

Living the Ethics of One's Faith: The Aga Khan's Integral Vision

By M. Ali Lakhani

Central to my life has been a verse in the Holy Qur'an which addresses itself to the whole of humanity. It says: "*Ob Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women...*" I know of no more beautiful expression about the unity of our human race—born indeed from a single soul.

(His Highness the Aga Khan,
Address to the Canadian Parliament, February 27, 2014¹)

One of the central elements of the Islamic faith is the inseparable nature of faith and world. The two are so deeply intertwined that one cannot imagine their separation. They constitute a "Way of Life."

(His Highness the Aga Khan,
Acceptance Speech, Tutzing Tolerance Award, May 20, 2006²)

At a time when much of the Western world is struggling to come to terms with what some have portrayed as the civilizational threat of Islam to the West, it would do well to heed the compassionate and pluralistic message—and also example—of one of Islam's most quietly influential leaders.

¹ The speeches of His Highness the Aga Khan are excerpted, with thanks, from the official AKDN website (<http://www.akdn.org/speeches>) and, on occasion, from the online archive known as NanoWisdoms (<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog>). Some of the speeches cited in this article are also excerpted from the publication *Where Hope Takes Root: Democracy and Pluralism in an Interdependent World* by His Highness the Aga Khan, introduction by the Rt. Hon. Adrienne Clarkson, © 2008 by Aga Khan Foundation Canada, published by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd. (hereafter cited as *Where Hope Takes Root*).

² From "The Spiritual Roots of Tolerance", speech made at the Tutzing Evangelical Academy, upon receiving the Tolerance Prize, May 20, 2006 (hereafter referred to as the "Tutzing Address"); *Where Hope Takes Root*, p.124, at p.125.

His Highness Prince Shah Karim Al-Husseini, known in the West as the Aga Khan, is the 49th hereditary spiritual leader (Imam) of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, and direct descendent of the Holy Prophet of Islam. The Ismaili Muslims of the Nizari branch headed by the Aga Khan are characterized by having a living Imam³ and by possessing a strong intellectual and civilizational heritage rooted in a vision of underlying spiritual harmony. As the Aga Khan explained in his letter to the Amman Conference in July 2005:

Our historic adherence is to the Ja'fari *Madbbab* and other *Madbabib* of close affinity, and it continues, under the leadership of the hereditary Ismaili Imam of the time. This adherence is in harmony also with our acceptance of Sufi principles of personal search and balance between the *zabir* and the spirit or the intellect which the *zabir* signifies.⁴

The Ja'fari School (*Madbbab*) is derived from the sixth Shia Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, one of the most influential Muslim intellectuals of the 'Ali'd tradition stemming from 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was the first Shia Imam and one of the four "Rightly Guided" Sunni Caliphs. The teachings of both Imam 'Ali and Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq are central to an esoteric strain in Islam which has come to be known as "Sufism", and almost all the Sufi *tariqas* are derived from the direct spiritual lineage or influence of these

³ The capitalized term "Imam" is not to be confused with the uncapitalized term "imam" or clerical leader. As the Aga Khan explained in his address to the Canadian Parliament in February 2014, "The Sunni position is that the Prophet nominated no successor, and that spiritual-moral authority belongs to those who are learned in matters of religious law. As a result, there are many Sunni imams in a given time and place." However, according to the Shia doctrine, tradition, and interpretation of history, the Prophet designated and appointed his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, to be the first "Imam", or spiritual and temporal leader. As "Hazar Imam" or "Living Imam", the Aga Khan's spiritual and temporal authority over Ismaili Muslims is expressed by their spiritual allegiance (*bayab*) to him as Hazar Imam, and by his guidance through the exercise of his *ta'lim* and *ta'wil*, that is the intellectual-moral and principal authority of interpretation in spiritual and temporal matters in conformity to the principles of the faith (*Usul ad-Din*) and the traditions of Islam, adapted according to the needs of the changing times.

⁴ Amman Message, July 2005 (<http://ammanmessage.com/>). The Amman Message is an initiative of the Royal Court of Jordan, begun in November 2004. It sought to define the Ummah (or Muslim community) and thereby to portray its diversity—an important retort to those who might seek to portray it as homogeneous. The Ismailis were recognized in the Amman Message as a part of the Ummah through a protocol issued and accepted by the Aga Khan, from which the excerpt herein is cited.

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