Excerpts: TH, Aga Khans III and IV on tradition and modernity -- Part 2/4: Towards "new understandings of essential principles"

"[It] is not a simple matter for any human society with a concern and appreciation of its history to relate its heritage to its contemporary conditions. Traditions evolve in a context, and the context always changes, thus demanding a new understanding of essential principles. For us Muslims, this is one of the pressing challenges we face."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2003 Institute of Ismaili Studies 25th Anniversary Graduation Ceremony address (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6826/

"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 ... is the fact that it tends to anchor a faith in one time and that is one aspect which, of my faith which I would never accept."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1989 All India TV and Radio Interview with Rajiv Mehrotra (India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4296/
Michael Charlton: But in this conflict between the orthodox, who say that the Qur’anic teaching, like Khomeini appears to be saying in Iran, are immutable and even if the majority wishes them to be changed -- they can not be changed because the teaching itself is unchanging and must not be changed -- in that context, between those who think like that and those who think that Islam can not survive unless it adapts, where do you stand yourself?

Aga Khan: I think the question is where you start from. Are you starting from the Qur’an? Are you starting from the Sharia? Are you starting from secular Christian law? Where are you starting from? The Qur’an is not a body of law, and that, I think, is a statement that every Muslim will make. What is referred to today as Islamic law is a compilation of views expressed by law makers who lived well after the revelation of the Qur’an, well after the time of the Prophet. The interesting thing is that in the Qu’ran, for example, a lot of the things which I would refer to as punishment, are punishment as deterrent. The punishment itself is not the issue at stake. The question is you have got to stop certain things from happening for the good of society. Now if that’s the starting point, then I would say a lot of things do not have to be done, which maybe being done today in the Muslim world. That is my position, because I will start from the Qur’an. I will not start from an interpretation made five or six generations after the life of the Prophet. If we’re talking about fundamentalism, lets start at the revelation of Islam.

Michael Charlton: That puts you fairly firmly in the minority in view of what appears to be happening in Iran and Pakistan.

Aga Khan: No. Not at all. Not at all. I think you have to be very careful in the West not to consider that the more rigid forms of Islam today are typical of the Muslim world. That is not the case. It’s very far from the case.
"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."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's 1934 Foreword to 'Muhammad: A Mercy to All Nations' by Al-Hajj Qassim Ali Jairazbhoy (London, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10546/

"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."
"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 reinterpreting 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/
"History, both Muslim and non-Muslim is studded with examples of societies which have stagnated through failing to adapt to new historical and human trends. Paralysis gained control of the body of these groups through a progressive attack on the military, moral, material, social and economic features of these societies. From this gradual paralysis death has invariably ensued, either after longer or shorter periods. I believe, therefore, that a continuous review of the history which is being made every day is necessary so that the processes of adjustment for the bases of our society are brought up-to-date, and I would say even more, are projected into the future so that specific goal can be obtained over a number of years. One fact seems to hold true throughout human history and that is that any society or nucleus of human beings, which has moved in a specific direction, regardless of the environing historical trends, has met with dismemberment or destruction."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1964 First World Socio-Economic Conference address (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9999/

"[O]ne cannot change religion overnight. This evolution is a slow thing, and it is, therefore, an everlasting job with its own rhythm, usually a lot slower than the political and economic upheavals of the present time."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1975 L’Expansion Interview with Roger Priovert (Paris, France) [Translation]
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1732/

Aroon Purie: As Imam of your sect, you are also an interpreter of the Qur’an for your followers, but on the other hand, you are a man with a modern education and background. How do you reconcile these two aspects on subject like women’s rights, family planning and other related matters?

Aga Khan: As Imam of the Ismaili sect, I am in a position to adapt the teachings of the Qur’an to the modern condition. On the question of
modernity the issue is essentially whether one is affecting the fundamental moral fabric of society or whether one is affecting the fundamentals of religious practice. As long as these two aspects are safeguarded the rest can be subject to adjustment.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1989 India Today Interview (India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/4315/

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Rajiv Mehrotra: The other philosophical dimension that in Islamic worldview 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.
"My grandfather gave, and I have myself given, a certain interpretation to Shiism. The intellect is seen as a facet of faith, in the service of faith. Reason, reflection, form part of the process of decision making. This reflection is desirable, is necessary in the interpretation of religion. This means that we invest in the intellect of the community. This is one of the elements which has made it possible for the Ismaili Community to respond to the problems of ... [sentence is incomplete]."
'Progress does not mean occidentalisation'


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See also: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on tradition and modernity - Part 4/4: Innovate; 'Discover new knowledge'


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