Excerpts: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on secularism and Islam's reconciliation with it

"The Muslim world offers deep roots in a system of values emphasizing service, charity and a sense of common responsibility, and denying what it sees to be the false dichotomy between religious and secular lives."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1994 Massachusetts Institute of Technology Commencement Ceremony address (Cambridge, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1/

"God has favoured me with the blessing of Islam. I think that many religions find it difficult to adapt to or to live in an evolving world. Not so with a Muslim who believes in the omnipresence of God. In Islam, there is no dichotomy between the spiritual and the temporal. I have endeavoured all my life to live and work in accordance with this integrated philosophy. I think that many of us, Muslims who were educated in the West or have been imbued with Western ideas, forget that there are certain Christian traditions which go back to the teachings of Saint Augustine and which sharply separate the religious from the secular. These are not the traditions of Islam. Quite the contrary, Islam forbids the separation between the way you deal with people in society and that in which you discharge your religious duties. The meanings of life, its aims and ethics are part and parcel of the integrated unity of the Muslim environment in which I believe and through which I work."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1986 Riad Naguib El-Rais Interview, 'The
"With the deaths of King Charles the First, and Louis the Sixteenth, Western culture initiated a process of secularisation which grew into present day democratic institutions, and lay cultures. Islam, on the other hand, never endorsed any political dogma. So the historical process of secularisation which occurred in the West, never took place in Muslim societies. What we are witnessing today, in certain Islamic countries, is exactly the opposite evolution, the theocratisation of the political process. There is no unanimity in the Islamic world on the desirability of this trend but it would certainly be less threatening if the humanistic ethics of the faith were the driving force behind the processes of change."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1996 Brown University Commencement Ceremony address (Providence, Rhode Island, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5089/

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**Antonio Marujo / Faranaz Keshavjee:** Does daily life carry the same importance as eternal life?

**Aga Khan:** *In Islam, they are the same thing.* One cannot separate faith from the world. This is one of the greatest difficulties that the non-Muslim world has, because the Judaic Christian societies developed with that notion of separation. For the Muslims, that separation is not possible. We are expected to live our faith every day, in every hour. One of the difficulties that we are facing in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, is the articulation of the difference in values in a comprehensive form. However, this does not mean that we are in conflict. They are just different values.

[Emphasis added]

**Antonio Marujo / Faranaz Keshavjee:** One of the differences is locality, debated in countries such as Portugal, Turkey, and France.
For many, faith should remain confined to a private space. You mentioned that Islam doesn’t separate faith from the world. How do you perceive this notion?

**Aga Khan:** I would like the non-Muslim societies to accept the values of Islam. If Islam says that we do not separate the world from faith, the Western world should accept that. I would go further and say: it is a wonderful way to live! It is an extraordinary blessing to be able to live our faith everyday! Making ethic the way in which you live your daily life, and not only in occasions such as death, a marriage or a birth. I am not criticising anyone. I am saying that secular society, by the nature of secularity and the demands of time, provokes in people the need to first place the world and faith after. This is not a part of Islam.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Paroquias de Portugal interview with Antonio Marujo and Faranaz Keshavjee (Lisbon, Portugal) [Translation] http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8861/

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**Stefan Aust / Erich Follath:** Provocative, sad and distasteful. But the freedom of the press is one of the highest values in our democracy. We have to balance one thing against the other and we will allow non-believers to express even outrageous opinions.

**Aga Khan:** I think that you are now referring to one of the most difficult problems that we have and I don't know the answer. The industrialised West is highly secularised; the Muslim world is much less secularised and that stems largely from the nature of the faith of Islam, which you know and I know has an intrinsic meshing with everyday life. And that is a scenario where people of goodwill need to think very, very carefully.

**Stefan Aust / Erich Follath:** In some of your speeches you mentioned Kemal Ataturk in a positive context. Turkey followed his path and is one of the very few countries with a predominant Muslim population where there is separation of church and state. Would you like to see others go the same way?
**Aga Khan:** I am not opposed to secularism as such. But I am opposed to unilateral secularism where the notions of faith and ethics just disappear from society.

*His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2006 Spiegel Online Interview (2nd), Stefan Aust and Erich Follath, ‘Islam Is a Faith of Reason’ (Berlin, Germany)*

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7900/

"Historically, the arts, including architecture, have taken their principal inspiration from religious faith. But when art is separated from faith-based roots, other influences can dominate -- including soulless technology and empty secularisation."

*His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 Aga Khan Award For Architecture Prize Ceremony address (Doha, Qatar)*

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9616/

"I fully understand the West’s historic commitment to separating the secular from the religious. But for many non-Westerners, including most Muslims, the realms of faith and of worldly affairs cannot be antithetical. If ‘modernism’ lacks a spiritual dimension, it will look like materialism. And if the modernising influence of the West is insistently and exclusively a secularising influence, then much of the Islamic world will be somewhat distanced from it."

*His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2006 School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, Commencement address (New York, USA)*

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7699/

"[I]t is striking to me how many modern thinkers are still disposed to link tolerance with secularism and religion with intolerance. In their eyes -- and often in the public’s eyes I fear -- religion is seen as
part of the problem and not part of the solution. To be sure, there are reasons why this impression exists. Throughout history we find terrible chapters in which religious conflict brought frightening results. Sometimes, a part of the problem grew; it came from proselytising in which faith was not so much shared as imposed. Again in our day, many ostensibly religious voices aggressively affirm a single faith by denying or condemning others."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2006 Acceptance Address for the Tutzing Evangelical Academy’s ‘Tolerance’ Award (Tutzing, Germany)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7706/

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.

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/

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Michael Charlton: Is there an ideal form of Islamic government?

Aga Khan: I don't think, you know, you can talk about Islamic government. If you go back to the Qur'an, there is no government mentioned in the Qur'an.

Michael Charlton: I know, you all say that. All Imams and all political leaders in Islam say that. On the other hand, it seems to me that those divisions between the religious and secular life in Islam are, in fact, the, at the heart of all development and they have to be addressed ... 

Aga Khan: They have got to be addressed, that is absolutely correct.

Michael Charlton: Who wins? What comes out top, religion or the secular process?

Aga Khan: I couldn't generalise on that. It depends entirely on the society of the land you are talking about. You know, I simply can not make a comparison between an Arab country in the Middle East and Indonesia, but they are there. We are talking about too...it's too vast an Empire, you know, we are talking about hundreds and millions of people covering so many different races and languages.

Michael Charlton: But is it a genuine revival of religion in your
view? There [sic] consistency that appears to be against secularisation?

Aga Khan: You could interpret it that way. You could also interpret it as a desire of certain peoples within the Muslim world to return to a pre-colonial position.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1979 BBC Radio 4 Interview with Michael Charlton (London, United Kingdom) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1988/

"During the long periods of interregnum between the destruction of empire and the re-attainment of sovereignty, Islamic culture -- already, as I have said, forced into hibernation -- was further weakened by the West becoming the focal point of international economic development, with a resultant emphasis on Western cultural and artistic values.

"Even when the Islamic states did recover political independence, sometimes within freshly-drawn frontiers, they were brought into being as reflections of Western concepts of nationhood. The most obvious example of this was Turkey, which Ataturk reshaped from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire as a secular state in the belief that the adoption of Western patterns would enable his country to achieve a Western degree of economic development."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1984 address on receiving the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Medal for Architecture at the University of Virginia (Charlottesville, USA) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3006/

"There is still time to prevent the repetition here of that clash between the conservative and modernist elements in Muslim society. I know that the educated classes hope that with the general spread of instruction and learning amongst the people, there will be no need
Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's 1950 broadcast message on Radio Pakistan, 'Build up that free Islamic state mentality' (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10452/

"The fact must be faced that there is either an open or hidden clash between the conservative and the progressive elements in Muslim society. In Turkey this clash had led to a secular state. In Egypt it is there between the Ikhwan and the Governing classes. It threatens itself in the opposition between the so-called Darul-Islam and the responsible Government in Indonesia. Thank God it is not in Pakistan. But unless a healthy middle way such as existed in the first century is found, the ship may be on the rocks again. Pious Muslim thinkers who face realities in Egypt, North Africa and Iran know all about it. I hope and pray that it may be the destiny of Pakistan whose creator Quaid-e-Azam was essentially a modern man to bring about this spiritual and intellectual unity. Here and now and by not only its example but its mediation and influence prevent it ever again from leading to final break as it did in Turkey, in any other Muslim state and society. With this prayer I wish you every success."
both in the material, intellectual and the spiritual world."

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III’s 1950 Pakistan Institute of International Affairs address (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10053/

"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 2010 Politique Internationale Interview with Jean-Jacques Lafaye, 'The Power of Wisdom' (Paris, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9473/

"Second, you [graduands] are graduating with a professional qualification. The courses that led to your degree have their powerful internal logic; your profession has its assumptions about standards, and increasingly about its rights and privileges. But the world you enter will not be labelled physiology, cardiology and genetics; it is a world of unwell, fearful people. Professional standards and assumptions can provide a form of intolerance, pride and myopia as intractable as the rigidities of traditional societies. As you know far better than I, science alone will not give us much guidance on when to prolong human life and whether to intervene in its creation.

"The industrialised world only rather recently has rediscovered that these questions engage not merely professional ethics and standards; they touch the deeply held convictions of a Judeo-Christian tradition, an idea of humanity that has challenged the prophets and philosophers for thousands of years. Nations cannot assign these issues to a priesthood of scientists; they require the resources of the human spirit as well as the mind. The Islamic world is dealing with
these questions on two fronts simultaneously; first, in the reintroduction of science and its sceptical world view that it is not part of current tradition; second, Islamic societies are rediscovering the importance of the modern, secular world of their Islamic ethical underpinning. Is it any surprise that there is soul-searching and social upheaval, but also intellectual vitality and tumult, among the people of the Islamic world?"
See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the need to revive spiritual traditions as a prerequisite to restoring public integrity


See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on tradition and modernity -- Part 3/4: 'Progress does not mean occidentalisation'


See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the theocratic state and democracy


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