Excerpts: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on what Muslim education needs from nursery school to university

"Let me turn to another aspect of Islamic society: our intellectual elite. In the past, much of the dynamism of Muslim society was born from the leaders of the faith: the Imams, the Pir and Mullahs. This identity between the leaders of the faith and the empire's intellectual elite was a continuous source of strength both to the faith and those whose duty it was to govern the empire. How many aspiring Mullahs or Imams today enter secular universities and obtain degrees in secular subjects? And vice-versa, how many university graduates, after completing their degrees, turn their lives to directing the flock of the faithful?

"Let me not be misunderstood -- I criticise neither Pirs nor Mullahs nor Imams nor degree-holders. I simply state that in future I believe it will be in our society's interest to have a much wider platform in common between our religious and our secular leaders. Our religious leadership must be acutely aware of secular trends, including those generated by this age of science and technology. Equally, our academic or secular elite must be deeply aware of Muslim history, of the scale and depth of leadership exercised by the Islamic empire of the past in all fields.

"It is through the creation of such a new elite, inspired by, and widely read in everything related to our heritage, that there must come about a revival in Muslim thought. The whole approach to education, without becoming archaic, should begin now to reintroduce, as widely as possible, the work and thought of our great Muslim writers and philosophers. Thus, from the nursery school to
the university, the thoughts of the young will be inspired by our own heritage and not that of some foreign culture.

"Again, let there be no misunderstanding: I am not in any way opposed to the literature or the art or the thought of the West. I simply maintain that the Islamic heritage is just as great and that it is up to us to bring it to the forefront again. When our nursery school children first begin to read, why should they not let their imaginations build upon the prowess of the Great Khaled rather than Wellington or Napoleon? And if the student of philosophy seeks a degree, should he not be encouraged to read about even Al-Hallaj rather than Hegel or Kierkegaard?"

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1970 University of Sind Convocation Address (Hyderabad, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1602/

"[H]ow are we to save both teaching of Islam, knowledge of nature and our daily Islamic life of kindliness, gentleness and prayers? If the present method by which the Ulema being brought up on one line of studies and the scientific youth on a different one continues, then disaster will come because there will be a fundamental misunderstanding in the outlook of intellect and faith in the soul of the nation. We must learn ... what saved Christianity for Europe. It was the fact that, as the universities at the time of the Renaissance and centuries that followed went forward with natural studies, at the same time, the same universities had faculties of divinity in which the priesthood was trained. The atmosphere of science permeated the atmosphere of Christian divinity studies and the atmosphere of the Christian divinity students permeated the atmosphere of the scientific studies; thus both grew and developed together. Christianity adapted itself to science ...

"Alas, Islam, which is a natural religion in which God's miracles are the very law and order of nature, drifted away and still drifting away, even in Pakistan, from science which is the study of those very laws and orders of nature....
"The only practical hope I see is that all your universities in Pakistan should have a faculty of Islamic religious and philosophical studies attached to ordinary curriculum for post-graduate students, who alone could be recognised as Ulemas. Something of the kind I know is being prepared in Egypt. A great Muslim divine, alas dead far too soon, the late Sheikh al-Maraghi, insisted in Azhar that natural laws should be taught according to the latest discoveries; but if we turn to Iran, Pakistan, North Africa, outside Egypt, we find that the Ulemas are being still brought up on the same old lines and the modern students on a totally different line. There is no unity of soul without which there can be no greatness....

"Unless our universities have the keen graduated Ulema school for men brought up in the same atmosphere as the science students, realising the fundamental truth that Islam is a natural religion of which the Ayats are the universe in which we live and move and have our being, the same causes will lead to the same disastrous results....

"Without Aligarh [University] no Pakistan would have come, but to live we want many Aligarhs with science and religious philosophy and education blended in one atmosphere realising that God of the Qur'an is the one whose Ayats are the universe."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's 1952 letter to H.E. Dr. Zahid Husain, President of Arabiyah Jamiyyat, 'What have we forgotten in Islam?' (Karachi, Pakistan) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1253/

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"While I am speaking to you about education, I would like to add that I do not think it is sufficient that Muslim children should be taught Islamic theology without corresponding secular education [or secular education] without religious training. Both of these must go hand in hand, and I see no reason why they should not do so in the schools which we build and have already built....

"Having lived in the Western world for many years, I know that
people have found it difficult to reconcile their faith with the pace of modern life. This problem should at all costs be minimised for our brother Muslims who live in these fast progressing countries. You cannot give a child secular education and then expect him not to ask questions about his religion. This is one more reason why your schools should have well-qualified teachers giving courses on the background of Islam, its history, theology, philosophy and all the other subjects which pertain to its glorious past."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1957 address at the Annual General Meeting of the East Africa Muslim Welfare Society (Mombasa, Kenya)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/895/

"But adaptation [to newly adopted homelands] is neither a simple process, nor one that can be completed in one or two generations. Still, today, there are Ismaili children born in this country, who like many other immigrant children, grow up sometimes unable to speak their ethnic language and who learn and adopt as their own ways which their parents always considered alien or worse. Many of these young people themselves seek to preserve their cultural heritage and to strengthen their bonds to their communities of origin. For this to happen, educational materials that reflect the rich humanistic and cultural dimensions of Islam have to be accessible to them in English. Such materials of the required calibre, unfortunately, are not always available, either in the country of settlement, or in the country of origin. Also, for religious education effectively to complement what children learn in secular schools, it has to be intellectually stimulating and pedagogically sound."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1994 remarks at the Ismaili Council Dinner (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4833/

"The problems facing Muslims in East Africa today are not far
different from elsewhere. The same problems confront [Pakistan].
Here, with the goodwill and active co-operation of your own
government, you have already made great headway and you have
had something positive to guide you. This lead has tried to preserve
the faith, to guide the people and in general terms to force the
nation to work on modern progressive lines, without abandoning
Muslim traditions and belief. In Africa, inevitably progress is much
slow [sic]. Government support for education in the Muslim schools
for example, is by no means automatic. Higher standards have to be
reached before they can qualify for official recognition and financial
support. This can only be achieved if there is an overriding will to
modernise the whole approach of Islamic teaching and attitude to
our way of life. Again, though the lead to modernisation of religious
teaching is often resisted and even resented, the fact remains that
the direction has been given to you. In East Africa no such guidance
has been forthcoming. It is only when this lead is given, that the
reforming spirit, which is at work among the younger generation of
Muslims today, can find a constructive outlet. Then 'ijma' will pay
its proper role and if the social scientists are correct in saying that
public opinion is generally conservative, then we need not fear of
going too far.

"[For Pakistan] to hold its own in modern world, to come to terms
with the highest and the latest developments in science and
technology, a radically new approach will be needed. If Islam
aspires, as I believe she must, to recapture the glories of the past,
she must be ready to adapt -- I do not say abandon her own
traditions -- to the entirely different circumstances of today. If we
fail to do this, not only shall we fail to progress ourselves, but the
younger generation will become disillusioned and fall prey to alien
and materialistic creeds, which have nothing whatever in common
with Islam."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1958 Pakistan Institute of International Affairs
address (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1164/

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


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