Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on Islamic and Qur'anic principles of philanthropy and its management

"The Qur'an, the Hadith, the sayings of Hazrat Ali, and many scholarly sources make numerous references to the forms and purposes of philanthropy. Human dignity -- restoring it, and sustaining it -- is a central theme. Enabling individuals to recover and maintain their dignity as befitting their status as Allah's greatest creation, is one of the main reasons for charitable action. There is dignity in the individual's ability to manage his or her destiny. That being the case, the best of charity, in Islamic terms, can go beyond material support alone. It can take the form of human or professional support such as the provision of education for those otherwise unable to obtain it, or of the sharing of knowledge to help marginalised individuals build different and better futures for themselves. Thus conceived, charity is not limited to a one-time material gift, but can be seen as a continuum of support in a time frame which can extend to years. This means that multi-year support for institutions that enable individuals to achieve dignity by becoming self-sustainable, holds a special place amongst the many forms of charity in the eyes of Islam.

"There is another precept found in the Qur'an and Islamic philosophical texts of great significance that is particularly relevant in this context. It is the emphasis on the responsibilities placed upon those charged with the management of philanthropic gifts and the institutions supported by them. The duty of responsible stewardship is very clear, a concept that can be equated to the notions of trust and trusteeship in today's international legal terminology. The obligation to maintain the highest level of integrity in the management of donated resources, and of the institutions benefiting from them, is grounded in our faith. It is critical to the realisation of the purposes of all gifts, to the continuation and growth of philanthropic
giving, and for credibility in the eyes of the public. Muslim societies have the moral right to expect and demand that philanthropic donations be managed according to the highest ethical standards.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2000 address to the Conference on Indigenous Philanthropy (Islamabad, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5811/

"Individual philanthropy is an important duty in all the major religions of the world. In Islam, the Holy Qur’an offers explicit direction to share resources beyond one’s requirements, and to care for the poor and those in need. The injunction to service is the ethical underpinning of the work of the Aga Khan Development Network. It drives its efforts to build the intellectual capital and institutions needed to address the problems of our world today.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2005 Acceptance Address for the Carnegie Medal for Philanthropy (Edinburgh, Scotland)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7543/

"It’s part of the ethic of Islam. It’s not philanthropy. It’s that you have a duty to share what you do not need yourself. If Allah has given you the wherewithal to share, you share. And you don’t share on the basis of handouts. The best of giving is what enables people to become independent. That is, you don’t give philanthropy on an ongoing basis, if you can give philanthropy, it’s to make people capable of managing their own destinies.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2007 remarks in the documentary: Let the Beauty we Love Be What We Do: A Profile of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9734/
"Often non-profit activities are considered charity. And this is a word that we do not like. Islam has a very clear message about the different forms of generosity. There is that with regard to the poor, which takes the form of gifts. But the recipient remains poor. There exists a second form of generosity that contributes to growing the independence of the person. This concept, in which the goal is to make the person the master of their destiny, is the most beneficial in the eyes of Allah."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2007 L’Express Interview with Eric Chol and Christian Makarian, (Paris, France) [Translation]
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8106/

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**Antonio Marujo/Faranaz Keshavjee:** In 1976, you mentioned that Prophet Muhammad understood the importance of new solutions for the daily lives that would not affect the principles of Islam. Does this motivate the undertakings of the AKDN?

**Aga Khan:** Definitely. Firstly, the notion of dealing with poverty. Islam has a group of very strong orientations on how to help people, which is different (no more or less better) from the Christian world. For example, in Islam, we do not use the terms philanthropy or charity [as in Christianity].

Islam says that the best form of charity, to use the term, is by helping people to become self-sufficient. It is to give in such a way that the person becomes master of one’s own destiny. This is a very clear affirmation to all Muslims, and it underlies our health programmes, education ... it is helping people to help themselves. The same is applicable to micro-finance. Whatever the need of the poor, one should help to resolve it. One does not specify material poverty, disease, or divisions within the family.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Paroquias de Portugal interview with Antonio Marujo and Faranaz Keshavjee (Lisbon, Portugal) [Translation]
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8861/

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"I am fascinated and somewhat frustrated when representatives of the Western world -- especially the Western media -- try to describe the work of our Aga Khan Development Network in fields like education, health, the economy, media, and the building of social infrastructure. Reflecting a certain historical tendency of the West to separate the secular from the religious, they often describe it either as philanthropy or entrepreneurship. What is not understood is that this work is for us a part of our institutional responsibility -- it flows from the mandate of the office of Imam to improve the quality of worldly life for the concerned communities."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2006 Acceptance Address for the Tutzing Evangelical Academy’s ‘Tolerance’ Award (Tutzing, Germany)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7706/

Peggy Dulany: Probably some people are very familiar and others might not be as familiar with the traditions of social conscience within Islam and I wonder if you could enlighten us both about the thinking and also how you have translated that into practice.

Aga Khan: What Islam says about supporting people in society is perhaps somewhat different from other communities and other faiths. The premise that Islam works on is not just helping, but helping to render the individual capable of governing his or her destiny. You are not just helping them away from poverty, you’re giving them the means to propel themselves and their families into their future in ways which they control. And therefore when you educate, when you help in healthcare, when you give access to credit you’re not looking at just helping the individual survive, you’re trying to reposition the individual and the family in society. That is the basic premise of social support that I believe is the correct interpretation of Islam.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2012 Acceptance Address and Interview - David Rockefeller Bridging Leadership Award Ceremony hosted by the Synergos Foundation (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10256/
ITV: We have already touched on the subject of self-sufficiency, particularly in rural areas. Is that part of the Ismaili and indeed your own philosophy?

Aga Khan: I think improving the quality of life, of people, is a fundamental Islamic concept.

ITV: Making them self-sufficient.

Aga Khan: Making them self-sufficient and helping weaker sections of a country or a community. That is fundamental, right from the revelation of Islam -- the way Prophet Muhammad lived himself -- it is a fundamental Islamic concept.

ITV: Showing the weak how to help themselves, not just picking them up.

Aga Khan: Charity and help -- both. Charity -- but not to the extent making them beggars.

ITV: Is that philanthropic?

Aga Khan: I think it is philanthropic to help them to become self-sufficient. Afterwards, there is no reason for it to be that way, and on the assumption that society will always have weak elements, those who are givers to that society have to continue to address themselves to the weaker sections of the society.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1985 Independent Television (ITV) Interview (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3134/

Don Cayo: There’s a category of what I broadly call good works that is never going to have a pay-off. I would cite, for example, Mother Theresa’s work in Calcutta. To give dignity to the poor and dying is not an economic proposition. In the Muslim ethic, in your world, is there a role for that sort of pure charity?
Aga Khan: Oh yes, very definitely. Islam defines charity in many ways, and it doesn’t in any way challenge that form of charity. What it says is that there are areas in society where charity has to have an impact on the way people become autonomous.

There are situations such as the one you’re referring to where people probably have no alternative. It is the end of life. They are marginalised. Very often they have no family around them. These, in the Islamic faith, also are people for whom we all have an obligation. So that category of charity is absolutely respected and recommended and sustained, particularly, for example, in the case of orphans. ‘Orphans’ is probably the major category in Islam for that sort of situation.

But then there’s the other attitude, which is to say if you can give to make an individual or institution autonomous -- give them the capacity to be masters of their own destiny -- that is referred to as the best form of charity. But obviously in the case you’re saying it wouldn’t apply.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Vancouver Sun Interview with Don Cayo (Vancouver, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9087/

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