Excerpt: Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III on the historical roots of apathy across Muslim society

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE OF IMAMAT SPEECHES, INTERVIEWS AND WRITINGS

"This general apathy which pervades every walk of life is the sign of a moral disease, and what I will ask you to consider with me today are the causes of this terrible disease, and I will especially invite your attention to this point. Are the causes of this disease, to use a medical phrase, congenital and necessary, i.e. are they part of the faith, or are they accidental and acquired? ...

"Islam, as a faith, when it was best understood, did not lead to apathy but to extraordinary devotion and self-sacrifice which it elicited even from such wretched material as the dissolute and immoral Meccan aristocrats of the days of ignorance; for these very men under the purifying influence of Islam distinguished themselves above all the Arabs by their loyalty and devotion....

"We must, therefore, consider what the real causes are of this supineness which we are compelled to recognise as universal in Moslem society of today, a supineness all the more remarkable under the benign rule of England, where a little self-sacrifice would enable us to achieve greatness; for through greatness in modern times consists in pre-eminence in learning, wealth, and such pre-eminence we might attain with constant effort [sic].

"I believe that this disease cannot be assigned to any one single cause, but I will, with your permission, enumerate four causes which, in my judgement, have had a paramount influence in introducing this apathy, this moral torpor, into Moslem society; and you will notice that all the causes of which I speak have been in operation for a very long time....

"[I]n my humble opinion -- an opinion held also by many of the most learned who have given the matter serious study -- it was, first, the bad example and selfishness of the Abbassides; secondly, the fatal system ... with its restrictions on the intellectual development of the women;
thirdly, the constant and silent withdrawal of the most pious and moral Moslems into a life of private prayer and devotion; and, lastly, this doctrine of necessity, that brought about our downfall. I say it was in my opinion these four causes that have brought Moslem society down to its present low and degraded level of intellect and character.

"How low we have fallen, one can easily find out by comparing Moslem general intelligence of today to that which exists even in the most backward of Slavic-European States. If this downward tendency is not arrested, there is danger that the best minds amongst the present-day Moslems in India will be brought up without any knowledge of the purity and beauty of Islam, and this loss will mean the certain estrangement of all the ablest of the community and the consequent loss of character, honesty and devotion amongst the intelligent, and this will mean, further, that our intellectual and social leaders will not possess the moral qualities most necessary for permanent success."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's 1902 All India Muhammadan Educational Conference Presidential Address, ‘Muslim Education in India’ (Delhi, India)

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