Excerpts: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on fasting and Ramadan

"Let us then study the duties of man, as the great majority interpret them, according to the verses of the Koran and the Traditions of the Prophet....
The healthy human body is the temple in which the flame of the Holy Spirit burns, and thus it deserves the respect of scrupulous cleanliness and personal hygiene. Prayer is a daily necessity, a direct communication of the spark with the universal flame. Reasonable fasting for a month in every year, provided a man's health is not impaired thereby, is an essential part of the body's discipline through which the body learns to renounce all impure desires.... Thus far I have described those tenets of Islam which are professed and held in common by all Muslims of any and every sect or subsect."

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1225/

"The enemies of Islam have attacked its outward manifestations and constantly attempted to show that its practice (even such essentially elevating manifestations as prayer, fasting, alms, etc.) is impossible in modern and civilised conditions. Unfortunately, the 'Ulama' -- the savants -- have played into the hands of the enemies. The present practices of Islam took shape and form at the time when the schoolmen reigned supreme in East and West alike.... If Islam is ever to fulfil its mission it must have a universality not only in space, namely, throughout the earth,
but in time, namely, as long as mankind exists on this globe.

"We maintain that the Prophet only ordered prayer, fasting, and gentleness in all human relations, kindliness and consideration for all beasts and animals from the smallest worm to the largest mammal....

"If, rightly, the Muslims have kept till now to the forms of prayer and fasting as practised at the time of the Prophet, it should not be forgotten that it is not the forms of prayer and fasting that have been commanded, but the facts, and we are entitled to adjust the forms to the facts of life as circumstances changed. It is the same Prophet who advises his followers ever to remain Ibnu 'l-Waqt (i.e. children of the time and period in which they were on earth), and it must be the natural ambition of every Muslim to practise and represent his Faith according to the standard of the Waqt or space-time."


Nicholas Tomalin: You’ve told me the ways in which your faith makes it easier to come to terms with the modern world. Are there any ways in which it is more difficult?

Aga Khan: Islam is a way of life, much more than Christianity. That’s is an old, boring thing to say, but it’s true. Now if we are to modernise our society we have to come into contact with totally different traditions. Basically the Ismaili Muslims have a choice between the Communist East, which would prevent us teaching our children the Faith, and the West, which has a set of materialistic and religious standards which are often at variance with ours. Imagine our difficulties seeing a civilisation which is at least twenty years a head of us in roads, hospitals, and standards of living, but which if we imitate too closely will obliterate the reality of our Faith. Sometimes we are faced with the choice of either accepting habits and customs which have proved economically successful in the West, but go against what our Faith tells us to do, or continuing in our old ways,
thus jeopardising our economic development.

I will give you a simple example. One of our factories making jute, for instance, in East Pakistan. In a Western society a factory like that is working 24 hours a day, six days a week all year round. But in an Islamic society that factory can work 24 hours a day, yes, but with five breaks for prayers and a complete break in the month of Ramadan, when the working force is reduced to less than half by fasting.

This is a terrible practical problem. Even among Muslim States they do not agree whether or not to work full time during Ramadan.

**Nicholas Tomalin:** How would you advise your communities?

**Aga Khan:** I think if it was, say, a steel factory in a time of national emergency, of war or something like that, then I would advise them to work during Ramadan. If it were peace, and the production were not so vital, then I would advise them to observe Ramadan.

But the real question is, where does one stop? If we are always importing from the West techniques to develop our economics, how can we stop importing alien ideas? You can imagine the problem. Every time we send our young men to Western Universities seven out of ten of them come back with alien traditions and tendencies of which they may be unconscious.

*His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1965 The London Sunday Times Interview with Nicholas Tomalin (London, United Kingdom)*

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1400/

Click here for this post in PDF format.