Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on the Islamic concept of statehood

Pakistan Television: And what would be your ideal world view of the future of Islam? And what kind of world, Islam as a faith and followers of Islam would envisage where really we can say that yes this is an Islamic country with the best of ideals and practices?

Aga Khan: I would like [the] essence of the faith to be more predominant in everyone's life. Go back to the origins of Islam. It was a faith practised in a land with no physical frontiers. The concept of the modern state is not really an Islamic concept. Islam was a brotherhood, is a brotherhood. That is the first thing -- the free movement of people, the generosity of people's attitudes towards their brothers around the world, that is itself I think is important. Secondly, living in the context of the moral discipline of Islam, I think, is important because living in a society where freedom eventually becomes equated with license, is not what I would want....

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1985 Pakistan Television Corporation Interview (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3209/

"The issue, very simply, is this: what kind of nation states do we hope will emerge in the Muslim world during the next century? What are we looking for? What do we want of our society? What kind of institutions should we seek to create? ...
was in one form or the other subjugated by the will of the West. England and France between them controlled most of the Middle East including Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, the whole of North Africa with Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya; most of those parts of Africa south of the Sahara which had substantial Muslim population such as Nigeria, Senegal, Dahomey, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zanzibar; and finally most of those parts of Asia which were totally or substantially Muslim, including the Indian subcontinent, and Malaysia. Thus at the dawn of the twentieth century, practically no Muslim areas of the world were self-governing. This is a startling fact, but none the less true.

"One of the many consequences was that the concept of Muslim statehood was broken in time and in action to be replaced by the concepts which were Western in inspiration as well as in practice. The art of government no longer directly involved the Muslims of the world. Those who did concern themselves were never in the position of testing their ideas against the harsh realities of nineteenth and twentieth century power politics. I suggest therefore that there has been a very prolonged vacuum in Muslim responsibilities in this field and that this vacuum in turn provoked a deep apathy towards problems of Islamic statehood. Few men in their daily lives have time to worry about other peoples' problems, and at the dawn of the twentieth century, problems of Muslim statehood were completely dormant.

"Within the last 30 years, most of the Muslim world has regained its independence, and now is totally in control of its own affairs. But the loss of control of government in the recent past has left the Muslims of today in a situation either of prolonging the inherited forms of Western government or of adopting a pragmatic approach, the results of which are impossible to forecast."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1970 University of Sind Convocation Address (Hyderabad, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1602/
“During the long periods of interregnum between the destruction of empire and the re-attainment of sovereignty, Islamic culture -- already, as I have said, forced into hibernation -- was further weakened by the West becoming the focal point of international economic development, with a resultant emphasis on Western cultural and artistic values.

“Even when the Islamic states did recover political independence, sometimes within freshly-drawn frontiers, they were brought into being as reflections of Western concepts of nationhood. The most obvious example of this was Turkey, which Ataturk reshaped from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire as a secular state in the belief that the adoption of Western patterns would enable his country to achieve a Western degree of economic development.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1984 address on receiving the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Medal for Architecture at the University of Virginia (Charlottesville, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3006/

John Stackhouse / Patrick Martin: You’ve spoken in the past, well before September the 11th, about some of the difficulties or challenges of Muslim nations to secularise. Is that still a great challenge for those countries, and do you foresee it happening in the near term?

Aga Khan: I can’t give you a single answer to that, and the reason is that the history of these nations is very different one from the other. If you were to take the Central Asian republics, their relationship to the faith of Islam, relationship to democratic processes is very different from what happens in other parts of the world. But I think the more over-riding issue is the issue of theocracy versus secular state, and I think that at this point in time, the vast majority of countries within the Muslim world have recognised the difficulty of a theocratic state, and these difficulties are due to many different forces in these countries. But also, the pluralism within Islam. Because if you create a theocratic state,
automatically you are saying there must be an interpretation which is the state interpretation of the faith. So that alone is a very, very difficult question to ask. And you can see, I don’t have to name the countries, you can see what happens when these internal stresses occur in states which would present themselves as theocratic states. So I think the answer is most of them are going towards a secular state, but I would want to avoid the notion of a secular state without faith. What we are talking about are states that want to have modern forms of government but where the ethics of Islam remain the premises on which civil society is built. And I think that’s where we see this -- to me very exciting -- effort to maintain the ethics of Islam, but in a modern state. And I think when we’re talking about the ethics of Islam, it’s easier to have civil society institutions built on the ethics of the faith, than a theocratic state in the full form.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2002 Globe and Mail Interview (3rd) with John Stackhouse and Patrick Martin (Toronto, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6120/

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Michael Charlton: Yes. In these [Iran’s 1979 revolution] situations has normally led to an autocracy of some kind or another. Anarchy and disorder has been replaced by a much stronger form of leadership. Is that the general pattern?

Aga Khan: No, I would say it has been replaced by an individual or an idea and that individual doesn’t have to be autocratic, although he may be called upon to do certain things to restore national integrity or law and order.

Michael Charlton: Is there an ideal form of Islamic government?

Aga Khan: I don’t think, you know, you can talk about Islamic government. If you go back to the Qur’an, there is no government mentioned in the Qur’an.

Michael Charlton: I know, you all say that. All Imams and all
political leaders in Islam say that. On the other hand, it seems to me that those divisions between the religious and secular life in Islam are, in fact, at the heart of all development and they have to be addressed ...

**Aga Khan:** They have got to be addressed, that is absolutely correct.

**Michael Charlton:** Who wins? What comes out top, religion or the secular process?

**Aga Khan:** I couldn’t generalise on that. It depends entirely on the society of the land you are talking about. You know, I simply can not make a comparison between an Arab country in the Middle East and Indonesia, but they are there. We are talking about too...it’s too vast an Empire, you know, we are talking about hundreds and millions of people covering so many different races and languages.

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

See also: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on secularism and Islam's reconciliation with it


See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the theocratic state and democracy

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