



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“The Institutions of the Ismaili Muslim Community”

Talk at “The Muslim Religion and Cultural Evolution of the Islamic World” Conference

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Abstract

Delivered as part of a summer programme of lectures and seminars organised by the University of Lisbon and sponsored by the Luso-American Development and Oriente Foundations, Shams Vellani elaborates the transnational dimensions of the Ismaili community, with particular attention to the community’s recent history, and its leadership under the current Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan. The talk situates Shi’ism generally, and Ismailism in particular, as one response to the question of authority that arose after the death of Prophet Muhammad. In the contemporary period the Imam, and the institutions that have developed under its leadership, have become a vehicle for the community to articulate and actualise its social conscience which is informed by its understanding of Islam. Likewise, the desire to implement a mechanism for social governance of the community has led to the development of a modern constitution, an expression of its Shi’i ethics, that became instrumental in reifying a larger communal Ismaili identity and value-system whilst recognising the community’s pluralism and diversity.

The Ismaili Community in International Perspective

I am grateful for the invitation to speak at this special session on Contemporary Islam that has been allocated to two sister Muslim communities in Portugal. The topic which has been proposed is the Ismaili Community in its international dimension. I have been asked to elaborate it from the Community’s spiritual, historical and social perspectives, taking on board its institutions. It has also been suggested to situate in this context, the Community’s institutionally fostered attitude to upholding human dignity, encouraging the spirit of volunteerism and engaging in interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

Let me make two remarks about this topic. Because of the breadth of coverage it implies, it will be difficult to do justice to it within the allotted time span. Secondly, I do not claim scholarship in the subject and therefore plead for the audience’s generosity to bear with my lay understanding.

Islam and Pluralism

In a programme guided by experts of established reputation there is no need to belabour the point about pluralism in Islam. Scholars have long been writing that, historically, Islam has elicited varying responses which have been expressed as two main perspectives: the Shi’a and the Sunni. Each in turn accommodates a rich variety of spiritual temperaments, juridical preferences, social and psychological dispositions, political entities and cultures. The Ismaili

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tariqah is one such response within the overall Shi'i perspective. Under the guidance and leadership of a living, hereditary Imam, it seeks to comprehend the true meaning of the revelation in order to understand the purpose of life and human destiny and to trace a path to its fulfilment.

Social Conscience in Islam

On one hand it is being realistic to appreciate that the very vastness of the vision of Islam, as it has unfolded over fourteen centuries, in a multiplicity of cultures and climes, has meant a plurality of interpretations of the faith and of conceptions of an ideal community, the *Ummah*. In the absence of an established church in Islam and an institutionalised method of pronouncing on dogma, a proper reading of history reveals that it is inappropriate to refer to the Shi'a-Sunni divide, or to differences of interpretation within each branch, in terms of an orthodoxy-heterodoxy dichotomy.

On the other hand, it is equally important to stress that, whatever the differences between the Shi'a and the Sunni, or among their subdivisions, these have never amounted to such fundamental a divergence over theology as to result in separate religions. The vast majority of Muslims, Shi'a and Sunni, also share the intimate implications, for their personal and social conduct, which flow from Islam's central impulse of submission to the Divine. The revelation is explicit and emphatic on this. The Muslims are a community of the middle path that avoids extremes. Their duty is to encourage good and discourage evil, without resorting to coercion but using the best of arguments. Theirs is the faith which forbids compulsion and leaves each to their own choice in matters of belief. To turn to the east or west is not a mark of piety; it is the nobility of conduct that endears one in the sight of God. They are asked to cherish and respect the gift of life.

The true struggle for them, *jihad*, is to engage fully and peacefully in earthly life and yet to rise above its trappings in search of the Divine. But that quest is only meaningful in tandem with efforts to do good for the kin, the orphan, the needy, the vulnerable; to be compassionate, just, honest, humble, tolerant and forgiving.

That potential of elevation to Divine proximity earns the human person the status of the apex of creation. The encompassing ethic of Islam is, hence, the enablement of each person to live up to his or her exalted status as the vicegerent of God on earth, in whom God has breathed His own spirit and to whom He has made whatever is in the heavens and the earth an object of trust and quest.

This is the notion of human dignity which brooks no qualifications as to gender, creed, race, political persuasion or any discriminatory factors that detract from the essential worth of individuals and thereby diminish humanity itself.

This is the meaning of social conscience in Islam, a state of affairs when the spiritual illuminates the mundane in one's daily life.

This is the legacy of the Prophet which remains a lasting source of emulation for Muslims everywhere and in every age.



Social Conscience and the Imamat in Shi'i Islam

In Shi'i Islam, it is the mandate of each hereditary Imam-of-the-Time, from the Prophet's progeny, to help realise this paradigm through an institutional order that befits the circumstances of time and space.

The terrain of history and geography where the Imams exercise their mandate has varied radically:

- From what is known as the period of *satr*, when activity had to be restricted to quiet circles of scholarship such as the likes of the Brethren of Purity, to the bright eminence of the Fatimid Caliphate;
- From life in fortresses, and yet with a welcoming openness to scholars and refugees of all persuasions, fleeing from hostile forces, to a subdued and veiled existence in the aftermath of Mongol barbarities;
- From the era of colonial empires to the modern age of many independent nation-states.

The Institution of Imamat and Contemporary Society

The challenge today arises from emerging trends hastening towards a global culture. This is the time characterised by rapid generation of knowledge in a vast array of disciplines and at a rate that disorients. In the absence of stable bearings to help negotiate change, what should be an age of opportunity, poses to many, as one of profound confusion and anxiety. People of faith try to turn to their own ancient sources of wisdom. Ismailis look to their Imam for a sense of direction while other Muslims seek advice of their own *'ulama* and *mujtahids*; for all of them, the ultimate source of wisdom is the Islamic revelation, their timeless fountain of inspiration and grace.

The guidance of the Imam, as that of his predecessors, is unambiguous: Faith is also the voice of reason; therefore nurture, develop and use with sincerity the gift of intellect. An unwavering submission to God need not be at variance with the liberty of human will.

The guidance echoes the Prophetic tradition: "We (the Prophets) speak to people in the measure of their intelligences"; and is in tune with the exhortations of Hazrat 'Ali, the first Shi'i Imam: "None other can guide a person who fails to guide and warn himself; while Divine help accrues to those who exert themselves on the right path."

The Imam's authoritative guidance thus provides a liberating, enabling framework for a believer's quest for meaning; a sincere believer relies on his own capacities and knows that when in doubt, he should seek direction from the 'Alid Imam of the time who, in Shi'i tradition, is the one vested with authority.

This spirit of liberation and enablement underlies the Constitution for the social governance, and to guide the social development, of the Ismaili community, now settled in many countries across the globe, mainly in the developing regions but with an increasingly significant presence in the industrially advanced parts of the world. Like the Muslim *Ummah* itself, it represents a wealth of pluralism of cultures, languages and nationalities, its traditions falling



within four broad geographical and ethnographic groups: Arabian, Central Asian, Iranian and South Asian.

The Development of an Ismaili Constitution

The first modern Constitution was introduced for the Ismailis of Eastern Africa, at the beginning of the last century, by the late Aga Khan III, the grandfather and immediate predecessor as Imam of the present Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary Imam. It gave the community a form of administration with a hierarchy of institutions at local, national and regional levels. It set out rules of personal law in such matters as marriage, divorce and inheritance and provided guidelines for interface with other communities. Similar Constitutions were ordained for the countries of the subcontinent. All of them were periodically revised in light of changing circumstances.

The present Imam, His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, extended the practice to many other regions. In 1986, he promulgated a Constitution that, for the first time, brought under one aegis, the social governance of the worldwide Ismaili community, with built-in flexibility to take account of regional diversities. Served by volunteers, men and women, the Constitution functions as an enabler to harness the best in individual creativity to promote common weal. Like its predecessors, the Constitution is founded on each Ismaili's spiritual allegiance to the Imam-of-the-Time, which is separate from the secular allegiance they owe as citizens of their respective countries. While the Constitution serves primarily the social governance needs of the Ismaili community, its provisions for encouraging amicable resolution of conflicts, through impartial conciliation and arbitration, are being increasingly used in some countries by non-Ismailis also.

The Constitution, thus, facilitates the community's internal cohesion and also fosters an outlook of openness and friendship to all neighbours.

Social Conscience and Institutional Action

Apart from the institutions for the community's social governance, the Imam has founded what are known as Apex Institutions which collectively constitute the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). An endeavour to realise the social conscience of Islam through institutional action, the Network brings together institutions and programmes whose combined mandate is to improve living conditions and opportunity and to help relieve society of ignorance, disease and deprivation. The Network's primary concern are some of the poorest areas of Asia and Africa where its programmes serve the common good of all peoples, regardless of their origin, gender or religion.

The modern geneses of the AKDN are the institutions that were created in the late nineteenth century by the late Imam, His Highness Aga Khan III. By the time of his death in July 1957, these institutions included sophisticated medical facilities, schools, housing associations, insurance companies and co-operative banks. His 72-year long Imamatus was a critical period in the modern history of the Ismaili Community. His leadership enabled it to adapt to historical change.



The Ismaili Community in Modern History

Soon after the accession to the Imamate of the present Aga Khan, in July 1957, significant changes occurred in Africa and Asia. Colonial empires gave way to numerous, independent nation states, each with their own national aspirations. The process of change was punctuated by serious crises: the expulsion from Burma of its non-indigenous residents; the civil war in Pakistan which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh; the expulsion of the entire Asian population from Uganda under the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin; the exodus from Mozambique of its non-indigenous populations due to the almost complete breakdown of law and order in the period leading to the country's independence.

Adaptation to change, at an accelerating pace, has been a consistent feature of the period since 1957. Newer crises have arisen: the eruption of violent ethnic animosities, as in Tajikistan, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the continuing brutalisation of Afghanistan. As with the earlier crises, urgent humanitarian measures have had to be taken including, when necessary, resettlement of dislocated populations either within the regions concerned or in Europe and North America.

The Expansion of the AKDN

Under the leadership of the present Imam, the AKDN has expanded far beyond its original geographical focus and scope of activities. Many new institutions have been created while the existing ones have had to be strengthened or rationalised, to reflect the complexity of development processes. The Aga Khan Foundation, including the Aga Khan Rural Support Programmes and the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme, the Aga Khan University, the Aga Khan Health Services and the Aga Khan Education Services, operate in social development. The newly created University of Central Asia, a partnership endeavour of the Ismaili Imamate and the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, aims to concentrate on research and study of development problems and solutions pertaining to mountain societies. Economic activities are the province of The Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development whose affiliates currently operate in four sectors: infrastructure improvement, industrial promotion, financial services and tourism development. One of the Fund's important objectives is to strengthen the role of the private sector in Third World development. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture co-ordinates activities in the realm of culture. Under its aegis are the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Aga Khan Programme for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Historic Cities Programme. The built environment is the Trust's special area of concern, more particularly in societies in which Muslims are present. It also sponsors, especially for educational purposes, other aspects of culture as appropriate.

All these institutions pursue specific mandates in their respective fields. But as they work together within the overarching framework of the Aga Khan Development Network, their different pursuits interact and mutually reinforce one another. Their common goal is to help eradicate impediments for disadvantaged people to attain their innate dignity and self-realisation. They have long pioneered the philosophy and strategy that sustainable human development only occurs in a wholesome environment that is conducive to the fulfilment of the cultural, economic, social and spiritual needs and aspirations of individuals and communities.



In seeking to achieve their humanitarian and development aims, the AKDN institutions rely on the energy, dedication and skills of volunteers who work with remunerated professionals, drawing upon the talents of people of all faiths.

This emphasis on meritocracy, that allows competent people, irrespective of their persuasions, to contribute to efforts towards human relief and development, is the hallmark policy of Imamat institutions. It has parallels during the Fatimid Caliphate and what is known as the Alamut period of its history. But this is not unique to the Ismailis. It is a principle of Muslim ethic. For Islam's vision of society is that of believing men and women who, whatever the laws by which they abide or directions to which they turn, are governed by a shared ethic that elicits and elevates the good that resides in each human soul. This desire to evoke the noble, and the Qur'anic imperative of amiable, wise discourse with people of all faiths, and striving with them for deeds of goodness, inform the Ismaili Imamat's interfaith engagements.

The AKDN and Interfaith Dialogue

His Highness the Aga Khan, for example, is a founding patron of the World Faiths Development Dialogue, together with its founding Co-Chairs, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the President of the World Bank. The AKDN has forged partnerships with culturally rooted development agencies in India and elsewhere. In Portugal, the Imamat and the Catholic Church are co-operating on two poverty alleviation initiatives through capacity building. One is to strengthen the volunteer sector by providing professional training and the other is a childhood protection and development programme for Muslim and Christian immigrant communities as well as their neighbours who live on the margins of society. In Mozambique, the AKDN is currently helping in the establishment of a Biomedical Faculty at the Catholic University of Beira.

In its search for responses to issues of the built environment of Muslim societies and for ways to revitalize their architectural traditions, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has systemically gathered a treasure of data so crucial for education. The process of search has involved not only architects and historians of architecture but also sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and scholars of other disciplines. Besides Muslims among these experts, there have been Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Jews. There is reason for confidence that some of the premises on which this process has been built could usefully inform methodologies for similar searches for developing responses to other critical issues of modern life, whether these relate to forms of government, implications of amoral attitudes to the concept and practice of free enterprise, especially, in the context of rapidly globalizing free markets, or challenges of new knowledge in genetics and other disciplines with an intimate bearing on society's well-being. These premises include: respect for pluralism since monolith answers have historically been shown to be inappropriate and impractical; search for essence rather than a predilection for forms; the courage to examine creative solutions that seek to rearticulate the essence while being in tune with an evolving environment; the potential synergies when experts and thinkers of different persuasions feel able to share their own thoughts, insights and experiences.

In carrying out their varied humanitarian and development activities, the Imamat institutions benefit immensely from collaboration with a wide range of national, regional and international agencies, both public and private, including leading agencies from Portugal, as



they have from their co-operation with different faith communities, in different parts of the world. Why do we all want to work for the good of humanity? In a tradition, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: “Do you love your Creator? Love your fellow beings first”.

Thank you.