His Highness the Aga Khan on Western perceptions and notions of freedom

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE

Don Cayo: When I look at the Western perceptions of freedom, which we value highly, I sometimes think we interpret it as the whole world should be free to be like us. Is that how we are seen from the other perspectives?

Aga Khan: I think that’s certainly one aspect -- the feeling that the societies of the industrialised world are always right, and therefore what they get right should be the norm for everybody else. I think there are areas where we don’t agree with that. We think freedom is important, of course. But we think that freedom really is not something that one has to take in the absolute. There is abuse of freedom. And when freedom is abused, what does it become?

Don Cayo: License, I guess.

Aga Khan: Exactly. And that’s where parts of our world say “Stop!” That boundary between freedom and the abuse of freedom is something which is driven by so many different notions of thought, faith, society, the whole thing.

Don Cayo: But that comes into play in a large way as an impediment at times to the pluralism that you work so hard to foster.

Aga Khan: If pluralism means abuse of faith, I would agree with that. I think that’s something we would not want to see.

But I’m seeing a reaction. I may be wrong, but you mention the recurrence of ethics in Western society. Western society has its own means of correcting itself, and I think Western society is in the process of looking at that very, very great problem. Look what’s happening in the Anglican Church; look what’s happening in the Catholic Church. Faith institutions are dealing with very, very severe problems of freedom and abuse of freedom.
**Don Cayo:** In Canada I think some of our success is the comfortable tolerance of letting people set different standards for themselves. So, yes, some people may choose license and other people choose some realistic guidelines, if you like, to exercise their freedom. Is that what you see as the goal for the broader society, or is it a little different from that?

**Aga Khan:** Well I think it’s difficult to impose a firm line. But I think that when you look at history, the history of humankind, you will find that when freedoms have become license, society tends to disaggregate. And I think that what we’re seeing in the Western world is that very issue on the table, and a reversal. I think there is a reversal under way. Freedom doesn’t mean that if you want to abuse that freedom, whatever it is, you legitimise or impose that on others.

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-- His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Vancouver Sun Interview, Don Cayo (Toronto, Canada)

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