



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Introduction to His Highness the Aga Khan

His Highness the Aga Khan became Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims on 11 July 1957 at the age of 20, succeeding his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan. He is the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims and a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his family) through his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, the first Imam, and his wife Fatima, the Prophet's daughter.

Son of Prince Aly Khan and Princess Tajuddawlah Aly Khan, the Aga Khan was born on 13 December 1936 in Geneva. He spent his early childhood in Nairobi, Kenya, and then attended Le Rosey School in Switzerland for nine years. He graduated from Harvard University in 1959 with a BA Honours Degree in Islamic history.

Like his grandfather Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan before him, the Aga Khan has, since assuming the office of Imam in 1957, been concerned about the well-being of all Muslims, particularly in the face of the challenges of rapid historical changes. Today, the Ismailis live in some 25 countries, mainly in West and Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as well as in North America and Western Europe. Over the four decades since the present Aga Khan became Imam, there have been major political and economic changes in most of these areas. He has adapted the complex system of administering the Ismaili community, pioneered by his grandfather during the colonial era, to a new world of nation-states, which has grown in size and complexity following the independence of the Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union.

The Aga Khan has emphasised the view of Islam as a thinking, spiritual faith: one that teaches compassion and tolerance and that upholds the dignity of man, Allah's noblest creation. In the Shia tradition of Islam, it is the mandate of the Imam of the time to safeguard the individual's right to personal intellectual search and to give practical expression to the ethical vision of society that the Islamic message inspires. Addressing as Chairman, the International Conference on the Example (Seerat) of the Prophet Muhammad in Karachi in 1976, the Aga Khan said that the wisdom of Allah's final Prophet in seeking new solutions for problems which could not be solved by traditional methods, provides the inspiration for Muslims to conceive a truly modern and dynamic society, without affecting the fundamental concepts of Islam.

During the course of history, the Ismailis have, under the guidance of their Imams, made major contributions to the growth of Islamic civilisation. The University of al-Azhar and the Academy of Science, Dar al-Ilm, in Cairo and indeed the city of Cairo itself, exemplify their contributions to the cultural, religious and intellectual life of Muslims. Among the renowned philosophers, jurists, physicians, mathematicians, astronomers and scientists of the past who flourished under the patronage of Ismaili



Imams are Qadi al-Numan, al-Kirmani, Ibn al-Haytham (al-Hazen), Nasir e-Khusraw and Nasir al-Din Tusi.

Achievements of the Fatimid Empire dominate accounts of the early period of Ismaili history, roughly from the beginnings of Islam through the 11th century. Named after the Prophet's daughter Fatima, the Fatimid dynasty created a state that stimulated the development of art, science, and trade in the Mediterranean Near East over two centuries. Its centre was Cairo, founded by the Fatimids as their capital. Following the Fatimid period, the Ismaili Muslims' geographical centre shifted from Egypt to Syria and Persia. After their centre Alamut (in Persia), fell to Mongol conquerors in the 13th century, Ismailis lived for several centuries in dispersed communities, mainly in Persia and Central Asia but also in Syria, India and elsewhere. In the 1830s, Aga Hassanaly Shah, the 46th Ismaili Imam, was granted the honorary hereditary title of Aga Khan by the Shah of Persia. In 1843, the first Aga Khan left Persia for India, which already had a large Ismaili community. Aga Khan II died in 1885, only four years after assuming the Imamate. He was succeeded by the present Aga Khan's grandfather, and predecessor as Imam, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan.

In recent generations, the Aga Khan's family has followed a tradition of service in international affairs. The Aga Khan's grandfather was President of the League of Nations and his father, Prince Aly Khan, was Pakistan's Ambassador to the United Nations. His uncle, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, was the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations' Coordinator for assistance to Afghanistan and United Nations' Executive Delegate of Iraq-Turkey border areas.

The Aga Khan's brother, Prince Ayn, joined the United Nations Secretariat, Department of Economic and Social Affairs following his graduation from Harvard in 1965. Since 1968, Prince Ayn has been closely involved with the governance of the principal development institutions of the Imamate. The Aga Khan's eldest child and daughter, Princess Zahra, graduated from Harvard in 1994 with a BA (Honours) Degree in Development Studies, and is the Head of the Social Welfare Department located within the Secretariat of the Aga Khan in France. His eldest son, Prince Rahim, who graduated from Brown University (USA) in 1995, has responsibilities in respect of the Imamate's economic development institutions. His second son, Prince Hussain, who graduated from Williams College (USA) in 1997, is involved in the cultural activities of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

In consonance with this vision of Islam and their tradition of service to humanity, wherever Ismailis live, they have elaborated a well-defined institutional framework to carry out social, economic and cultural activities. Under the Aga Khan's leadership, this framework has expanded and evolved into the Aga Khan Development Network, a group of institutions working to improve living conditions and opportunities in specific regions of the developing world. In every country, these institutions work for the common good of all citizens regardless of their origin or religion. Their individual



mandates range from architecture, education and health to the promotion of private sector enterprise, the enhancement of non-government organisations and rural development.