



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK (AKDN): AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

Reference

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The AKDN Mandate

The Aga Khan Development Network is a contemporary endeavour of the Ismaili Imam to realise the social conscience of Islam through institutional action. It brings together, under one coherent aegis, institutions and programmes whose combined mandate is to help relieve society of ignorance, disease and deprivation without regard to the faiths or national origins of people whom they serve. In societies where Muslims have a significant presence, its mandate extends to efforts to revitalise and broaden the understanding of cultural heritage in the full richness of its diversity, as the quality of life in its fullest sense extends beyond physical well-being. The primary areas of concern are the poorest regions of Asia and Africa. The institutions of the Network derive their impetus from the ethics of Islam which bridge the two realms of the faith, *din* and *dunya*, the spiritual and the material. The central emphasis of Islam's ethical ideal is enablement of each person to live up to his exalted status as 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.

Din and Dunya

A person's ultimate worth depends on how he or she responds to these Divine favours. *Din* is the spiritual relationship of willing submission of a reasoning creature to his Lord who creates, sustains and guides. For the truly discerning, the earthly life, *dunya*, is a gift to cherish inasmuch as it is a bridge to, and preparation for, the life to come. Otherwise it is an enticement, distracting man from service of God which is the true purpose of life. Service of God is not only worship, but also service to humanity, and abiding by the duty of trust towards the rest of creation. Righteousness, says the Quran, is not only fulfilling one's religious obligations. Without social responsibility, religiosity is a show of conceit. Islam is, therefore, both *din* and *dunya*, spirit and matter, distinct but linked, neither to be forsaken.

The Guidance of the Imam

The challenge of choice is moral and individual, but meaningful in a social context. For while personal morality is a paramount demand of the faith, Islam envisions a social order which is sustained by the expectation of each individual's morally just conduct towards others. The

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function of ethics is to foster self-realisation through giving of one's self, for the common good, in response to God's benevolent majesty.

By grounding societal values in the principle of human moral responsibility to the Divine, Islam lifts the sense of public and social order to a transcendent level. The lasting legacy of the Prophet Muhammad is the strong suffusion of the mundane, of daily life, with the sense of the spiritual. This prophetic example remains a source of emulation for Muslims everywhere, in every age. Within Shia Islam, it is the mandate of each hereditary Imam from the Prophet's progeny, as the legate of the Prophet's authority, to seek to realise that paradigm through an institutional and social order which befits the circumstances of time and place. In a world of flux, the Imam gives leadership in the maintenance of balance between the spiritual and the material in the harmonious context of the ethics of the faith, of which he is the guardian.

Ethical Foundations of AKDN Institutions

Notionally, the AKDN seeks the ideal of social action, of communitarian strategy, to realise the social vision of Islam. Although the outcome of its action is pragmatic, the motivation for it is spiritual, a universal ethic whose purpose is to elicit the noble that inheres in each man and woman. The abiding traits which define this ethic, inform the principles and philosophies of AKDN institutions: their collective focus on respect for human dignity and relief to humanity; the reach of their mandates beyond boundaries of creed, colour, race and nationality; their combined endeavour towards empowering individuals, male and female, to become self-reliant and able to help those weaker than themselves; their policy of nurturing and harnessing a culture of philanthropy and voluntary sharing of time and talent; the transparency of their governance based on the values of trust, probity, equity and accountability; and their overall aim generally to seek to engender, or contribute to other efforts which seek to engender, a fraternal ethos of enlightenment, peace, "large-hearted toleration", mutual aid and understanding.

What are the abiding traits of Islam's ethical ideal which inform the AKDN mandate?

Ethic of Inclusiveness

Islam's is an inclusive vision of society. The divine spark that bestows individuality also bonds individuals in a common humanity. Humankind, says the Quran, has been created from a single soul, as male and female, communities and nations, so that people may know one another. It invites people of all faiths to a common platform, to vie for goodness. The Prophet sought to harness individual and group differences and talents to serve common needs of different religious groups, among whom he encouraged a spirit of harmony and toleration as constituents of a larger community of his time.

Ethic of Education and Research

The Prophet and Hazrat Ali

The key to the nature of society that Islam espouses is an enlightened mind, symbolised in the Quran's metaphor of creation, including one's self, as an object of rational quest. The very first revelation to the Prophet is a command to read. Those who believe and have knowledge are



the exalted ones. Such cannot be equated with those who are ignorant. "My Lord! Increase me in knowledge", is a cherished prayer it urges upon the believers, men and women alike. Learning ennobles, whatever its source, even if that be distant China, and is obligatory upon every Muslim man and woman, the Prophet is reported to have said. "One's greatest ornament is erudition", and "the most self-sustaining wealth is the intellect" which "gives one mastery over one's destiny", are among the sayings attributed to Hazrat Ali, the first Shia Imam. "Knowledge is a shield against the blows of time", wrote Nasir-i Khusraw, an eleventh century Iranian poet-philosopher. But the person of knowledge and wisdom carries the greater obligation of sharing it. The Prophet likens the knowledge which is kept from others to a girdle of fire round one's neck. "One dies not", said Hazrat Ali, "who gives life to learning".

Early Muslim Scholars

The teachings of Islam were a powerful impulse for a spiritually liberated people. It spurred them on to new waves of adventure in the realms of the spirit and the intellect, among whose symbols were the universities of Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ilm in Fatimid Ismaili Cairo and their illustrious counterparts in Baghdad, Cordova, Bukhara, Samarqand and other Muslim centres. Reflecting the spirit of the culture which honoured the pursuit of knowledge, Al-Kindi, a ninth century philosopher and student of Greek philosophy, saw no shame in acknowledging and assimilating the truth, whatever its source. Truth, he wrote, never abases. It only elevates its seeker. As a result, sciences flourished in their different domains: mathematics, astronomy, botany, medicine, optics, pharmacology, zoology and geography. In his *History of Science*, George Sarton traces, from 750 onwards, an unbroken stretch of six centuries of Muslim pre-eminence in the world of science.

The Spirit of Inquiry

Scientific research was considered a meritorious duty. It was the response of the faithful to the persistent call of the Quran to ponder creation in order to understand God's greatness. This attitude helped to cultivate an open yet inquiring bent of mind. Ancient sages were esteemed but their legacy was critically appraised. Ar-Razi (d. 925), philosopher and medical scientist, while in admiration of Galen, wrote: "But all this reverence will not and should not prevent me from doubting what is erroneous in his theories". Ibn Haytham (Al-Hazen), al-Biruni and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), in challenging the long held view of Euclid and Ptolemy that the eye sent out visual rays to the object of vision, laid the foundations for modern optics.

Research was recognised as a way of intellectual growth, an ethical duty since the human intellect is a divine gift to be cherished and cultivated. "Accept whatever adds to your wisdom, regardless of the nature of its source", is a well-attested Prophetic tradition. "Wisdom sustains the intellect" whose "natural disposition is to learn from experience", are among the sayings of Hazrat Ali. Jurists and mystics, from the classical Middle Ages to the 20th century, from al-Ghazali, Ibn Khallikan and Sanai to Shaykh Shalut and Mohammad Iqbal, have upheld and celebrated the never-ending duty of the mind to push the frontiers of its gaze to ever expanding horizons to capture glimpses of a flawless, continuing creation.



Ethic of Compassion and Sharing

A truly enlightened society urges the care of the weak and restraint in their sway by the rich and powerful. Scriptural tradition regards wealth as a blessing, and its honest creation one's duty for it can aid the general welfare of society. "When the prayer is finished, scatter in the land and seek God's bounty, and remember God frequently; haply you will prosper". But when misused or hoarded, wealth is a derisory pittance, an illusory source of power. The pious are the socially conscious who recognise in their wealth a right for the indigent and the deprived whom they help for the sake of God alone, without any desire for recompense or thankfulness from those whom they help.

Charity is not just sharing one's material wealth. Generosity with one's intellectual, spiritual, material or physical wherewithal is highly commended. When withheld, such gifts are a futile burden, "a twisted collar tied to the miser's neck". "One who is more blessed by God", goes an Alid tradition, "is needed more for people". The ethic of voluntary service is, thus, a strongly marked trait of Muslim tradition, celebrated in the example of the *Ansar*, the Helpers, the honourable title for those citizens of Medina who gave succour to Muhammad and his fellow fugitives when they had to emigrate from Makkah to escape persecution.

Ethic of Self-reliance

The poor, the deprived and those at the margin of existence have a moral right to society's compassion, the tradition reminds frequently. But Muslim ethic discourages a culture of dependency since it undermines one's dignity, preservation of which is emphatically urged in Muslim scripture. "Man shall have only that for which he labours", says the Quran. That encouragement to self-help is reinforced in Prophetic traditions: "Man cannot exist without constant effort". "The effort is from me, its fulfilment comes from God". From the time of the Prophet, therefore, the greater emphasis of the charitable effort has been to help the needy to become self-reliant. It has been narrated, for instance, that the Prophet would rather that a mendicant was helped to equip himself for gathering and selling wood to earn sustenance. During his tenure as the last of the four rightly-guided Caliphs, Hazrat Ali helped, for instance, to fund a self-help scheme, voluntarily proposed by a group of residents of an area, to improve its irrigation potential. He preferred that people should prosper, he explained, to their remaining economically weak.

Ethic of Respect for Life and Health Care

As the care of the poor, so that of the sick and disabled is a frequently articulated duty. Good health, like knowledge, is a divine gift, says the Quran, which forcefully urges the sanctity of human life, equating the saving of one life to the saving of the entirety of humanity. "God has sent down a treatment for every ailment", is an oft-quoted saying of the Prophet. People achieve happiness because of the gift of reason, of which medicine is a salient fruit, so wrote a tenth century physician al-Majusi in the introduction to his canon. Learning medicine, according to Muslim jurists, is a "duty of sufficiency", which is incumbent upon, not every individual, but a sufficient number of people to serve the health needs of a community. Under Muslim patronage medicine made far reaching strides. Encyclopaedic treatises on medicine, particularly of Ibn Sina (Avicenna in Latin) and ar-Razi enjoyed a pre-eminent status in the medical literature of learned societies as far apart as Central Asia and Europe. Hospitals



flourished as did mobile dispensaries, which were, not uncommonly, staffed by both male and female health personnel.

The science of medicine was supported by meticulous research. In the late 14th century, when the great plague, the Black Death, struck Europe and Asia, Muslim physicians rejected the widely entrenched superstition that the scourge was a divine retribution. Explaining their scientific hypothesis of contagion, Ibn al-Khatib, an eminent statesman and physician of Granada, wrote that the existence of contagion was established by experience, study of the evidence of the senses, by trustworthy reports of transmission, by the spread of it by persons, by infection of a healthy sea-port by an arrival from an infected land, by the immunity of isolated individuals. "It must be a principle that a proof taken from the tradition has to undergo modification when in manifest contradiction with the evidence of the perception of the senses".

Ethic of Sound Mind

An equal, if not greater, emphasis was placed on mental health since preservation of sound mind is among the foundational principles of Islam's ethical code. The principle was seriously applied in practice. In designating a ward of the Mansuria Hospital, built in Cairo in 1284, for mental patients, its endowment deed stipulated: "The foremost attention is to be paid to those who have suffered loss of mind and hence loss of honour". The principle has had a wider application in tradition. Any substance abuse which interferes with the normal functioning of the mind is a greater violation of the ethical code for it amounts to self-inflicted loss of personal dignity and of the ability to fulfil one's responsibility to oneself, to one's family and to society. "Do not be cast into ruin by your hands", is a recurring admonition.

Ethic of Sustainable Environment: Physical, Social and Cultural

Care of the environment, in its comprehensive meaning, is a duty of trusteeship which humankind owes by virtue of its vicegerency over creation. Each generation of people are described as both "viceroys and successors in the earth", stewards over its resources for the benefit of all living beings. Profligacy, wastage and acts that corrupt the balanced order of nature, which is a sign of divine beneficence, earn a severe reproach. The evil that people do "vanishes as jetsam and what profits men abides in the earth." Hence, those who create wealth in its diverse forms, intellectual and spiritual, cultural and material, are raised to a position of honour, but only if they recognise and respect the element of trust in what they create. To squander in vanity or to withhold in jealousy what they are able to create, amounts to usurping the rights of those, including the generations yet to be born, who need the fruits of their talents. Each generation is, thus, ethically bound to leave behind a wholesome, sustainable social and physical environment.

Ethic of Governance

Those who control and administer resources for the benefit of others are bound by the duty of trusteeship. In Shia Islam, this duty is owed to the Imam. The Muslim tradition of religious law, thus, firmly grounds the ethic of governance in the principles of trust, probity, equity and accountability. The scripture, for instance, sternly warns corruptly inclined citizens and authorities against collusion to defraud others. Guardians of orphans and the weak are similarly warned not to compromise their fiduciary obligations, and to keep away from their wards'



property "except to improve it". The tradition, hence, obliges administrators of a charitable foundation not only to maintain, but to seek to enhance, the value of its corpus and maximise its yield in order to sustain its charitable commitments.