Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on secularism and Ismailism

**Question:** Does the fact that you have been to Harvard mean that you have ideas for modernising?

**Aga Khan:** Secular institutions yes. Definitely so.

Nicholas Tomalin: Have you used your power to make any radical changes in the Ismaili religion?

**Aga Khan:** You don’t change the religion. But you might change certain traditions. For instance, my grandfather made it quite clear to the Ismaili Community that women were not to wear the veil, and they no longer do. I have not made any strong directives of this type. But I hope I am modern in my outlook, and I know that in many ways I am a different sort of person from my grandfather. This will necessarily subtly change the character of the Faith.
Geoffry Barker: Do you see yourself as a reforming or conservative Imam?

Aga Khan: I think that is terminology which just does not apply in the sense that the essentials are the essentials and have remained the essentials for centuries. So I think reform as such doesn’t exist. Conservatism could exist in secular terms, not in religious terms.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1979 The Age Interview with Geoffry Barker (Melbourne, Australia)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10329/

Aftab Ahmad Khan: How would you assess the progress of Ismaili Community under your leadership and what would you consider as your major contribution?

Aga Khan: It is a very difficult question for me to answer. I can tell you what my objectives have been. Whether those objectives have actually been fulfilled is something which, I think, the Ismailis and the people who know and observe the community are better qualified to say. One of my objectives was to help the community adjust to increasingly rapid forces of modernisation and what I would call threats of extreme secularisation, the imbalances which one notes in certain parts of the world caused by the unequivocal search for material wealth, which passes the limits of reason. I think that was a problem: not of one time but a continuing problem. A delicate balance had to be found between living in the twentieth century, with all that means in terms of technological knowledge, of aspirations for material well-being and at the same time, the actual turning into practice of the spirit of the Muslim brotherhood, the practice of one’s faith and the concern for the betterment of the people. That was one issue which I sought to deal with....

Aftab Ahmad Khan: How do you assess the future of Muslim minorities in Western secular states?

Aga Khan: I think these communities in the industrialised world
will need to deal with their problems with wisdom because they will be in the front line of exposure to industrial and substantially secularised societies. They will have to take a long term view of their position in their society with the deep conviction that they do not and should not forsake their traditional attitudes to their faith and the family. I say that for a very precise reason. The industrialised secular societies themselves are beginning to change and they are seeking to re-establish a better equilibrium. This is quite evident in the Western world. So rather than the short term integration into the secularised society, the contribution of Muslim minorities should be to assist the societies in finding a better equilibrium which strengthens the quality of life. However, I think it is going to take a very mature reflection and a sense of time which is a particular strength of Islam. Islam gives [the?] time a completely different meaning than what the industrialised world conceives.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1983 Pakistan and Gulf Economist Interview with Aftab Ahmad Khan (Karachi, Pakistan)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2799/

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Pranay Gupte: Within the global context, wouldn’t you say that you hold a particularly unique position because it is not simply the sectarian faith but really the broader secularism of the Ismaili community?

Aga Khan: Yes, and in so far as Islam affects all aspects of an individual’s life, and particularly in our tradition, the role of the intellect in that whole context is a massively important issue. And I am looking at it. Many people are working with me on it. And I have to tell you that it’s an issue which is affecting us on a daily basis. I referred to it earlier as the ethical context. I think that is the context in which we will seek the solutions. In the ethical and the cultural contexts. Not only in the theological context. Our tendency would be to say the theological context is too restrictive. And, therefore, we have to look at it in the wider context of ethics and culture. And I think if we can look at it in that context, we have some opportunity of developing sound solutions without failing to recognise our
history, our religious history, our cultural history. So that the contextu alisation of these issues is a really central problem, a central issue which I daily have to address.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 1999 Pranay Gupte Interview (United States, United Kingdom)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5676/

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


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See also: Their Highnesses the Aga Khans III and IV on Ismailism’s inviolability yet simultaneous flexibility


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