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PHILANTHROPY IN ISLAM

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Bismillahir rahmanir rahim

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about philanthropy in Islam, and introduce the Aga Khan Development Network.

Islam is a perpetual endeavour towards an equitable order, premised on submission to One God of all-encompassing benevolence who has gifted the human person the power to perceive and reason so as to discern the Truth. The believers are said by the Holy Quran to be “in a bond of God, and a bond of the peoplebidding honour and forbidding dishonour, vying one with the other in good works.” They are asked to be securers of justice, not to be swayed towards inequity by hatred for a people, or love for the family or slavish deference to power and wealth. Humankind, says the Quran, has been created from a single soul, whatever its outward differences, for the purpose of striving together for goodness.

The immediate context for the Quran’s exhortations was the early seventh century Arabia, an age of ignorance when religion, by and large, had degenerated into irrational dogmas. The absence of a moral restraint of higher answerability encouraged among people vain and selfish pursuits at the expense of the poor and the weak.

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Islam, on the other hand, vests life with a higher purpose. Virtue is a contemplative response to Divine benevolence. Of humankind, says the Quran, are people who give of themselves to earn the pleasure of God, feeding the hungry, the needy, the orphan, the captive for the love of Him, desiring no recompense nor thankfulness. An act of charity, like any act of virtue, is a freely reasoned choice, a self-imposed obligation.

There is no spiritual merit in rejecting the world as a way to devote oneself to God. To such as wish to escape societal cares, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his family) admonishes: “Do you Love your Creator? – Love your fellow beings first.”

Wealth is a blessing, and its honest creation a duty since it can aid the general wellbeing. Hence, it is the element of trust in it that renders wealth desirable. Islam’s is the path of moderation in earning riches and bestowing generosity. Believers are asked to be generous with that which is in excess of what they reasonably need for the protection and wellbeing of their families.

Deprivation in the midst of affluence indicates that the rights of the needy have been usurped. Therefore, warns the Quran, “You will not attain piety until you expend of what you love” in the way of God. The hand of friendship must be extended to all in need, without discrimination. Underlining this ethic in his instructions to the Governor of Egypt, Hazrat Ali, the last of the four rightly guided caliphs, and the first Shia Imam, wrote: “[A]mong your subjects, there are those who share your faith and those who follow other religions. Both kinds suffer from the same weaknesses and disabilities to which human flesh is heir. Let your compassion come to their rescue just as much as you expect God to show you mercy and forgiveness”.

Traditions extol the merit of relieving the debts of people in distress or extending kindly loans to them to help them make a fresh start in life and stand on their own feet. The moral challenge for a Muslim is to ask not what he or she has achieved for himself or herself but what he or she has helped others to achieve. A sustainable order of equity depends on the mutual willingness and ability of a people to take charge of their own destiny. The Quran says: “God changes not the condition of a people until they change that which is in



themselves”. Philanthropy, therefore, is especially meritorious when it translates into a continuing commitment, through health and educational support, and sharing of knowledge and expertise, towards helping the vulnerable enhance their own capacity for self-improvement.

The social ethic of Islam obliges capable citizens to remain aware, and ensure fulfilment, of duties that are essential to sustain a wholesome society. This ethic laid the ground for a civil order functioning in partnership with ruling authorities for the sake of common good. Over centuries, institutional instruments developed to facilitate the appropriation of this Quranic ideal in the daily lives of Muslims everywhere. Guided by the example of the Prophet and his companions, the law and practice came to sanction, refine and fiscally support the enduring institution of *wakf* as an instrument of planned philanthropy and societal development. The law sought to embed its management in such principles espoused by the faith as trust, probity and answerability. Trustees were made responsible not only for maintaining, but also seeking to enhance, the value of the endowment and maximise its yield in order to enable an abiding commitment to its philanthropic objectives.

This evolution led to an unprecedented upsurge in the creation of foundations to cater to the needs of the poor, the sick, the emaciated, victims of calamity and fraud, orphans, single women or debtors in distress. Systematic, long-term funding enabled the development of hospitals. Health support for the vulnerable was considered paramount in light of the Quranic injunction that to save a life is to save the whole humanity. Such foundations also helped sustain, in diverse Muslim lands, a magnificent flowering of a richly varied range of educational institutions, from the *madarasas* to other academies, libraries and observatories. They responded to the quest of the learner in a vast array of disciplines, in the humanities and sciences, keeping alight and carrying the torch of enlightenment across barriers of faith and culture. Education and research to understand the universe was equated to meditation on Divine wonders, grace and majesty.

Jurists and theologians interpreted any good action, including the building of roads, bridges and irrigation systems, intended to strengthen the society, as worthy of support through pious foundations. There were precedents. Hazrat Ali, as the fourth caliph, helped to fund a self-



help irrigation project, explaining that he preferred people to prosper to their remaining economically weak.

It is in this illustrious tradition that His Highness the Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, has established the Aga Khan Development Network – the AKDN – as the contemporary endeavour of the Ismaili Imamate to realize the social conscience of Islam through institutional action. The AKDN comprises a range of cultural, social and economic development agencies that seek to improve opportunities and living conditions of the weakest in society in many of the poorest regions of Africa and Asia – from Uganda to Mali, Egypt to Afghanistan, the Indian sub-continent to Central Asia.

The AKDN makes a long-term commitment to communities with whom it works, promoting their capacity to sustain the processes and trends initiated in concert with local government, the private sector and national and international development agencies. But programmes always reflect the choices made by people themselves on how they wish to improve their prospects. The pillar of sustainability is the ethic of respect for each other's values and ideals which shape the identities of the communities so that, together, they are able to understand and manage the forces of change.

These are the principles which have guided, for instance, the AKDN work for the past twenty years in Northern Pakistan, once one of the poorest areas on earth. The region, which lies at the intersection of four of the world's highest mountain ranges, is home to diverse communities – Shia and Sunni Muslims, and non-Muslims – a population of about 1.3 million.

Some 3,900 village organisations have been created to deal with a variety of issues, from women's initiatives and water usage to savings and credit. Economic growth has been impressive, with a three-fold increase in per capita income. The accumulation of capital and knowledge has enabled the communities to take measures to protect their environment and cultural heritage, and contribute towards the cost of their health care and education needs. Antagonisms born out of despair have been replaced by consensus around hope for the future.



Another instructive illustration of the AKDN's participatory philosophy is its Madrasa Pre-School Programme in East Africa. In the pre-independence period, the colonial education policy there was racially based. Historically, the indigenous Muslims, who belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, have been at a serious disadvantage. Christian Africans, on the other hand, have had the support of education facilities provided by the European Christian Missions. The educational backwardness of the African Muslim children has traditionally been a serious impediment to their social development. They are among the most marginalized people in the region.

In the mid-1980's, Muslim leaders from Kenya's coastal region requested His Highness the Aga Khan for assistance in improving the educational attainments of their youth. In response, studies were carried out. These indicated that the lack of adequate pre-school preparation created the problem of access to formal schooling, and of satisfactory performance if children were admitted to primary school. Given the nature and scope of the problem, the community leaders welcomed the AKDN's proposal for a distinct programme of early childhood education, although the concept of pre-school was not familiar among poorer coastal communities.

The current Madrasa Pre-School Programme responds to the aspirations of parents and community leaders for a mode of early education that is grounded in their heritage, and prepares their children for the challenges of an evolving world. It is a co-operative venture which brings together parents, community leaders, local and national educators. It builds on the existing traditional madrasas or Quranic schools, adapting their curriculum for confident access to the so-called secular education sector.

In response to demands, and with the encouragement of the World Bank, UNICEF and other agencies, the programme has been extended to other areas of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Regional Madrasa Resource Centres have been set up. These train teachers, predominantly women, develop training methodologies, teaching programmes and manuals which make the best use of internationally known successful pedagogies, while utilising low-cost, locally available and relevant materials.



Wherever they operate, AKDN agencies are established under national laws but are international in scope, working in partnership with national and international agencies. Many governments and international agencies have extended to the Ismaili Imam and the AKDN the courtesies and privileges of diplomatic protocols to facilitate the Imam's humanitarian and development work.

The AKDN mandate is guided by the spiritual vocation of evoking the noble that resides in each man and woman. This universal ethic defines the focus of AKDN institutions on respect for human dignity, and their reach beyond the boundaries of faith, ethnicity, gender or any other discriminatory barriers. Their combined endeavour is to empower groups and individuals to become self-reliant and able to help those weaker than themselves. Their policy is to nurture and harness a culture of philanthropy and voluntary sharing of time and talent. Their governance is transparent, based on the ancient values of trust, probity, equity and answerability. Their overall aim is to seek to engender, and contribute to the efforts of others who seek to engender, a fraternal ethos of enlightenment, peace, tolerance, mutual respect, help and understanding.

Thank you.