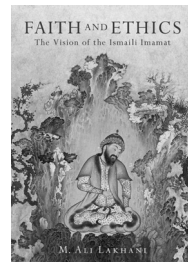


Faith and Ethics: The Vision of the Ismaili Imam

By M. Ali Lakhani

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Reviewed by Andrew Frisardi



F*faith and Ethics*¹ addresses an urgent present reality: the challenges brought about by globalization, modernization, and cultural fragmentation, whereby groups of people from widely diverse backgrounds and worldviews must reach deep for tolerance and understanding. The book consists of an extensive and detailed account of the ethical teachings of Prince Shah Karim al-Husseini (born in Geneva in 1936), the fourth Aga Khan, who is the hereditary spiritual leader or Imam of Shi'i Ismaili Muslims. The author, M. Ali Lakhani, QC, a Canadian barrister and the founder-editor of *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, is himself an Ismaili Muslim. Lakhani draws on the Aga Khan's own lectures and writings, to make the latter's thought accessible and often conversational in tone.

Four of the book's ten chapters explain how the Imam's ethical teachings are applied in a real-world, contemporary context; for example, through his initiative the Aga Khan Development

¹ This independent review of *Faith and Ethics* was first posted online on the Amazon books website on March 1, 2020, and is republished here with the kind consent of the reviewer.

Network, a network of NGOs and developmental agencies which work primarily in the poorest parts of Africa and Asia, addressing developmental, humanitarian, and cultural needs, without regard to differences of religious affiliation, ethnicity, or gender. The other chapters offer an explanation of the Ismaili community and of the Imam and his role among Ismaili Muslims; of the Quranic and Islamic-theological basis of the Aga Khan's teachings; and of the challenges of modernity that his teachings address. As someone coming from a Catholic background, I was struck by how much the Aga Khan's ethical vision resembles that of Pope Francis: both religious leaders view globalization as a call to the pluralistic tolerance at the heart of their respective faiths, not as a pretext for xenophobia and retrograde policies meant to stop inexorable change.

At the same time, both the Aga Khan and the pope admit that the global society is tricky to negotiate. As the Aga Khan has said, quoted by Lakhani, "Diversification without disintegration, this is the greatest challenge of our time." The Aga Khan's prescription for the conflicts and complexities of global culture is what he calls a "cosmopolitan" ethic. Islam is a fundamental and irreducible source for this ethical perspective. One of the Imam's principles, which goes with the Quranic dictum of "no compulsion in religion," is that he would never foist his religion on anyone else, nor, as this book makes clear, resort solely to religion *per se* to conflict-solve our social and planetary ills. The cosmopolitan ethic above all respects difference and is tolerant toward differing viewpoints, including agnostic or atheistic ones. So, for the Aga Khan, the much-touted "clash of civilizations," supposedly (according to certain Western authors) promulgated by Islam toward the West, is actually a "clash of ignorance" on the part of both Islam and the West—ignorance, precisely, about each other.

As Lakhani writes in his preface, "At a time when Islam is under great scrutiny, when it is beset by fragmentary forces from within and without, when horrific acts are undertaken in its name—acts which most Muslims consider appalling and defamatory of their faith—and when its very nature is both misrepresented and

misunderstood, there is a need to take a fresh look at its ethos.” So, Lakhani’s lengthy discussion of the Aga Khan’s cosmopolitan approach to modern conflict simultaneously has the wider application of demonstrating to outsiders that Islam in the orthodox, Quranic sense is a religion of unity and justice, not of persecution and oppression. Despite the brutal dogmatism of Islamicist terrorists, Islam as presented in the Quran and by the Muslim sages is anything but pitiless and fanatical; it is joyful, intellectually rigorous, and compassionate.

The Quran teaches that all peoples, not just Muslims or any other group, were created from a single soul—the soul of humanity. As Lakhani points out and as the Aga Khan has emphasized, this Quranic insight about humanity’s oneness is a basis for the tolerance and justice of the ethos of Islam: “The spiritually based world view that recognises the bond of a common humanity will necessarily be tolerant” —with concomitant ethics and ideas of social justice. In our age, when the more traditional societies and groups throughout the world have been challenged by the onslaught of modernism with its secularist bias, some Muslims have endorsed an exclusivist attitude toward other religions and cultures. But for the majority of Muslims, the Quranic teaching about the universality of revelation and the plurality of the prophets under the one God still resonates deeply.

Principal truths are timeless, but modernity is characterized by exponential change. Therefore, a question arises for the tolerant religious person: how to be responsive to the changes while remaining committed to fundamental realities. For the Aga Khan, “tradition and progress are not incompatible when modernisation is adapted to complement and respect a region’s cultural heritage, reflecting its distinctive traditions and values.” At the same time, his teachings explicitly reject recent Islamic authoritarian reactions to Western infiltration of Muslim culture. For one thing, religion is a matter of the heart and the spirit, so by its very nature cannot be imposed from without. Also, the Muslim world itself is vast and pluralistic, the vast majority of it outside the Arab countries, so no single solution in the form of a world-wide “caliphate” is even remotely desirable or even

possible. Coerced uniformity would only make matters worse for everyone, including Muslims. The Aga Khan's solution is to follow the Quran itself, which proposes, writes Lakhani, "multiple communities, each with its distinct religious paths and norms of conduct, coexisting under the umbrella of a humane ethos of 'good deeds', secure in the understanding that outer differences are reconcilable inwardly." And this, in turn, is because "Truth has multiple forms of expression and . . . God cannot be confined within a single creed."

According to the Aga Khan, the criterion for discerning which innovations are not in conflict with the ethic of Islam or of any authentically religious perspective is that they will be changes rooted in the dignity of what it means to be human; foregrounding values like interconnectedness, empathy, humility, compassion, tolerance, generosity, respect for civility, all of which allow us to "navigate change without compromising" faith. Again, this approach is reminiscent of Pope Francis, who also attempts to address all human beings, not only those who self-identify as Catholics, and who emphasizes the value of tolerance and compassion.

As Lakhani says, because our culture is global and our world pluralistic and often secular, "there is need for prudence in addressing ethical formulations in overtly religious or theological language." He adds: "For the Aga Khan, cosmopolitanism is a way of promoting faith-based values outside the narrow—and to some, threatening or divisive—framework of religious discourse . . . to promote ethical values principally outside the context of theological articulations or interfaith ecumenism." The Charter of Medina issued by the Prophet in 622, "which envisaged a unified community . . . of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, a cosmopolitan vision of a 'community of communities' transcending sectarian and religious differences," clearly prescribes such tolerance. And he cites the Prophet's pluralistic ethos also from a sermon in Mecca: "Your God is one. No Arab has any superiority over a non-Arab, and no non-Arab any superiority over an Arab, and no white one has any superiority over a black one, and no black one has any superiority over a white one, except on the basis of

taqwa [God-consciousness].” Lakhani’s explanation, through the Aga Khan’s teachings, of Islam’s pluralistic and tolerant heritage is one of the most valuable features of this book, since many in the West are unaware of it.

I will note that, while the Aga Khan’s tolerant cosmopolitan and pluralistic approach is welcome, his teachings as presented in this book do not address certain critical and global ethical questions particular to our time. Specifically, I would have liked to understand how the Aga Khan’s teachings are applicable to issues raised by exponential developments in biotechnology and other technologies. The fundamental human questions raised by cyborg technology, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and other unknown quantities will require that we make moral distinctions on the basis of principles that are more fundamental than scientific development *per se*. The answers to such questions depend on what it means to be human, something that is beyond the provenance of empirical science. At the same time, how can the ethical values espoused by the Aga Khan (or Pope Francis) help us to make these distinctions, or aid nonreligious people and religious people to come to a consensus (in the form of legislation) about them? For example, as Lakhani explains, for Ismaili Muslims, “the ideal of progress is to balance material growth with spiritual limits, and individual freedom with responsibility to God and His creation.” Yet many people in the modern world do not believe in spiritual realities or faith claims and therefore see the human responsibility to creation differently. To argue that human beings should not be grafted with machines (as proposed by the growing field of transhumanism), a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim person could argue that human beings are made in the image of God and that transhumanism violates that relationship. But this argument would mean nothing to those who reject theological premises or religious teachings. How and where, then, can we find common ground for discussion and policy making?

As the Iranian Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr has said, quoted by Lakhani in this volume, the modernist ideology is based on “that which is cut off from the Transcendent, from the immutable principles which in reality govern all things and which

are made known to man through revelation in its most universal sense”; and this ideology “rejects the primacy of absolute and ultimate truth transcending the human order and descending upon the human realm from the Divine Order.” Can tolerance, equity, and other worthy values alone remedy the gap of understanding that this creates? Practically speaking, this gap matters because theological or anti-theological assumptions implicitly underpin so much our collective discussions, complicating the attempt to common ground on certain vital issues, such as transhumanism or artificial intelligence.

In sum, the Aga Khan’s ethical teachings as presented in this book are especially applicable to the challenges presented by religious pluralism and to encouraging dialogue between religious perspectives, and to calm down reactions to polemics between religious people and secularists, but less so for conflict resolution that requires shared epistemological and ontological principles. I would have liked more commentary in this book on how the Aga Khan conceives of “compromise” in such situations, since the questions they raise are only going to become more frequent as this century progresses. Nevertheless, Lakhani’s book is valuable for the insight it offers into Islam’s richly pluralistic and tolerant tradition. I recommend it to readers who seek better understanding of Islam and the Islamic world, both internally and in relation to the West, in the context of modernist society.

I should also mention that the Institute of Ismaili Studies, in London, deserves credit for its series of elegantly produced publications, “with the object of promoting scholarship and learning on Islam,” all with a broad-minded, interdisciplinary approach, as well as profound, serious thought, insight, and scholarship.