His Highness the Aga Khan on the theocratic state and democracy

**John Stackhouse / Patrick Martin:** You’ve spoken in the past, well before September the 11th, about some of the difficulties or challenges of Muslim nations to secularise. Is that still a great challenge for those countries, and do you foresee it happening in the near term?

**Aga Khan:** I can’t give you a single answer to that, and the reason is that the history of these nations is very different one from the other. If you were to take the Central Asian republics, their relationship to the faith of Islam, relationship to democratic processes is very different from what happens in other parts of the world. But I think the more over-riding issue is the issue of theocracy versus secular state, and I think that at this point in time, the vast majority of countries within the Muslim world have recognised the difficulty of a theocratic state, and these difficulties are due to many different forces in these countries. But also, the pluralism within Islam. Because if you create a theocratic state, automatically you are saying there must be an interpretation which is the state interpretation of the faith. So that alone is a very, very difficult question to ask. And you can see, I don’t have to name the countries, you can see what happens when these internal stresses occur in states which would present themselves as theocratic states. So I think the answer is most of them are going towards a secular state, but I would want to avoid the notion of a secular state without faith. What we are talking about are states that want to have modern forms of government but where the ethics of Islam remain the premises on which civil society is built. And I think that’s where we see this -- to me very exciting -- effort to maintain the
ethics of Islam, but in a modern state. And I think when we're talking about the ethics of Islam, it's easier to have civil society institutions built on the ethics of the faith, than a theocratic state in the full form....

**John Stackhouse / Patrick Martin:** Can you explain, though, I've spent some time in Islamic countries and there is one problem, particularly among the young, educated people -- they tend to turn to Islam and the theocratic solution in great numbers right now. What is the appeal?

**Aga Khan:** I ask myself how great those numbers are. I would say that when they're put to the political test, they're actually often less numerous than they appear to be. A case in point would be Pakistan. So I just want to make the point that I'm not sure in my own conviction that the numbers are as great as they might perceive, or be perceived. They are very vocal, they're very visible, they're well organised, they have a point of view. Whether that point of view represents the majority of the population of a given country, I would find very difficult to say because I'm not certain of that.

But I think within those groups that you're talking about, there are a number of things which are of concern to me. I think the first thing is the nature of governance. The use in many, many countries of their own views on the nature of governance, the competence of governance, etc. So the nature of governance is an issue. I think the nature of the economy is another issue. Young people who are educated have an entitlement to have decent employment, and in a number of countries, they don't find that. There is no systematic relationship between the state of progress of the economies, and the number of people who are being educated. So there's frustration.

I think there are sometimes some moral issues vis-à-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? So I think there's a multiplicity of
questions which the Islamic people are asking -- I think they ask themselves about the freedom of their countries when they find that their economies are constrained because somebody says you are going to go into a period of recession because your government’s been spending too much, that creates frustration. So I think there’s a number of forces that play on news that we have to accept.... Democracy is a wonderful concept, but it's not failsafe. It doesn't work in every country in every time, it doesn't work.

**John Stackhouse / Patrick Martin:** Has the West been too aggressive in pushing democracy on countries that may not have the same political traditions as we do?

**Aga Khan:** Again, I'm not sure if [it is] the issue of democracy per se. To me the issue is how do governments change in developing countries, what are the processes. That's where I think the democratic system has caused problems. It has caused instability. Democracy with fifty, sixty, seventy national parties is not a very solid formula for stable government. So you know, I think that if you look at it from the point of view of the Third World, you can see that there are wonderful concepts but they do need to be worked through very, very carefully. Because if they fail, the concept is rejected.

---

"Today, the world is divided into theocracies and secular states. Sometimes people talk -- quite rightly -- about the three nations which are, each in its own way, theocratic, namely Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia. If they were to change, you would have a different world. If I dare say it, politics should be left to politicians, and God to God."

---

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/

---

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2010 Politique Internationale Interview with Jean-Jacques Lafaye, 'The Power of Wisdom' (Paris, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9473/
See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the Islamic concept of statehood


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


Click here for this post in PDF format.