Excerpts: TH Aga Khans III and IV on interpreting the faith: individuality vs formalistic approaches which anchor faith in time

"I think that one has to be very careful in the interpretation of Islam, not anchoring that interpretation at one time in history. If you make Islam a faith of the past, you in a sense make it impossible for the Muslim to practise his faith today and in the future. And as a Muslim I totally reject the concept that the message of Islam is tied to any given time after the revelation of the faith. And Islam must be practised by people today and in hundred years, two hundred years. And if Islam is a faith forever, then [the] leadership must be very careful not to harness it to concepts of a given time."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1985 Independent Television (ITV) Interview (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3134/

"Those who wish to introduce the concept that you can only practise your faith as it was practised hundreds of years ago are introducing a time dimension which is not part of our faith today. It is a very delicate issue, whether it is in science, in medicine, in economics."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1991 The (Manchester) Guardian Weekly interview with Akbar Ahmed (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10697/
**Rajiv Mehrotra:** There is a perception that sections of Islam are, let us say, intolerant of other faiths with which you talked about essentially secular approach and philosophy. What is the Islamic position on other faiths and relationships with other faiths?

**Aga Khan:** Well I think we are experiencing a time of, in a sense, the search for a legitimacy in interpretation of Islam in relation to the modern world, in relation to modern society, in relation to non-Muslim societies and in that search there are all sorts of interpretations being put forward. I personally am very cautious about seeking a formalistic approach, because I think that one of the great risks -- apart from the fact that it does tend to deny individuality which is, of course, something strongly upheld in the Islamic faith -- is the fact that it tends to anchor a faith in one time and that is one aspect of my faith which I would never accept. I would never accept that the concept of Islam, the practice of Islam, cannot be fulfilled in the modern world or in the world of tomorrow.

**Rajiv Mehrotra:** The other philosophical dimension that in Islamic world view must come up for you in some measure is in the development models that you might be seeking to encourage. I think so that Islam decrees a societal framework which may seem somewhat strained relationship to modern technology modern practices, structures, financial institutions. How would you reconcile those?

**Aga Khan:** Well I say this with deference that I am not entirely convinced that the faith itself has decreed any particular form rather that the people have interpreted it. And if my role is to interpret the faith in regard to modern society, I have to look at the basic issue which is, well, anything that we are doing is in conflict with the ethic of Islam. If it is not in conflict with the ethic of Islam then I must interpret it as being possible.

**Rajiv Mehrotra:** Spirituality, or the religion or the faith is frequently threatened by technology. You have a passion and a great interest in technology. How have you managed to reconcile that?

**Aga Khan:** Well, from the moment that I am not willing to say that the faith of Islam is of a particular time, when I have to search...
within Islam what are the elements which allow me to interpret within the modern world and my interpretation is that Allah’s message and His power is not limited. And in fact that modern science simply allows us to discover more and more of the miracles that He has performed, perhaps continues to perform, and we are blessed with the faculty of intelligence. And I cannot understand why we would be blessed with that faculty unless we were mandated to use it.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1989 All India TV and Radio Interview with Rajiv Mehrotra (India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4296/

"There is value in formal observances. I think it is well that a man should make a habit of formal prayer night and morning, for protection and in thanks. But, I place emphasis on the continual direct relation between God and man. And of recent years the best of Islam has done the same."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III’s Daily Sketch Interview answer to the question ‘Is Religion Something Special?’ (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10121/

"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."
"[For the Sunnis] it remained for the Faithful to interpret the Qur'an, the example and the sayings of the Prophet, not only in order to understand Islam but to ensure its development throughout the centuries. Fortunately the Qur'an has itself made this task easy, for it contains a number of verses which declare that Allah speaks to man in allegory and parable. Thus the Qur'an leaves the door open for all kinds of possibilities of interpretation so that no one interpreter can accuse another of being non-Muslim. A felicitous effect of this fundamental principle of Islam that the Qur'an is constantly open to allegorical interpretation has been that our Holy Book has been able to guide and illuminate the thought of believers, century after century, in accordance with the conditions and limitations of intellectual appreciation imposed by external influences in the world."

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

"It must not be forgotten that, according to the principle of Ijma already mentioned, the interpretation of the precepts and laws which regulate the lives of the Faithful, as laid down in the Qur’an and in the Traditions of the Prophet, can be done at any time and for any generation. Such an interpretation, by means of the Ijtihad which is a personal and living research, can be made, within the general limits of the Qur’an and Traditions. The suppleness of Muslim Law enhances its value, and its broad lines leave room for vigorous growth and adaptation to the changing and unforeseeable
circumstances of international life. Muslim Law must, therefore, be freed of the rigid character, given to it by ancient codifications. It would be erroneous to assume that the door to interpretation has been shut, because the four leading juridical schools of Muslim orthodoxy had already decided, for all time, as to the prescriptions of Muslim Law....

"As regards the Qur’an, we stress the fact, that to be better understood -- without being blindly attached to the exegesis of ancient authorities -- it would inspire Muslims to a revival of religious thought and action. The Traditions and Sayings of the Prophet are to be seriously and critically studied with a view to freeing them from posterior deviations and infiltrations. As regards the four juridical schools, we may point out that their divergences are of little importance, and there are no antagonisms between them."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III, (with Dr Zaki Ali) in 'The Religious Revival of Islam', Chapter 4 of their book 'Glimpses of Islam', 1944
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10456/

"Is religion different from Science or Philosophy? Is the former so interpreted and understood? No, there is possibility of bringing about the greatest intellectual reconciliation not only with modern philosophy and science but even with other subjects...."

"Once upon a time I said somewhere that other religions have taken in formalities, but Muslims have outformalised the formal. Both Christians and Hindus have made progress in Scientific education but Muslims have lagged far behind. What has happened in a country that is looked upon as the capital of Islam has inevitably happened in every Muslim country. This does not mean that the faith of Islam is not true. Nay Islam is the most rational, most social, of all faiths.

"It only means that our substitution and interpretation of Islam totally fails us. To this work gentlemen, however unpleasant and
offensive it may be to the conservatives, thought is necessary if we are to keep alive the name of Muslim University and Muslim Educational Conference.... Howsoever unpleasant it may be, this task of reinterpretting Islam will have to be done. The work which Christianity has done, we must do for Islam. In fact without serious effort on these lines, we should not be able to hold up our own in face of the stress and strife of modern life.

"A faith that can be believed in sincerely by philosophers, of whom any country can be proud, can never be in contradiction with the best thought of the present. As I have once said before, whatever its objective truth, it will not maintain subjective truth if it is interpreted in this old way."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's 1936 All India Muhammadan Educational Conference Presidential Address (2nd) (Rampur, India) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10501/

See also: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on Islam's and the Qur'an's assent of freedom of individual interpretation

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