Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan's cautionary notes on Western values

"Today my worry is not [with polygamy]. My worry is the notion of unique family, which is in the process of destroying itself. Voila! We are further than the polygamy today. Today we face a situation where a part of our world accepts that children are born outside the family."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2001 Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International Interview (Aleppo, Syria and Lebanon) [Translation]
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6073/

Aga Khan: Modernisation does not mean occidentalisation....

Reem Haddad: And just at the end, Your Highness, is there a message that you would like to leave the Syrian people?

Aga Khan: ... Secondly the notion that progress does not mean occidentalisation. Progress in the Ummah means moving forwards in quality of life, but not giving up your identity, not giving up your value systems. Indeed our value systems are massively important for the future. [Emphasis original]

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 Syrian TV Interview with Reem Haddad (Aleppo, Syria)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9004/
"I would question what you interpret as, or the elements you put in the word, 'progress'. There are many aspects of the industrialised world as it is called today which I do not wish for the future of the Islamic world, nor for my own children. I think there are imbalances there, which of course exist in other societies but the imbalance is there, which I don’t think are healthy, which I would wish changed, which I would hope Islamic society in the future will address and find different forms, perhaps better forms, of solutions. So, I don’t think one can equate ‘progress’ exclusively with what is happening in the industrialised world now, very far from it....

"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/

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Geoffry Barker: I’ve been told that you seem a different personality in the East. Are you aware of any change in your mental attitude when you are in the East?

Aga Khan: No. I think there is certainly more empathy with the East emotionally, culturally, historically. That is natural. I was brought up in the West but I don’t always understand the West.

Geoffry Barker: What don’t you understand?

Aga Khan: Some attitudes.

Geoffry Barker: Such as?
**Aga Khan:** Social attitudes which I find difficult. I think they are transitional....

**Geoffry Barker:** Could you give me an example of some of these attitudes?

**Aga Khan:** Well, I think that freedom of ... maybe some of the freedoms seem to bordering on license at times. I think also in terms of certain freedoms of comment, certain freedoms of attitude towards other people which to me are areas of concern. I think for example at times the media, some of the media, are involved in things which I disapprove of. I think they are damaging to society. The may have their justification ... but I think at times they are disruptive.

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**Nicholas Tomalin:** Do you feel happier here in the West, or in the East?

**Aga Khan:** I feel happier, personally, in the East. But I must stay here to learn from the West what it can offer us.... 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.... 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.

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Nicholas Tomalin: Do you find left-wing political attitudes are a danger to your Faith?

Aga Khan: In the Faith itself, every man is equal. So long as this is the dominant element a left-wing attitude is not going to get a strong grasp. What does happen, and this is a danger, is that the left-wing attitudes tend not only to destroy the Faith of a man towards his religion but also the respect of one individual towards another. When the Faith is broken down everything goes with it: the family, society, the individual, the intelligence.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1965 The London Sunday Times Interview, Part II, with Nicholas Tomalin (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10176/

"I believe that the first problem facing every Muslim living in the industrialised world, is that Muslim children will be born in the West for two or three generations to come. They will be young people having no personal contact with their family traditions, cultural background, or country of origin. Most likely, they will not speak their mother tongue: Arabic, Urdu or Persian for example. They will have no contact with their language, its culture or its civilisation. Here in particular there is a series of basic questions to be answered: how will these Muslims deal with their culture and traditional background? How will they deal and associate themselves with the industrial society in which they live, its culture, its civilisation, its language? All Muslims, be they Sunnites or Shiites, are confronted with this problem. From this viewpoint we should ask ourselves: how can we combine our Islamic traditions and culture with the traditions and culture of the industrial society without losing both?"

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1986 Riad Naguib El-Rais Interview, 'The
Aftab Ahmad Khan: How do you assess the future of Muslim minorities in Western secular states?

Aga Khan: I think these communities in the industrialised world will need to deal with their problems with wisdom because they will be in the front line of exposure to industrial and substantially secularised societies. They will have to take a long term view of their position in their society with the deep conviction that they do not and should not forsake their traditional attitudes to their faith and the family. I say that for a very precise reason. The industrialised secular societies themselves are beginning to change and they are seeking to re-establish a better equilibrium. This is quite evident in the Western World. So rather than the short term integration into the secularised society, the contribution of Muslim minorities should be to assist the societies in finding a better equilibrium which strengthens the quality of life. However, I think it is going to take a very mature reflection and a sense of time which is a particular strength of Islam. Islam gives [the?] time a completely different meaning than what the industrialised world conceives.

Aftab Ahmad Khan: A number of professional people from the Islamic countries have settled down in Western countries. What should they do to help their own societies?

Aga Khan: I think these are people who are living in what sociologists call a cross-cultural situation. It is an unpleasant word but it says, I suppose, what it tries to say. My concern would be that these people who are exposed to this cross-cultural situation should use that exposure to strengthen their contribution to their own countries and to their own societies by drawing from the culture which is not theirs but which is beneficial and by not accepting without question a whole lot of attitudes and principles which come from a part of the world alien to us.
"I have observed in the Western world a deeply changing pattern of human relations. The anchors of moral behaviour appear to have dragged to such depths that they no longer hold firm the ship of life: what was once wrong is now simply unconventional, and for the sake of individual freedom must be tolerated. What is tolerated soon becomes accepted. Contrarily, what was once right is now viewed as outdated, old fashioned and is often the target of ridicule.

"In the face of this changing world, which was once a universe to us and is now no more than an overcrowded island, confronted with a fundamental challenge to our understanding of time, surrounded by a foreign fleet of cultural and ideological ships which have broken loose, I ask, do we have a clear, firm and precise understanding of what Muslim Society is to be in times to come? And if as I believe, the answer is uncertain, where else can we search then in the Holy Qur’an, and in the example of Allah's last and final Prophet?"

Aga Khan: I think there are sometimes some moral issues vis-a-vis the West where there are attitudes in the West where some of our people, and I'm talking now about youth in the Muslim world, not just the Islamic community, ask themselves is there a dividing line between freedom and licence? And if there is a dividing line between freedom and licence, which is a highly important ethical question to every person, where is it? Is it where the West has situated that divide, or is it where we would like to see it? ...
John Stackhouse/Patrick Martin: Do you think the masses that you're speaking of understand the West? We spoke earlier about the misconception of Islam.

Aga Khan: Yes I think they understand the West; whether they're empathetic with all Western values is a question I would have to say no to. They are not empathetic to all Western values.

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/

"In a world where quality of life is increasingly measured in material terms there is risk that the essential value system of Islam will be eroded, or even threatened with disappearance."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2007 Golden Jubilee Inaugural Ceremony address (Aiglemont) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8171/

Caroline Pigozzi/Jean-Claude Deutsch: How does the Imam, who is celebrated in the third world, become a private person in Europe?

Aga Khan: The hereditary public function is an integral part of my life. It is second nature to me. Although, it is no longer made up of public ceremonies, the Ismaili-Imam relationship is intact. What is surprising is that in the West the community has maintained its traditions and preserved the respect for its religious leader. It is not clear how such a complex function is to be maintained in a world which is constantly changing.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1994 Paris Match Interview (1st) with Caroline Pigozzi and Jean-Claude Deutsch (Paris, France) [Translation] http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/850/
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: 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.
"In future, even beyond the Muslim world, I believe it will be the abuse of freedom that fuels debate. Indeed, in many areas people defend the principle of freedom to a point where freedom tends to become depravity, permissiveness and disrespect. At that point, Islam says 'no.' And that doesn't only apply to the problem of the relationship between men and women. Take the economic crisis that is affecting us all. The root of the problem is that certain financial institutions have been allowed too much freedom, which they have abused in a way verging on the immoral."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2010 Politique Internationale Interview with Jean-Jacques Lafaye, 'The Power of Wisdom' (Paris, France)

"Western Europe and North America possess much that can be envied. They also face social and moral conflicts which are far more daunting than known in Asia or Africa. Increasingly, I believe, thinking people both in Europe and America are asking: Where is this all prosperity leading us? Are we any happier? Do we get as much satisfaction out of living as did our fathers and forefathers? ..."

"The pressure of an acquisitive society has made quite frightening demands on family life. Mothers with younger children go out to work in the millions. The juvenile crime rate soars upwards, homes are broken, and the family unit itself is undermined at its source...."

"What has been called the permissive society where anything goes, nothing matters, nothing is sacred or private any more, is not a promising foundation for a brave and upright new world. This fearful chase after material ease must surely be tempered by peace of mind, by conscience, by moral values, which must be resuscitated. If not, man will simply have converted the animal instinct of feeding
himself before others and even at the expense of others, into perhaps a more barbaric instinct of feeding himself and then hoarding all he can at the cost of the poor, the sick and the hungry.

"It is my deepest conviction that if Islamic society is to avoid following blindly the course of Western society without taking the trouble to raise guards against the latter's weaknesses and deficiencies, a thorough rediscovery, revitalisation and reintegration of our traditional values must be achieved."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1967 Peshawar University Convocation Address (Peshawar, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1494/

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John Tidmarsh: [B]ut, does the Islamic world, to some extent, resent the intrusion of Western culture, Western ideas, the growing intrusion?

Aga Khan: Yes, I think there are times when what I would call occidentalisation, is a force that the Islamic world would not welcome. The Islamic world, and Islam itself, does not make that difference between the spiritual and material world in the same terms as St. Augustine might have done in the Christian world. We have, I think somewhat different ethical values. And they are, linked, strongly, to this, non-separation, between the world of everyday and the world of the practice of the faith.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1997 BBC Radio Interview with John Tidmarsh (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5301/

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"There are certain areas, certain countries of the Muslim world, who are relatively opposed to the West, but I'm not sure they are opposed to the West on religious grounds. My interpretation is that they are opposed to the West on completely different grounds. Which will
cover social attitudes, will cover economic issues -- but not the faith. Remember that for the Muslims, the Christians are Ahl’al Kitab, 'People of the Book'. They believe in One God. So I would not all accept the fact that -- although the statement that fundamentalist Islam will oppose Christianity because of Christianity. That's not the cause."

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

"In the long run, the question is what is the context in which human society will function and the Islamic community will function? And I think the whole notion of relevance is a massively important issue. It's going across all faiths. Not just the Islamic faith. Not just the Islamic interpretation. It’s going across all faiths today. There is a clear search for ethical contexts. And my sense is that could be a little bit of a reaction to maybe some of excesses in the material context. You know, it's clear that uncontrolled freedom becomes license. It's an issue that keeps coming up all the time. And it's one which needs very, very deep reflection. Very deep reflection. It's probably the most challenging issue that I have to address today. More so since the life sciences have evolved, since communications have evolved"

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1999 Pranay Gupte Interview (United States, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5676/

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