Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on interpreting the Qur’an

Michael Charlton: But in this conflict between the orthodox, who say that the Qur’anic teaching, like Khomeini appears to be saying in Iran, are immutable and even if the majority wishes them to be changed -- they can not be changed because the teaching itself is unchanging and must not be changed -- in that context, between those who think like that and those who think that Islam can not survive unless it adapts, where do you stand yourself?

Aga Khan: I think the question is where you start from. Are you starting from the Qur’an? Are you starting from the Sharia? Are you starting from secular Christian law? Where are you starting from? The Qur’an is not a body of law, and that, I think, is a statement that every Muslim will make. What is referred to today as Islamic law is a compilation of views expressed by law makers who lived well after the revelation of the Qur’an, well after the time of the Prophet. The interesting thing is that in the Qu’ran, for example, a lot of the things which I would refer to as punishment, are punishment as deterrent. The punishment itself is not the issue at stake. The question is you have got to stop certain things from happening for the good of society. Now if that’s the starting point, then I would say a lot of things do not have to be done, which maybe being done today in the Muslim world. That is my position, because I will start from the Qur’an. I will not start from an interpretation made five or six generations after the life of the Prophet. If we’re talking about fundamentalism, lets start at the revelation of Islam.

Michael Charlton: That puts you fairly firmly in the minority in view of what appears to be happening in Iran and Pakistan.
Aga Khan: No. Not at all. Not at all. I think you have to be very careful in the West not to consider that the more rigid forms of Islam today are typical of the Muslim world. That is not the case. It’s very far from the case.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1979 BBC Radio 4 Interview with Michael Charlton (London, United Kingdom)

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Aga Khan: ... If you read the Qur’an you will find that a very substantial part of Islam and Islam’s teaching has to do with the individual’s behaviour in society in totally secular matters -- how you behave in your relations with other people in society, in your business transaction, in your family, in your friends....

Geoffry Barker: Westerners are often appalled by the literal implementation of savage Qur’anic laws which permit, for example, public beheading of adulterers, the chopping off of hands and flogging for breach of alcohol prohibition. How would you as Imam defend these laws? Do you insist on their implementation among the Ismailis Muslims?

Aga Khan: You must be careful not to refer to Islamic law. There is no such thing as ‘Islamic law’. There are four basic schools of Islamic law in the Sunni Muslim world, there are several schools of Islamic law in the Shia Muslim world. Our attitude is simply that codes change and that what is important is the purpose behind the code.

I must say that in certain areas of the Muslim world there is a very rigid application ... I am not at all saying that today the Ismaili world would encourage mutilation or flagellation or things like that ... Flagellation, beheading, mutilation, these sort of things, may be a totally temporary aspect which is put forward as maybe a justification at a time of crisis.

I think you will find that generally speaking the Muslim world will not be going in that direction.
See also: The Imamat on the Qur'an

See also: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on Islam's and the Qur'an's assent of freedom of individual interpretation

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the Imam's authority and discretion in interpreting the Qur'an

See also: TH Aga Khans III and IV on interpreting the faith: individuality vs formalistic approaches which anchor faith in time