Excerpt: Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III on Ismailis and his guidance to them

"What has been my own policy with my followers? Our religion is our religion, you either believe in it or you do not. You can leave a faith but you cannot, if you do not accept its tenets, remain within it and claim to 'reform' it. You can abandon those tenets, but you cannot try to change them and still protest that you belong to the particular sect that holds them. Many people have left the Ismaili faith, just as others have joined it throughout the ages. About a score of people out of many millions -- a small group in Karachi and in India -- pretended to be Ismailis but called themselves 'reformers'. The true Ismailis immediately excommunicated them. There has never been any question of changing the Ismaili faith; that faith has remained the same and must remain the same. Those who have not believed in it have rightly left it; we bear them no ill-will and respect them for their sincerity.

"What about political guidance? It has been the practice of my ancestors, to which I have strictly adhered, always to advise Ismailis to be absolutely loyal and devoted subjects of the State -- whatever its constitution, monarchical or republican -- of which they are citizens. Neither my ancestors nor I have ever tried to influence our followers one way or another, but we have told them that the constituted legal authority of any country in which they abide must have their full and absolute loyalty. Similarly if any government approaches me and asks me for my help and my advice to its subjects, this advice is invariably -- as was my father's and my grandfather's -- that they must be loyal and law-abiding, and if they have any political grievances they must approach their government as legally constituted, and in loyalty and fidelity to it. All my
teaching and my guidance for my followers has been in fulfilment of 
this principle: render unto God the things which are God's and to 
Caesar those which are Caesar's.

"In matters of social reform I have tried to exert my influence and 
authority sensibly, and progressively. I have always sought to 
encourage the emancipation and education of women. In my 
grandfather's and my father's time the Ismailis were far ahead of 
any other Muslim sect in the matter of the abolition of the strict veil, 
even in extremely conservative countries. I have absolutely abolished 
it; nowadays you will never find an Ismaili woman wearing the veil. 
 Everywhere I have always encouraged girls' schools, even in regions 
where otherwise they were completely unknown. I say with pride 
that my Ismaili followers are, in this matter of social welfare, far in 
advance of any other Muslim sect. No doubt it is possible to find 
individuals equally advanced, but I am convinced that our social 
conditions as a body -- education for both boys and girls, marriage 
and domestic outlook and customs, the control over divorce, the 
provision for children in the event of divorce, and so forth -- are far 
ahead. We were pioneers in the introduction of midwifery, and long 
before any other Muslim community in the Middle East, we had 
trained nurses for childbirth. With the support and help of Lady 
Dufferin's nursing association in India, I was able -- at a time when 
normal conditions in these matters were terribly unsanitary -- to 
introduce a modern outlook on childbirth, with trained midwives, not 
only in India and Burma but in Africa and (so far as general 
conditions permitted) in Syria and Iraq.

"In Africa, where I have been able to give active help as well as 
advice, we have put the finances of individuals and of the various 
communities on a thoroughly safe basis. We established an insurance 
company -- the Jubilee Insurance -- whose shares have greatly 
increased in value. We also set up what we called an investment 
trust, which is really a vast association for receiving money and then 
putting it out on loan, at a low rate of interest, to Ismaili traders 
and to people who want to buy or build their own houses."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's autobiography: 'The Memoirs of 
Aga Khan III -- World Enough and Time', Chapter 2: Islam, The Religion of 
My Ancestors, 1954