand Lodge. He was one of the nine members of the Supreme Council of the High Degrees of the 33rd degree, he was thus able – already in 1909 – to found a national obedience, the Ottoman Grand Orient, where he was affiliated with the Constitution Lodge, soon becoming its Grand Orator.³⁴ His role in Turkish Masonry was however controversial and not always tolerant of others. In 1911 he publicly revealed the masonic affiliation of Mûsâ Kâsım, a brother in his lodge but also Shaykh al-Islam, the highest charge in the state Religious Affairs office, creating a scandal which forced Kâsım to resign. Again, in 1918, when he became Grand Master of the Ottoman Grand Orient, a role he kept until 1920, Rizâ Tevfîk launched a ‘purge’ which affected his brethren. His charge certainly had a strong political touch, since his election coincided with the rise to power of his party, the Liberal Entente, following the fall of the Young Turk government: under his guidance, Unionists were even expelled from the lodges, and the order underwent strong rebuilding.³⁵

However, Tevfîk’s masonic membership should not be reduced to a merely political dimension.

The Ottoman intellectual was deeply immersed in the mystic culture of his times as a Sufi – he was a *baba* of the Bektashiyya and often attended meetings and convents of the order³⁶ (as a poet, he was famous for his mystic compositions, also sung by dervishes) – and believed there were several points of contact between Sufism and Masonry. One of the analogies he noted was certainly the vocation for political involvement which both institutions manifested – especially the Melâmî –, but some of his articles clearly show he felt that masonic initiation differed little from the Sufi way, at least in its most ‘enlightened’ manifestations.³⁷

Le plus grand devoir moral de la *tariqat melâmiyye*, à mon avis, est d’éprouver une profonde compassion pour l’humanité et de

33 Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 329-494.

34 Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 343.

35 Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 265-6.

36 He said so to Ramsaur. Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 351

37 Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 343.

ressentir dans sa propre conscience le malheur des autres [...] je suis réellement plus derviche que de nombreux autres derviches et je suis aussi plus que beaucoup d'autres, lié au soufisme. [...] je voudrais seulement dire un ou deux mots au sujet de la maçonnerie. Le premier est que l'on doit savoir avant tout qu'il ne demeure aujourd'hui plus aucun secret, sinon celui constitué pas le "mystère de la création" que l'homme dans sa faiblesse ne peut atteindre. Mon opinion, en ce qui concerne l'ordre maçonnique, est à ce point contraire à ce que croit la plupart des hommes non informés, qu'il m'est impossible de la résumer en quelques mots. Je dirai seulement que celui qui ne croit pas en une puissance créatrice, ne peut être maçon.³⁸

Tevfik's interest in metaphysical matters emerges especially in his role as a 'philosopher', as he called himself.³⁹ Tevfik had a profound knowledge of Western philosophy, which he wrote significant books about,⁴⁰ and was equally competent in Islamic philosophy, in history and in the principles of Sufism, about which he published a number of articles. His encyclopaedic knowledge was enriched by the study of a very wide range of sources, facilitated by his mastery of several European and Oriental languages, and his meetings with Western intellectuals, especially orientalist, such as the British Edward G. Browne, E.E. Ramsaur, or the French Barbeir de Meynard and Carra De Vaux. The latter especially held him in high esteem and translated some passages of his *Philosophical Dictionary*.

It would be beyond the scope of this study to go into the complexity of Tevfik's philosophical thinking, a topic which can be read about in Zarccone's work; however, there are certain significant elements for the purposes of this discussion. The works of the Ottoman intellectual in fact show a confluence between Islamic and European thinking which often turns into a synthesis or an acknowledgement of equivalence, not without stretching some points. Especially the conjunction of Western and Islamic mystic philosophy is structured in the doctrine of 'agnosticism' which he developed, that is the idea that Man's intelligence is not able to grasp the essence of things or the nature of the divine (according to Socrates' motto, "all I know is that I know nothing").⁴¹ The Ottoman intellectual formulates his own per-

38 Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 319.

39 Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 330.

40 He published *Felsefe dersleri*, 'Philosophy Lessons', which in 564 pages collected and developed the texts of his courses, held first in a high school and then at the University of Istanbul (*Dâr ü'l fünûn*), and the unfinished *Mufasssal kâmus-i-felsefe*, known as *Philosophical Dictionary*, his most appreciated work even though it ended at the letter C.

41 Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 371.

sonal concept of 'agnosticism' developing some points of Ibn 'Arabī's thinking (and adopting his vision of the Unity of Being), together with the thinking of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, interpreting it *a posteriori* as a foundation of Turkish mysticism.⁴² He wrote:

De même qu'il existe une forme mystique (Sufi) et théologique de l'agnosticisme, il existe aussi une forme philosophique et scientifique de celui-ci qui est respectable et indiscutable si l'on regarde la philosophie contemporaine.⁴³

In a similar fashion, he believed that definition of the principle of the Absolute, one of the crucial points of his thinking, was substantially identical in Ibn 'Arabī and Spencer, but also in Bergson.⁴⁴ Animated by the same spirit, he wrote: "En fait, entre la philosophie de Descartes et le soufisme, il n'y a divergence qu'au dernier degré".⁴⁵

Tevfik never gave a systematic structure to his philosophy, and his work was not without limits and contradictions, but his approach shows an effort to create a synthesis between cultures which have roots and epistemes which cannot always be assimilated to each other. This orientation may be seen as an attempt to heal what many, north or south of the Mediterranean, felt to be a fracture of civilisation between East and West, at a time when the East was most fragile in the face of European political and cultural imperialism.⁴⁶ Metabolization of modernity also passed through an appropriation of some of its canons in a key which was not contextualised and relative, but absolute and universalising.

However, Tevfik's philosophical studies reveal an interpretation which is unable to free itself from its intellectual focus, clearly centred on metaphysical issues which ever since his adolescence in Gallipoli had attracted and profoundly marked him, as he would later write: "je crois que cette influence de Gelibolu m'a apporté la saveur d'une enfance qui respirait la liberté et la spiritualité".⁴⁷ in fact, he interpreted Western philosophy through the prism of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, although viewed from a Sufi perspective which

⁴² Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 364.

⁴³ Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 372.

⁴⁴ Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 410.

⁴⁵ Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 393.

⁴⁶ One may remember the debate between Ernest Renan and Al-Afghani in the spring of 1883. The Persian intellectual had objected to the opinion expressed by Renan according to which Islam and science were substantially incompatible. *Renan/Al-Afghani*. URL <http://blogs.histoireglobale.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Renan-al-Afghani.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Cevdet, *Doctor Rizā Tevfik Bey*, 37-8, quoted by Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 338.

Zarccone calls 'enlightened',⁴⁸ specifying that Tevfik "n'a pris du soufisme que ce qui l'intéressait".⁴⁹

This approach is also reminiscent of how 'Abd al-Qādir interpreted Masonry: in fact, the Algerian emir associated the nature of Freemasonry to Islamic esotericism, interpreting its principles in the light of Sufi teachings, and especially of Ibn 'Arabī, the spiritual and doctrinal reference for Tevfik too. There are also clear analogies between the career and views of Tevfik and the experience of al-Afghānī: for the Ottoman intellectual too, Freemasonry was a tool and politics deeply marked his life, but the political and initiatory – Sufi and masonic – careers converged in support to progressive liberal ideas, expressed by his party, the Liberal Entente, espoused by the Bektashiyya order and spread by lodges since the mid nineteenth century.⁵⁰ It is no surprise then that, like al-Afghānī, Tevfik too, while openly proclaiming his faith in God (although accepting the theist position for the Ottoman Grand Orient) was accused of atheism, of being a mason, *qalandarī*⁵¹ or freethinker.⁵²

Sufi, mason or philosopher, Tevfik remains an example of a reformist intellectual open to the cultural stimulation of his age, capable of finding analogies and developing original syntheses in the meeting between Islamic and European thinking. As often happens to the freest minds, his capacity for looking critically at his own background and his liberal orientation, both in politics and in metaphysics, earned him stigma from the government and institutional Islam, making people forget his story for a long time.

⁴⁸ Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 330.

⁴⁹ Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 352.

⁵⁰ De Poli, *La Massoneria in Egitto*, 162-9.

⁵¹ The Qalandariyya was a heterodox sufi order spread from Morocco to China, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: their followers practised celibacy, lived together and drank alcoholic beverages. Cf. Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 5; Yazıcı, *Qalandariyya*.

⁵² Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 382, 442-4.