Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on the overriding concerns and problems that worry him

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE OF IMAMAT SPEECHES, INTERVIEWS AND WRITINGS

Pranay Gupte: Of all your worries, what concerns you most?

Aga Khan: I’m worried about continuity. And I’m worried about the efficacy of the institution in a continuum of time. Worried is perhaps not too strong a word. I think about that. I think about that. The institutions, I think, are aware of it. We are now working on 10-year programs. As I said, if you had asked me in 1957, can you work on the 10-year programme, I would have said, “It’s like walking barefoot on Mount Everest.” I mean you’re never going to get there. That horizon was an unreasonable horizon. Today that is a reasonable horizon.

Pranay Gupte: When you talk about worrying about continuity, beyond the temporal -- since you’re both a temporal leader and a spiritual leader -- does that really extend to the liturgy of Islam?

Aga Khan: Yes, it does because, first of all, of the plurality of tradition within Islam. Secondly, the processes of change, if they do occur, are very sensitive indeed. And they need to be very carefully thought through. It is an area where enormous wisdom, enormous knowledge, enormous sensitivity has got to be there. So that process is one of the issues that will go well past my lifetime. Well past my lifetime. And, you know, it’s something which I inherited, that I have worked with -- as you know, I have a degree in Islamic History and, therefore, I am comfortable in thinking about these issues. But they are highly sensitive.

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)

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Rajiv Mehrotra: What would you say for the world community moving into the 21st century? What are the overriding concerns and problems that worry you?

Aga Khan: A number of them, I think one of the biggest worries I have is how to encourage a sense of quality of life in the rural areas. To understand what rural populations are seeking, and to try and convince them that the development process is concerned about them and it will address their issues in their own language, in their own vocabulary, because I cannot visualise the massive rural populations of the developing world ever becoming urbanised without cataclysmic consequences. In Western societies that’s happened. The demography is stable or receding, so that is one of my concerns.

Another one of my concerns is the stabilisation of the economies of the developing world, that is, economies which are basically dependent on one or two resources. How do you take steps to avoid the volatility of that situation because you cannot have a stable development process in a volatile environment and there are a large number of countries which are dependant on that.

The third area is clearly how to deal with new forms of disease: “Disease of the modern society”, if you want to. That is something which is calling for enormous resources today. Developing countries don’t have those sort of resources. How do they enable their population to access to that sort of care? That’s another area. Obviously, there are political concerns and those sort of issues, but I am not a politician. But, in so far as there is the beginning of a cooling down of the conflictuality which existed between power blocs in the past, that I can only commend those who are making it happen, and wish and pray that should continue, because I think that will be a major force for improving the quality of life.
His Highness the Aga Khan's 1989 All India TV and Radio Interview with Rajiv Mehrotra (India)

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