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Aga Khan IV and Contemporary Isma‘ili Identity: Pluralist Vision and Rooted Cosmopolitanism

Sahir Dewji

Independent Researcher, Ottawa, ON K1P 1J1, Canada; sahir.dewji@gmail.com

Abstract: Cosmopolitan engagement and pluralism are consistent themes that run through the Isma‘ili community’s history and continue to be an integral characteristic of the community’s identity. The present Isma‘ili Imam, Karim Aga Khan IV, has been lauded as a champion of pluralism and recognized for his commitment to cosmopolitan ethics which feature prominently in his discourses to both Isma‘ili adherents and other communities. Although the Isma‘ilis have faced vilification and massacres in the course of history, this Muslim minority community has come to be recognized for its endeavors in the area of pluralism and bridge-building under the leadership of Aga Khan IV. The Imam offers religious and worldly guidance from his residence in France, where he has established a Secretariat that includes a number of departments that steer the various communal (jama‘ati) institutions as well as his non-denominational Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). This non-denominational organization established by Aga Khan IV has emerged as a world leading non-governmental organization providing a number of programs toward improving the quality of life of Muslims and others across the globe. Through his institutions, Aga Khan IV stresses the need for a healthy pluralism that is supported by dialogue and engagement with diversity. One such institution is the Global Centre for Pluralism based in Ottawa, Canada—an international research institution whose activities are underpinned by the Imam’s ethico-religious interpretation of the Islamic faith and commitment to civil society. Aga Khan IV’s discourse of pluralism and cosmopolitan ethics has placed his community at the forefront of engagement with an increasingly diverse world.

Keywords: Aga Khan; Isma’ilis; cosmopolitan ethics; pluralism; Imamat

1. Introduction

The Shi‘i Nizari Isma‘ili Muslim community (commonly referred to as Isma‘ilis) constitutes the second largest branch of Shi‘i Islam. The Isma‘ilis emerged through a number of divisions dating back to the early Muslim community on the issue of succession. In common with the Shi‘i narrative of Islam, Isma‘ilis believe that the spiritual and temporal authority of the Prophet Muhammad was handed down through his family (ahl al-bayt) by explicit designation (nass), beginning with the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law ‘Ali b. Abi Talib—the first Imam (spiritual authority). Historically, the foundational basis for the Shi‘i institution of the Imamat is tied to the belief in the special qualities and role of ‘Ali. This understanding is based on Qur‘anic verses and the distinctive charismatic bond (walaya). ‘Ali held with his followers that transcended everyday loyalty and support exercised by other Muslim leaders (Haider 2014). Over a period of history that spans more than a thousand years (Daftry 2007), the Isma‘ilis continue to recognize and venerate a living Imam, Aga Khan IV—the 49th hereditary Ismaili Imam who claims direct lineal descent from Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib and his successors. This Shi‘i transnational community of roughly 12–15 million is inherently diverse (culturally, linguistically, and ethnically) and has settlements in over forty countries across the globe. It is comprised of “indigenous communities in Syria, Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and India and diasporic dispersals in six continents” (Karim 2020, p. 2).
Aga Khan IV succeeded his grandfather Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III in 1957. Considered the hujjah or proof of God on earth, the Isma‘ili Imam embodies the social, political, and spiritual roles attributed to the historical ideal of a Shi‘i Imam. “He is an intermediary between the divine and human realms, and only he is sanctioned to prescribe doctrine and practice” (Steinberg 2011, p. 10). Under the guidance of the Isma‘ili Imam, over the past 60 years, Isma‘ilis have continued to adhere to Islamic beliefs and maintain their esoteric practices by focusing on ethico-religious ideals that promote pluralism and cosmopolitan ethics in the contemporary world. To this point, Aga Khan IV describes the institution of Imamat as a “two-fold” mission whose mandate consists of interpreting the faith and leadership aimed at securing the overall quality of life of the Isma‘ili community and humanity at large (Aga Khan IV 2010). As Aga Khan IV stated in an address to the Canadian parliament:

The role of the Ismaili Imam is a spiritual one; his authority is that of religious interpretation. It is not a political role. I do not govern any land. At the same time, Islam believes fundamentally that the spiritual and material worlds are inextricably connected. Faith does not remove Muslims—or their Imams—from daily, practical matters in family life, in business, in community affairs. (Aga Khan IV 2014a)

An important aspect of this mandate is shaped by Aga Khan IV’s interpretation of Islam, which relies on the dyadic Islamic concepts of din and dunya (faith and world). Integral to the bridging of faith and world is Aga Khan IV’s approach to din and application of the ethico-religious principles of Islam (Dewji 2017, 2018). This ethical dimension lends itself well to the Isma‘ili community’s attention to esoteric aspects of the practice of Islam rather than a dogmatic attachment to its theological doctrine—an interpretation that focuses on the esoteric (batin) teachings (Corbin 1993). Such an orientation anchors the Isma‘ili Imam’s role as a bearer of spiritual knowledge (‘ilm) whose worldview is marked by esoteric interpretation (ta‘wil) of Islam. The focus on inner aspects of spirituality and ethical principles facilitates a balanced engagement with contemporary life, wherein Isma‘ilis can draw from the ethics of their faith tradition and participate in the public realm with dignity and integrity (Dewji 2017). This combination together with Aga Khan IV’s aspiration for a common humanity is what inspires his cosmopolitan endeavor. In this article, I first demonstrate how the contemporary Imam’s cosmopolitan discourse is rooted within a Muslim ethical tradition that links the spiritual and worldly realities of human life. These concepts are also connected to knowledge and love, which serve as the basis for ethical engagement with the world. The basis of this interconnectivity is indeed the cosmopolitan ethic, which is integral to Aga Khan IV’s ethico-religious worldview. I then analyze the Imam’s discourse of cosmopolitan ethics and pluralism—the first serving as an impetus for the application of pluralism. I show how Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan ethic is given meaning through pluralism by focusing on the Global Centre for Pluralism (GCP) as one of the institutions wherein the cosmopolitan ethic is cultivated within the Centre’s space and programming. This Centre, established in partnership with the Canadian government, is perhaps an entity of its own that brings together religion and politics (partnership) and religion and the public sphere (civil society institution) like no other. In considering how the GCP exhibits and supports the ideals expressed by Aga Khan IV, I also raise some of the implications regarding the tenuous division between religious and secular spaces vis-à-vis the ethico-religious outlook of Aga Khan IV and his role as Imam of a religious minority community. Finally, I discuss how the cosmopolitan ethic serves as a value system that has come to define Isma‘ili identity in the contemporary world and how the Isma‘ili community’s religious bureaucracy seems to have taken on this characteristic without a substantive grasp of the concept’s function and implication for religious commitment and expression.
2. Cosmopolitan Ethics: Theological Roots and Ethico-Religious Imperative

As both the spiritual and temporal leader of the Isma’īlis, Aga Khan IV interprets the faith and guides his community in accordance with changing conditions of the world. Due to his involvement in worldly affairs, Aga Khan IV has emerged as a distinct public voice advocating for a cosmopolitan ethic—what he views as the antithesis to the highly controversial “clash of civilizations” theory. Inspired by the ethical framework of the Qur’an, Aga Khan IV integrates spirit and matter when addressing spiritual and worldly concerns of contemporary society. His model of engagement, which converges the sacred and the profane has great potential in shaping notions of sociability, inclusiveness, and citizenship. Inherent in Aga Khan IV’s message is a strong affinity for communal harmony as an ethical imperative coupled with a deep appreciation and gratitude for diversity.

The concept of cosmopolitanism deals with the way in which individuals juggle multiple belongings and divided loyalties and how they co-exist with other individuals of different cultures with similarly divided loyalties and complex identities. Recent formulations of cosmopolitanism suggest that individuals and communities are able to balance particular and universal commitments (Appiah 2006; Delanty 2006; Kymlicka and Walker 2012; Nussbaum 1996; Holinger 2002). This position argues for a “rooted” cosmopolitanism wherein “[r]ooted attachments may serve as moral sources in a second and even stronger sense: namely, they may contain within them the seeds of more universalistic commitments, such that we can appeal to people’s sense of rooted attachments to help motivate cosmopolitan commitments” (Kymlicka and Walker 2012, p. 4). The main characteristic of this cosmopolitan approach is recognition of peoples rooted in their own realities with an understanding that a universal cosmopolitan spirit is shared through encounter and engagement.

The relationship forged between state and society is one that closely captures Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan ideal. What one observes through the lens of Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan sensibility is an embodiment of the human potentiality for reciprocity, respect, and compassion. He offers an approach where faith is instrumentalized as a productive medium by which ethical precepts bring sustenance to an engaged form of cosmopolitanism. Linking together the basis of cosmopolitanism with ethico-religious precepts seems fitting to an Imam who welcomes diversity among human beings as the mercy of the Divine. He notes,

In an increasingly cosmopolitan world, it is essential that we live by a “cosmopolitan ethic,” one that addresses the age-old need to balance the particular and the universal, to honour both human rights and social duties, to advance personal freedom and to accept human responsibility. It is in that spirit that we can nurture bonds of confidence across different peoples and unique individuals, welcoming the growing diversity of our world, even in matters of faith, as a gift of the Divine. Difference, in this context, can become an opportunity—not a threat—a blessing rather than a burden”. (Aga Khan IV 2014b)

The cosmopolitan ethic, for Aga Khan IV, is more than a simple desirable orientation; it is grounded in Islamic ethical heritage and secular pragmatism. Aga Khan IV seems to have in mind a certain conception of cosmopolitanism based in universal morality that pertains to our obligations to one another, regardless of religious affiliation, gender, ethnicity, and political orientation.

This ethical cosmopolitanism requires a vision, and Aga Khan IV offers a transcendent truth to aspire to through his vision. In an interview with the author, Amyn Sajoo stressed importance of the ethical component of cosmopolitanism articulated by Aga Khan IV due to his position as Imam of a religious community:

The term ethic tweaks the idea of cosmopolitan in a slightly different direction from the ism and the ideological aspects of that. When you think about a cosmopolitan ethic, there is an element of saying that there is a virtue; not in the shallow sense of its good, but a virtue in the Aristotelian sense—that there are
very deep solidarities which are human, communal; more than just a liberal ideology. And particularly in the religious sense, these are solidarities that carry an element of obligation as well as the Aristotelian idea of friendship. To that extent, the solidarity of caring about the fate of others and having associative relations with them speaks to the civil society part. (Sajoo 2015)

Aga Khan IV’s prioritization of a cosmopolitan ethic does not mean upholding one principle of human commonality and zeroing out everything else. Rather it affirms unity while acknowledging difference—taking inspiration from Qur’an 4:1, which speaks to both the connectedness of human beings that are created through a single soul and the diversity of creation. In his 2006 speech to the Tutzizing Evangelical Academy, Aga Khan IV referred to the message of Qur’an 4:1 as a “remarkable verse” that “speaks both of the inherent diversity of mankind—the ‘multitude’—and of the unity of mankind—the ‘single soul created by a single Creator’—a spiritual legacy which distinguishes the human race from all other forms of life” (Aga Khan IV 2006). His cosmopolitan worldview essentially embodies an ethical field that links the various dimensions of the spiritual with diverse cultural processes that sculpt pluralistic societies. He guides his community through a reaffirmation of core Ismaili beliefs and values that are expressed in universal terms. The language of choice employed by Aga Khan IV lends to a reading of the public sphere as a social imaginary where diverse forms of sociability, communication, and practices intersect with ethics to deliver a meaningful common good.

A primary characteristic of Aga Khan IV’s articulation of a cosmopolitan ethic is his two-fold discourse of din (faith) and dunya (world). The notion of a cosmopolitan ethic beautifully intertwines the values and beliefs shaped by both din and dunya. “The merging of din and duniya (sic) is about how the community perceives itself, how its members look upon each other and the world outside. In other words, it is an ethical concept, not a constitutional or legal tenet” (Sajoo 2004, pp. 77–78). Within Aga Khan IV’s ethico-religious worldview is a stream of particularity that flows from din to dunya and a current of universality that flows from dunya to din that are akin to the streams of openness and fluidity exemplified through the cosmopolitan spirit. This fluid nature of din and dunya supports a channel of connectivity between the esoteric teachings of the Isma’ili faith and universal principles that underscore the dignity and sanctity of human life (Dewji 2018).

Another component of Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan ethic is the recognition and understanding of the Other. Integral to this characteristic is the pursuit of knowledge, which forms an intrinsic part of the Qur’anic spirit of being open to the Other. The injunction to embrace Allah’s diversity and understand creation is manifested through the acquisition of knowledge. Through the Islamic obligation and the Prophet’s exhortations there began a genuine intellectual curiosity prompted by faith. Knowledge (‘ilm) in this context incorporates both the secular and the religious domains of life—din and dunya. “Within the terms of Islam, all human knowledge—whether of things divine or purely mundane—ultimately derives from God, and thus all potential objects of human knowledge are themselves aspects of divine creation” (Euben 2006, p. 35). Taking this seriously emphasizes the importance of acquiring knowledge, not in and of itself but in order to know the Divine and creation—an invitation to seek the reflection of the Creator within creation and to genuinely reflect on the signs of God. Knowledge of one another based on the acknowledgment of diversity and difference is found in Qur’an 49:13: “O humanity! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you might know one another. The noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most righteous. Truly, God is all knowing, all aware.” Both distinction and difference are affirmed in this verse, and knowledge is understood as the reason for diversity. Implicit in this verse is a divinely ordained directive for Muslims to embrace a common humanity while acknowledging and respecting its diversity. Engagement with the Other is central to the pursuit of knowledge and reveals, simultaneously, the singularity and plurality of creation. “This underscores the singular status and infinite capacity of God as Creator, but it also reveals something about the self: that the self and the Other
both stand in the same relationship with God. Lateral difference does not place one in a privileged status before God or reduce the other simply to a marginal or derivative status” (Lamptey 2014, pp. 243–44). Knowledge, therefore, is attained through the nexus of selfless encounter and conscious engagement with the signs of the Creator—a fulfillment of the Divine will, a reaffirmation that knowing one another instills affection and appreciation for the diversity of creation (Afzaruddin 2011).

Concomitant with seeking knowledge and engaging the Other is the principle of walaya, which happens to be the central tenet of Shi’i Islam. Rebecca Masterton (2016) proposes walaya as a model for engagement that is genuine to the Qur’an’s injunction “to know one another.” She presents this principle as a means to overcome the Self–Other dichotomy. The underlying meaning of this term (closeness and intimacy) flows from a Divine imperative of love and friendship that enables one to enter in a dialogical exchange:

Walaya could be described as a framework of ethics that establishes a relationship between God and humanity. It implies a connection of love, not only between God and the Muslim, but also God, the prophets and imams; the prophets and imams and their followers. It also includes a connection of love among followers themselves; and between followers and the rest of humanity, whatever their religion, culture or race, but providing that the ethics of respect are upheld. (Masterton 2016, p. 23)

Masterson’s perspective on walaya in relation to engaging with the Other supports an ethical sensibility that transcends the spiritual dimensions of people’s lives. It posits the universal connection of each being articulated in Aga Khan IV’s conception of cosmopolitanism. It also encompasses the particular wherein each being seeks to know him/herself so that he/she may know the Other, the Divine. “[Walaya] as love, friendship and divine authority and protection continuously radiates from its Source upon all creation and is, in fact, ‘kneaded’ into the ‘clay of creation’” (Lawson 2016, p. 30). This spiritual attitude prevents the “Self” from being absolutized and opens up an eventual “fusion of horizons”12 where the “Self” attains the capacity to see itself as an “Other.” Walaya thus serves as an antidote to the anomie of today’s world.

Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan sensibility, which is inspired by an ethical background (religious and secular), balances the universal and particular and reconciles the world’s complexity and interconnectedness within the dimension of people’s daily life. His cosmopolitan vision affirms that individuals can be firmly rooted in their own religious, ethnic, cultural, and national realities while committing to equitable coexistence and pluralism. Aga Khan IV’s commitment to pluralism, which he expresses as “reconciling what is unique in our individual traditions with a profound sense of what connects us to all of humankind,” is achieved through expressing a cosmopolitan ethic13 (Aga Khan IV 2009). By starting with the premise of a cosmopolitan ethic as a conscious recognition and acknowledgment of one’s ability to engage with diversity and difference, pluralism becomes the vessel by which to situate the cosmopolitan ethic into a more active arena.

3. Pluralism: The Affirmation and Practice of Cosmopolitan Ethics

The Aga Khan IV has spoken about pluralism as an integral fabric of human coexistence for more than two decades. Pluralism has become a prominent feature of his guidance to the community and rhetoric of the various Imamat institutions (Kadiwal 2014). Aga Khan IV’s vision of pluralism is deeply embedded within his ethico-religious outlook, inspired by both Qur’anic precepts and Islamic spirituality. “The spirit of pluralism is not a pallid religious compromise. It is a sacred religious imperative. In this light, our differences can become sources of enrichment, so that we see ‘the other’ as an opportunity and a blessing—whether ‘the other’ lives across the street—or across the world” (Aga Khan IV 2007). More importantly, Aga Khan IV’s conceptualization of a cosmopolitan ethic attempts to root pluralism within a set of ethical ideals and moral values that demands a commitment to engage difference in a meaningful way (Dewji 2017). The spiritual dimen-
The vision of pluralism that occupies Aga Khan IV’s thought is inspired by a hadith of the Prophet: “There are as many paths toward God as there are people (or even as many as people’s inhalations and exhalations)” (quoted in Soroush 2000, p. 145). These wise words of the Prophet Muhammad serve as a legitimate basis on which to form Aga Khan IV’s pluralist vision; one that combines the affirmation of particularities of religious and cultural values of different communities as long as these do not infringe on the shared universal values. The Qur’an also affirms this inclusive and cosmopolitan message through its recognition of both the diversity and unity of creation as the will of God. This inherent pluralistic vision emanates from several verses in the Qur’an which Aga Khan IV cites frequently (i.e., Q 4:1, 49:13). Pluralism, for Aga Khan IV, is a dynamic and continuous process that is put in motion by a cosmopolitan ethic, which itself is derived by a diversity of religious, cultural, and social values that are shared among diverse communities across the globe. It is a blessing of the Divine that instills a propensity to learn and grow with one another (Aga Khan IV 2008a; Dewji 2017).

On a practical level, Aga Khan IV’s articulation of pluralism is shaped by an adherence to din and dunya and “by a pragmatism that appears to be a function of ensuring a good quality of life for his followers” (Karim 2015a, p. 253). Quality of life, in this context, is not simply a matter of material well-being but a concern for the entire socio-economic and religio-cultural context in which people live. Flowing from Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan ethic vision is an appreciation of shared universal values as well as a recognition of “different visions about a desirable quality of life” that are expressed through the particularities of diverse communities (Aga Khan IV 2011–2012). It is precisely this premise that defines the raison d’être of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Considered as one of the largest nongovernmental agencies, the AKDN and its clusters of agencies comprise one arm of the Imamat Institutions, with the other arm consisting of the various communal (jama’ati) branches of the Isma’ili community. These two organizational extensions along with their institutional counterparts fall within the remit of the Imam who personally guides their initiatives.

The purpose and function of the AKDN transform Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan ideal into a concrete action plan that promotes pluralism. The various agencies of this international nongovernmental organization (AKDN), operating in some thirty countries, are clear examples of Aga Khan IV’s concern for poverty alleviation and cultural homogenization (Karim 2014; Dharamsi and Mitha 2019). Aga Khan IV relentlessly links efforts of poverty alleviation, human development, and equitable access to education with ethical principles of Islam. His efforts to mobilize pluralism as a process to achieve stability and peaceful coexistence go hand in hand with the AKDN’s development work. For this spiritual leader and chairman of AKDN, the involvement in development work is harnessed by a convergence of values and common goals that seek to improve the lives of individuals and communities. The objectives of the AKDN are steered by the Imam’s cosmopolitan outlook, which is activated through a rigorous engagement with pluralism. As such, the AKDN serves a “model” that provides “concrete manifestation to the social conscience of Islam and to pivotal Islamic concepts, such as responsible stewardship of the planet and all life within in (khalifa) and the striving for a life of balance and integrity between the material (dunya) and the spiritual (din)” (Kassam 2003, p. 493). In this quest for improving the quality of human life while holding steadfast to the notion of equity, the AKDN emerges as a conduit and an embodiment of practices that reflect and perpetuate ideas of cosmopolitanism that seek to transcend the narrow confines of territoriality, nation-state, and citizenship. Guided by the vision of the Imam, which directly stems from the ethical foundation of the Islamic faith, openness and societal transformation navigate the humanitarian endeavor of the AKDN whose reach cuts across borders and engagement with different peoples forges a dynamic relation between the local and the global (Dewji 2018).

It is this engaged form of pluralism that guides the work and projects of all the Imamat institutions. A powerful example that demonstrates the convergence of religio-secular values is the Global Centre for Pluralism (GCP) in Ottawa, Canada, whose commitment
to pluralism and its dissemination takes inspiration from Aga Khan IV’s vision. Created from a partnership between the Ismaili Imamat, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), and the government of Canada, this institution imbues the cosmopolitan ethic. The GCP functions as Canada’s international hub for research, knowledge exchange, and dialogue with a primary goal of studying and offering tools toward realizing the practice of pluralism in the world (Tschirgi 2014). The GCP’s approach to pluralism rests on the basis that diversity is a public good that strengthens and enriches a society. The GCP, it can be fairly said, treats pluralism as a practice that is essential to building healthy and successful societies.

The activities of the GCP allow Aga Khan IV to translate his vision message into a tangible action plan, which is inspired by his interpretation of cosmopolitan ethics and the interplay of reconciling \textit{din} and \textit{dunya}. This is indeed the practical potential of pluralism that is comprehended through knowledge and expressed through engagement (Dewji 2017). This worldview permeates the GCP’s efforts in developing tools that assist in the articulation of pluralism across countries and communities as an enabling process by which human dignity is maintained and knowledge potential is harnessed for further development in all areas of life. The programmatic goals of the GCP are shaped by a pragmatic approach to the concepts of pluralism and cosmopolitanism as much as they are profoundly influenced by the theological and spiritual underpinnings of these concepts, as conceived and expressed by its founder and chairman—Aga Khan IV (Dewji 2018). As such, safe-guarding the interplay between universal and particular/personal and communal alongside the dissemination of pluralism is not the sole pre-occupation of the Imam but also of the GCP.

The GCP is an example of “a remarkable convergence of values” (Aga Khan IV 2008, p. 95) between a religious leader and a secular body. An important feature of supporting and enhancing pluralism in human society is education. For Aga Khan IV, “pluralist societies are not accidents of history. They are a product of enlightened education and continuous investment by governments and all of civil society in recognizing and celebrating the diversity of the world’s peoples” (Aga Khan IV 2005). Pluralism is an inspirational goal that must be consistently sought but is never completely achieved. “[P]luralism emerges as a possibility to pursue rather than the certain effect of determinate conditions. To the extent that it is attained, it remains a fragile achievement to be cherished rather than an outcome to take for granted” (Connolly 2005, pp. 63–64). Aga Khan IV’s encouragement for pluralism is propelled from a strong convergence of values that involves remaining open to acknowledging the Other and life-long learning, of which education is a primary objective in the process. At play here is a rich and dynamic tradition of ethics that are grounded in religion that offers a moral dimension to the practice of pluralism. Implicit in this perspective is a recognition that the cosmopolitan ethic is guided by spiritual insight and intimately connected to the quest for knowledge in the common search for betterment. If one accepts this precondition, then it follows that the GCP is a vessel that facilitates that search. As CEO of Aga Khan Foundation Canada, Khalil Shariff (2015) aptly notes,

[The Centre’s] very ambition is premised on the notion of a cosmopolitan ethic (i.e., the set of values) that can keep a society together even when its constituent parts may have very diverse views around a number of things. The very idea of the Global Centre for Pluralism, I think, is intricately related to the idea of a cosmopolitan ethic. In fact, without even the notion of the cosmopolitan ethic, the idea of pluralism becomes very fragile.

Viewing cosmopolitanism through an ethical lens helps to orient the individual to consciously foster an interaction of co-creativity. If we accept that society or individuals are driven by goals, then the cosmopolitan ethic generates the possibility to advance pluralism as a mode of living in diverse societies.

The GCP’s mandate is indeed to educate and inculcate pluralism as an inherent objective of civic culture. Although the task of cultivating pluralism in civic culture is generally associated with the realm of the secular, it does not necessarily require a strict
separation between religion and the public sphere. Earlier conversations with some GCP representatives around the intersection of the religious–secular conceptualization of the GCP and its messaging point to a sharp attempt to disassociate the link of the Isma’ili community in relation to the establishment and function of the GCP. The GCP is not founded on the premise of advancing the interests of the Isma’ili community, although this is very much a by-product of any of Aga Khan IV’s public initiatives, which raises the community’s social capital in the Canadian public sphere (Dewji 2017; Asad 2006). In spite of the secular tone and the fact that the GCP does not bear the name “Aga Khan” in its title, the GCP is still an institution of the Imamat that is created in partnership with the Canadian government. The values on which the GCP is premised cannot be thought of as being devoid of the ethico-religious interpretation of Islam, given Aga Khan IV’s position as Imam of the Isma’ili and his explicit messaging that *din* and *dunya* cannot be separated—a worldview that is intrinsic to the mandate of the Imamat. If anything, the effort to extenuate this reality only helps to undercut the messaging expressed in the public speeches of Aga Khan IV, in which he does not shy away from the religio-spiritual underpinnings of his deep interest in values such as pluralism and cosmopolitan ethics.

Of concern here is the understanding of the Imam’s position vis-à-vis the relation between the secular and religious. His extensive involvement in secular (worldly) affairs is indicative of his commitment to attend to both *din* and *dunya*. The critical link between faith and ethics is what facilitates Aga Khan IV’s participation in public life and the broad cultural appeal of his ethico-religious discourse. Speaking from this perspective, the public sphere is conceptualized as a complex arena where religious and secular ethics are intermingled. This is precisely the nexus at which pluralism finds expression, where individuals can take inspiration from the ethical precepts of their faith tradition while fulfilling their civic commitments (Dewji 2018). “That’s how the value system of Islam carries into everyday life, into the way you exist in society, and clearly into the things you do in society in a material way” (Aga Khan IV 2001). This approach to the public sphere, where religion is one of many identities that plays a significant role in the socio-cultural dimension of individuals, presents secularism as a doctrine of “neutrality” that is not vehemently opposed to the sacred and nor does it favor or disfavor any one position. From Aga Khan IV’s perspective, religion is not antithetical to the “secular” public sphere but a complimentary node that is interconnected by the convergence of social and religious ethics, which are ultimately concerned with the overall well-being of individuals (Karim 2015b; Sajoo 2004). The underlying premise at play here is the notion of a cosmopolitan ethic as envisioned by Aga Khan IV, which adheres to basic universal principles and is coupled with particularities (i.e., cultural and religious significations) that are translated and creatively put into practice through pluralism (Dewji 2018). Partaking in pluralism for Aga Khan IV can therefore be understood as a quest driven by the interface of sacred ethical values and the secular public sphere.

If there really exists no divide between the two, as Aga Khan IV expresses, then would not diminishing the significance of this understanding in the conception of the Centre raise serious questions about the validity of the message in the first place? In other words, what are the implications of this and does it have strategic worth to not locate “religion” in the secular domain given that Aga Khan IV has objected to describing his work as philanthropy? While the GCP is a secular institution, its attempt to disassociate any ethico-religious connection behind this Centre’s *raison d’être* only undermines the significance of pluralism that is inspired by a faith community and its religious leader. The GCP and its function fall under the ambit of Aga Khan IV and, as such, conjure a particular symbolic reference because they are intricately tied to his religious significance as Imam, his vision, and his developmental outreach. It cannot be ignored that Aga Khan IV’s attention to pluralism is partly based on his experience as leader of a transnational religious group that takes heed of the Imam’s religious and public discourse on pluralism. There is an implicit desire to achieve a critical balance between the material (*dunya*) and the spiritual (*din*) and between universal values and particular commitments. Aga Khan IV, indeed, proclaims a
4. Cosmopolitan Footprints and Isma’ili Identity

History points to important insights into the contemporary Imam’s ethico-religious outlook that underscores the centrality of a cosmopolitan ethic. His approach to cosmopolitanism, which “has to do with a knowledge and even appreciation of human diversity” (Hannerz 2004, p. 70), was not uncommon in the history of Islam. Muslims have interacted with others across politico-cultural and ethnic borders long before the birth of modern nation-states, an experience that can be defined as cosmopolitan. There is a multitude of scholarship that aims to illustrate the reality of a cosmopolitan outlook in Muslim societies that is inspired by faith and privileges the paradigms of encounter and engagement (Eckelmann and Piscatori 1990; Karim 2012; Lawrence 2010, 2012; Simpson and Kresse 2008). Rapid expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries brought Muslims further into contact with many religions, cultures, and ethnicities. Expansion and encounter were enjoined with the dissemination of the Prophet’s teachings and examples. Openness to the Other (foreign, strange, new) was vital to the religious, cultural, and intellectual growth of Muslim societies. Engagement with others provided for a two-way flow of ideas, cultures, and languages affecting both the local inhabitants of Muslim territories as well as the Muslim ruling class. These practices of cultural and intellectual exchange were directly inspired by a religious sensibility, pointing to a Muslim cosmopolitan spirit (Karim 2012). In particular, this cosmopolitan attitude was embraced, without reservation, by early Isma’ili thinkers. “[T]hey] embraced the most openly pluralist Islamic approach toward other cultural and religious sources. They had a cosmopolitan outlook in studying others’ material and spiritual sciences in a sustained search for universal truth and adapted intellectual schemes and cosmologies from several civilizations to explicate their own beliefs” (Karim 2020, p. 3).

The contemporary focus on a cosmopolitan worldview by Aga Khan IV highlights this leader’s endorsement of a universal ethic and emphasis on Islam as a broad ethos, which welcomes opportunities of understanding and reflection through dialogue, knowledge, and reciprocity.

Aga Khan IV’s approach is not unique to his Imamat. On the contrary, the Isma’ili Imams have, over the centuries, upheld a cosmopolitan ethos that has permeated the Isma’ili theological heritage. A consistent theme that helped sustain an “Isma’ili” cosmopolitan outlook over the centuries is fluidity. Aga Khan III, the 48th Isma’ili Imam and grandfather of Aga Khan IV, wrote in his Memoirs: “Ismailism has survived because it has always been fluid. Rigidity is contrary to our whole way of life and outlook” (Aga Khan III 1954, p. 65). This points to a consistent endeavor to uphold an ethico-religious approach within the Isma’ili theological heritage that affirms a vibrant dynamism to address diversity under the guidance of the Isma’ili Imams. In this way, the conceptualization of Aga Khan IV’s vision of a cosmopolitan ethic preserves a rich ethical tradition while promoting pluralism and facilitating an Isma’ili Muslim engagement in the current context. A few examples serve to illustrate this point and highlight the dynamism inherent within Isma’ili history.

The earliest development of an Isma’ili gnostic system, the community’s early history known as the first period of Concealment (dawr al-satr), provides an early endeavor of formulating a complex system aimed at interweaving the concept of Imamat with a cosmology. This exercise saw a cosmopolitan approach toward early ideas of Gnostic eschatology and interpretations of history and time. “It was in the light of such doctrines, rooted in a syncretic and ecumenical worldview, that the early Ismailis developed their system of thought, a system that appealed not only to Muslims belonging to different communities of interpretation and social strata but also to a diversity of non-Islamic religious communities” (Daftary 1998, p. 54).

Another expression of the cosmopolitan ethos can be found during the reign of the Fatimid Imam-caliphs (909–1094 CE) whose empire included much of North Africa and western Asia. Considered the “Golden Age” of Isma’ili history, the Fatimid era saw a high
regard for learning and pragmatic governance that serve as important antecedents to Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan sensibility. A legal publication, known as the aman (guarantee of safety) document, served as the apparatus of Fatimid rule, which sought to balance Isma’ili theological principles with diverse religio-cultural worldviews of non-Isma’ili communities of the Fatimid empire (Hamdani 2006). “Doctrinally, their model was underpinned by a universalist notion of authority of the divinely designated imam-caliph. Pragmatically, the model evolved with their experience of governing diverse communities across a vast terrain” (Jiwa 2015, p. 111). The aman document, issued as a guarantee of safety and justice, concretized the Fatimid’s inclusive approach to governance. It not only affirmed the Fatimid caliphs’ commitment to equity, justice, and peace but also conferred freedom of worship to the Egyptian population who belonged to different madhahib (Muslim legalistic schools) and other religious communities who were classified as the People of the Book or ahl al-kitab (Jiwa 2009). More importantly, the aman document consolidated a means of acting on pluralism in a milieu that was indeed cosmopolitan in nature.

Also noteworthy are the efforts of Aga Khan III whose leadership as Imam of the Isma’ilis spans 72 years. His cosmopolitan pursuit was steeped in universalist ideals that prioritized cross-cultural engagement and a de-territorialized understanding of religion. His approach to Islam was shaped by the interface of Western secularism and Muslim reformism in colonial South Asia during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The socio-moral reforms and socio-historical forces at play during Aga Khan III’s tenure influenced his interpretation of Islam, which called for a “this-worldly” approach that placed primacy on ethico-religious principles and embraced rationalism (Dewji 2020). The late Isma’ili Imam did not view science and revelation as an opposing force to religion and considered education as the antidote to the decline of Muslim progression. He insisted on creating “an intellectual and moral capital” for Muslims in accordance with “the justice and virtue and purity of our beloved faith” (Aga Khan III 1998, pp. 209, 214). The emphasis on education was very much in keeping with the cosmopolitan spirit that demanded a conscious effort to understand God’s creation and to engage with it in the best way possible. Aga Khan III argued for Muslims to “enlarge the sphere of education where it exists already and must create it where it is absent.” He also stressed that knowledge of the Sciences, as well as the Humanities, “must be the main practical objects of our energy and ambitions” (Aga Khan III 1998, p. 322). The precedent for this pursuit of knowledge came from the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who encouraged learning in all areas of life. The objective was clear: increase human knowledge for the purpose of understanding God’s creation and advance the quality of life of a waning Muslim community. Aga Khan III took interest in the acquisition of knowledge and appropriation of modern educational systems, taking inspiration from the hadith exhorting Muslims to travel as far as China to seek knowledge. In this manner, Aga Khan III looked to the Prophet Muhammad as an example who welcomed a diversity of knowledge for the socio-economic development of Muslims (Aga Khan III 1998).

The efforts of Aga Khan III, which paved the way for the Isma’ili community’s transformation into the twentieth century, are characterized by the intrinsic relationship between din and dunya. In addition to his preoccupation with education, Aga Khan III advocated for service and love of one another. At the core of his personal beliefs was the significance of monorealism (wahdat al-wujud) in understanding the Islamic faith. Wahdat al-wujud, translated as “Oneness of Being” or “Unity of Existence”, positions God as the only “true” reality, and as a consequence of this understanding, creation is regarded as an articulation of that reality wherein each created entity reflects an attribute of the one “true” reality (Dewji 2020; Funk and Said 2009). “Monorealism thus permitted the Aga Khan to resolve the contradiction between the plurality of existence and the unicity of divinity” (Boivin 1994, p. 205). Flowing from this idea that humanity is one yet diverse is an idea of a common bond that binds humanity together. Moreover, love and service to others in relation to revelation and knowledge was the anchor that strengthened the interconnectedness of humanity and the catalyst to expressing a cosmopolitan ethic. Love functions as “the
crown of a lifelong attachment, in which the human being devotes all that he has, knows, and feels to the love and service of another” (Aga Khan III 1954, p. 249). Love in this sense is not simply an ephemeral emotion but rather an illuminating spirit that serves as a mediator linking each being with the Divine and all of existence. In other words, love is an elevating experience for apprehending knowledge of the Creator and creation, as well as an illuminating spark that inculcates a profound ethos of encounter and dialogue.

The above examples highlight a continuous expression of a distinct cosmopolitan characteristic that cultivated a spirit of encounter and engagement, which shaped the Isma’ili identity as it has come to be known today. The various periods of Isma’ili history point to interpretive tendencies that continue to play an important role in Isma’ili practice and discourses. The different phases of the community’s history showcase “cosmopolitan moments”, attesting to a dynamic spirit of cosmopolitanism influenced by the inseparable realities of din and dunya. Concomitantly there is also a preservation and construction of a communal identity, steeped in spiritual and ethico-religious ideals, that is clearly crafted by the Imams’ interpretations and socio-cultural environments of the community. The bent toward a language of ethics that is grounded in a religious outlook has contributed to the evolution of the Isma’ili community and its engagement in the world over the centuries. Etched in the historical articulation of the Isma’ili community’s identity is an ideal that has transcended both time and place. What manifests in the tenure of Aga Khan IV, as Imam, is a desire to express this ideal in relation to the contemporary world and situate it within secular discourse and vocabulary. Therefore, while Aga Khan IV’s perspective is firstly rooted within religious discourse, its relevance extends to all contexts where moral sensibility and human responsibility are part of the social imaginary of lived realities. As such, the current Imam’s cosmopolitan outlook and advocacy of pluralism are to be understood as an ethico-religious heritage that upholds the value of faith and spirituality that is not divorced from secular philosophy.

5. Conclusions

Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan vision has deep spiritual underpinnings that also integrate concepts that are standard to philosophical discourses about human existence and experience, enabling a conversation that reaches far beyond the confines of religion. Through such a vision, religion and cosmopolitanism are not incompatible; rather the former does a service to this ideology by infusing an ethical paradigm that is rooted in particular resources not far removed from the larger human experience. The rhetoric of Aga Khan IV entails a two-fold discursive approach that considers issues facing humanity and provides advice to face the surmounting challenges with tools that are available amongst all communities (Karim 2015b). In this sense, Aga Khan IV is able to freely employ concepts that have gained cultural currency while paying attention to religious origins. The unremitting spiritual commitment to a cosmopolitan ethic along with the responsibility to pluralism is vital to the Isma’ili community’s identity and engagement with din and dunya in contemporary life.

The Isma’ili community’s experience and engagement with the contemporary world are a poignant example of a religious community “negotiating their lives within a general set of principles, which at once call for loyalty to the country in which they are living, loyalty to their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, their faith, and an appreciation of their responsibility towards the less fortunate of the world” (Matthews 2007, pp. 108–09). Through the Islamic framework of din and dunya in connection with a theology of monorealism, Aga Khan IV has offered an ethico-religious response to modernity, thereby creating a form of Muslim modernity that is characterized by a Shi’i Nizari Isma’ili worldview yet universal in its approach, which lends itself to a broader appeal for other Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Karim 2015a). By connecting the past with the present, universal with the particular, Isma’ili beliefs and cosmopolitan heritage are evoked in order to successfully interact with contemporary socio-cultural contexts. This spirit is also embodied in the very work of the Imam institutions, which act as a medium through which Aga Khan IV is able to translate
his vision of a cosmopolitan ethic into a concrete program of action that serves civil society. This is made possible by a great deal of practical experience due to the multi-ethnic nature of Aga Khan IV’s transnational community. From a pragmatic point of view, “pluralism encourages better ethnic and cultural cohesion within Ismaili jamats; it promotes greater acceptance of Ismailis by other Muslim groups; and it provides a socio-political basis for the community’s participation in public spheres of the countries where they live” (Karim 2013, p. 159). The importance of pluralism is especially valuable for the Isma’ili jamats established across North America and Europe who are faced with an increasing internal diversity. Anchoring the Isma’ili worldview in religious and socio-ethical values, such as pluralism, safeguards the diversities of the community and also offers a mechanism by which Isma’ils are able to adapt themselves in various contemporary contexts.

Under the leadership of Aga Khan IV, Isma’illis, especially in North America, have achieved significant success in various fields including public service, academia, media, and other professional fields (Karim 2021). They have also contributed to the development and evolution of their institutional infrastructure, facilitating the implementation of religious, social, and economic reforms (Takim 2015). The Imam for the Isma’illis “facilitates the imperative of social action by providing appropriate institutions” to translate ethical principles into action—“a duty the present Imam takes very seriously” (Ruthven 1998, p. 191). The placement of communal and non-communal institutions in prominent Western cities points to the ongoing efforts of the Isma’ili community to engage with the wider public sphere of which they are a part (Karim 2013, 2015a).

Indeed, Aga Khan IV’s discourses on pluralism and cosmopolitan ethics and his guidance to the community on balancing spiritual and material aspects of life have had a significant impact on the lived realities of his adherents. Although the focus on ethics and values (religious and secular) are espoused by the community and its institutions, there remains an unresolved tension between the Imam’s cosmopolitan vision for his community and the fulfillment of that ideal in practice. For instance, the community, especially at the level of appointed leadership, is still grappling with gender equity. This continues to be an obstacle that the community has not been able to effectively remove from its psyche due to the different cultural conceptions of women’s roles in society that persist. Certainly, this is a challenge for many transnational communities that have pockets of insularity. However, given the weight placed on the concept and practice of pluralism by the Imam, the community is a long way at achieving equity even though there have been significant improvements in this area since the time of Aga Khan III. There is also a growing concern around the institutional promotion of pluralism that manifests at the cost of stifling the internal (cultural) pluralism of the Isma’ili community (Karim 2013). When articulating a pluralist discourse that is driven by a centralized authority, there is a presumed belief that individual voices within the community are equally represented among decision makers who speak on the Isma’ili community’s behalf. “Thus the model of pluralism can fail to recognize both diversity within religious traditions and forms of religious difference that do not fit this model of organization” bringing into question the “ethical promises” of pluralism (Jakobsen 2010, p. 32). As a result, the voices of diverse Isma’ili individuals, which are a manifestation of a pluralist community, are curtailed to fit the agenda of institutional hegemony that focuses its efforts on public expressions of pluralism. The result is a paradox of both an internal pluralism and external pluralism paired with a central authoritative figure that exemplifies the bedrock of pluralism. “The mutually constitutive relations between plurality and unity—between celebrating the plurality of religious diversity and organizing under the unity of the category of religion—produce complicated political effects in a range of arenas” (Klassen and Bender 2010, p. 5). This inevitably leaves the community with the challenge to address with scrutiny the inadequacies of its internal manifestations while giving profundity to the ethico-religious ideal championed by Aga Khan IV.

The intersection of individual autonomy and community identity raises important questions in the Ismaili context. A centralized governing body—system of councils—that
oversees the needs of the Isma’ili community is essential and required for cohesion and sustained growth. However, the dependency on a highly organized center also brings a level of rigidity that is focused on protecting the community’s boundaries (Karim 2020). Regarding the articulation of an “Isma’ili” cosmopolitan ethic, inspired by the community’s theological and historical experiences, certain norms of this ideal “become imbricated with the operation of power because of the need to create community self-discipline so as to produce publicly articulable and authentic versions” (Jakobsen 2010, p. 42). How can a commitment to Aga Khan IV’s cosmopolitan worldview account for individual commitments that may stand outside the bounds of normative community interests? One can only anticipate that internal issues of identity (cultural, political, religious, ethnic, and sexual) will have to be addressed more explicitly under the banner of cosmopolitan ethics given that the dignity of each individual human being lies at the core of Aga Khan IV’s ethical orientation. A form of decentralization is perhaps inevitable and necessary in the interest of keeping internal tensions at bay and encouraging those who may be marginalized by the normative structure to offer an alternative. There is a rising level of critique around the ethical paradigm that is informed by Aga Khan IV and the application of his vision, which places the community in an apolitical position in its cosmopolitan stance. The significant over-dependency on the “center” and lack of initiative by the lay community members only keeps them behind. 19 Chancellor’s Professor at Carleton University, Karim H. Karim, adumbrates his view on this issue in an interview:

The jama’at [Isma’ili community] in this way is a very conservative jama’at. It is very reluctant. It seems to think that it does not know. I think it is mistaken in that, I think there are very intelligent people in the jama’at who are highly successful in their various walks of life. But there is this aura of mystery around even a simple concept such as pluralism or cosmopolitanism and a reluctance to engage with it with an open mind. So, what if we make a mistake? This is how we learn . . . So that kind of initiative, that kind of inquisitiveness, this intellectual engagement is lacking unfortunately. (Karim 2014)

The result is a sort of blind conformity to normativity without any rigorous engagement, which runs against the cosmopolitan spirit of this community’s intellectual heritage. The years ahead will offer evidence, if any, toward an approach that takes the Imam’s guidance seriously and perhaps allow adherents to rise above communal politics and remove the shackles of bureaucratic mechanisms that stifle the growth of a genuine Isma’ili cosmopolitan reality (Dewji 2018).

Be that as it may, the overall goal of cosmopolitan ethics and service to humanity continues to be valued as a deeply held Isma’ili goal that the community sees as rooted in the Islamic faith. The basis for this outlook is informed by Aga Khan IV’s theological and ethico-religious interpretation and his awareness of the pluralistic nature of Islam. His ability to negotiate scripture with reason and human experiences forges an interpretive medium allowing the community to thrive as a formidable force against global issues. The contemporary attention to cosmopolitan ethics is integral to Isma’ili worldview of intertwined nature of din and dunya. It has allowed for a range of innovative achievements in the secular and spiritual lives of the community and the possibility for deeper recognition of competing narratives. There is a great deal of opportunity that arises from Aga Khan IV’s discourse on pluralism and cosmopolitan ethics for reflection and dialogue around negotiating institutional objectives and community aspirations. Despite some of the obstacles that narrow Aga Khan IV’s vision for his community, this religious leader’s advice to cultivate a cosmopolitan ethic remains a powerful message that continues to manifest itself in the community’s identity and endeavors.

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The concept of knowledge is best explained through a combination of “way signs” and “knowledge”: The Arabic root (‘-l-m) “to know” has a semantic relationship to the Arabic ma’lam (sign post) from the same root (‘-l-m). This connection derives from the fact that, in the pre-Islamic environment, “way signs” guided the Bedouin on “his travels and in the execution of his daily tasks” (Rosenthal 2007, p. 10). It is thus fitting that the Qur’anic exhortation to search for knowledge also has a relation to signs (aya) of the Creator. However, the concept of walaya represents “a principle of spiritual charisma that lies at the heart of all major Shi’i sectarian beliefs and embodies the Shi’i religious ethos” of unwavering faith and obedience owed to the Imams (Dakake 2007, p. 7). The acknowledgment of ‘Ali as the rightful charismatic leader of the ummah, after the prophet Muhammad, is legitimized through an episode that occurred near the end of the Prophet’s life at Ghadir Khumm. ‘Ali’s supporters expressed their loyalty through their unbreakable bond of walaya (allegiance) to him. As the holder of spiritual authority, ‘Ali’s supporters considered him as the wali of God. In Isma’ili theology, the principle of walaya is regarded as the first pillar of faith. See (Amir-Moezzi 2002) for more on walaya.

For a recent and detailed account of the history and beliefs of Isma’ils, refer to Andani (2016a, 2016b).

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The “Clash of Civilizations” is a widespread theoretical framework used for understanding current and past Muslim–West clashes and conflict between civilizations. In particular, he invoked Islam’s propensity toward violence and backwardness as evidence of its incompatibility with western civilization. His approach is based on the assumption that the world must conform to Western norms and values in order for the world to attain peace and stability. This perspective has been challenged by many scholars who argue that this framework focuses on radical trends without any close analysis of their roots as well as economic and political forces that contribute to radical actions. “[This] is an impoverished portrayal of a complex reality and discourse about and within Islam-and also ignores the new clash of individualist and communitarian views in the West, one whose fault lines run through the core of public policy” (Sajoo 1995, p. 579). For more on the “clash of civilizations” theory, see Huntington (1996). See also Lewis (1993) and Fukuyama (1992).

As elucidated by Charles Taylor, the social imaginary is about the way people imagine their social existence. It extends beyond the limited confines of theories and ideologies that are admired and tightly held by a few. “It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice” (Taylor 2004, p. 24).

For a detailed exploration of the link between ethics and faith based on Aga Khan IV’s teachings, with attention to the inseparability of din and dunya, see (Lakhani 2018).

Notes
1. The concept of walaya represents “a principle of spiritual charisma that lies at the heart of all major Shi’i sectarian beliefs and embodies the Shi’i religious ethos” of unwavering faith and obedience owed to the Imams (Dakake 2007, p. 7). The acknowledgment of ‘Ali as the rightful charismatic leader of the ummah, after the prophet Muhammad, is legitimized through an episode that occurred near the end of the Prophet’s life at Ghadir Khumm. ‘Ali’s supporters expressed their loyalty through their unbreakable bond of walaya (allegiance) to him. As the holder of spiritual authority, ‘Ali’s supporters considered him as the wali of God. In Isma’ili theology, the principle of walaya is regarded as the first pillar of faith. See (Amir-Moezzi 2002) for more on walaya.

2. For a recent and detailed account of the history and beliefs of Isma’ils, refer to Andani (2016a, 2016b).

3. Faisal Devji (2009) views this as an exaggeration and posits that a more realistic estimate places the global Isma’ili community between 3 to 4 million.

4. Din and dunya are literally translated as “religion” and “the world” (also translated as secular). Although this may bring attention to the analogous modern binary “religion” and “the secular”, din and dunya, including their adjectival counterparts dinī (religious) and dunyāwi (worldly/secular), are not necessarily in opposition. According to Rushain Abbasi (2020), din and dunya were employed by pre-modern Muslim authors as a way of differentiating between two distinct spheres. “Premodern Muslims often maintained a conceptual distinction of the religious and secular at a primary level, but the former permeated into the latter a secondary level, rendering the religious more powerful in a sense” (Abbasi 2020, p. 193). This perspective helps frame Aga Khan IV’s positionality and usage of din and dunya in relation to the Muslim ethical tradition. On the other hand, Daryoush Poor (2014), notes the binary relationship of din and dunya employed by Aga Khan IV also resembles that of din and dawla (state) but with a slight distinction. He argues that dawla has been replaced by din, simply because Aga Khan IV does not hold a political position. To that end, Aga Khan IV’s institutions and his engagement with the modern world are best captured as secular (dunyawi).

5. This article is based on my doctoral research and draws from material in Dewji (2018).

6. The “Clash of Civilizations” is a widespread theoretical framework used for understanding current and past Muslim–West interactions. This conflict-laden theory was developed by Samuel P. Huntington (d. 2008) and was adopted as a framework for Western foreign policy. “He offered a worldview in which civilizations were the most salient entities for cultural identification and political action” (Karim and Eid 2012, p. 18). Huntington clearly believed that what lay ahead was a future grimed with violent clashes and conflict between civilizations. In particular, he invoked Islam’s propensity toward violence and backwardness as evidence of its incompatibility with western civilization. His approach is based on the assumption that the world must conform to Western norms and values in order for the world to attain peace and stability. This perspective has been challenged by many scholars who argue that this framework focuses on radical trends without any close analysis of their roots as well as economic and political forces that contribute to radical actions. “[This] is an impoverished portrayal of a complex reality and discourse about and within Islam-and also ignores the new clash of individualist and communitarian views in the West, one whose fault lines run through the core of public policy” (Sajoo 1995, p. 579). For more on the “clash of civilizations” theory, see Huntington (1996). See also Lewis (1993) and Fukuyama (1992).

7. As elucidated by Charles Taylor, the social imaginary is about the way people imagine their social existence. It extends beyond the limited confines of theories and ideologies that are admired and tightly held by a few. “It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice” (Taylor 2004, p. 24).

8. For a detailed exploration of the link between ethics and faith based on Aga Khan IV’s teachings, with attention to the inseparability of din and dunya, see (Lakhani 2018).

9. This motif can be found in verses such as Q 3:137; 6:11; 12:109; 16:36; 29:20; 30:9; and 30:42.

10. The concept of knowledge is best explained through a combination of “way signs” and “knowledge”: The Arabic root (‘-l-m) “to know” has a semantic relationship to the Arabic ma’lam (sign post) from the same root (‘-l-m). This connection derives from the fact that, in the pre-Islamic environment, “way signs” guided the Bedouin on “his travels and in the execution of his daily tasks” and that constituted “the kind of knowledge in which his life and well-being principally depended” (Rosenthal 2007, p. 10). It is thus fitting that the Qur’anic exhortation to search for knowledge also has a relation to signs (aya) of the Creator. However,
this rendering of ‘-l-m does not capture all of its contents and expansive reach. It is a complex term that holds deep meaning in
Muslim intellectual life and daily life, as well as religious and political life.

11 In her analysis of al-Ṭabarî and ibn Kathîr’s explanation of the verb ta’arafu (to know), Asma Afsaruddin indicates that both
exegetes interpret the verb ta’arafu as a command to know others in order to come nearer to God and to foster love among people
(Afsaruddin 2011, p. 72).

12 The “fusion of horizons” is taken from Gadamer (influenced by European philosophies) who sought to think through “an outlook
where difference was somehow attenuated in favor of a nearly preestablished harmony between self and other and of an eventual
fusion of horizons” (Dallmayr 1996, p. 41). The “fusion of horizons” only becomes operational through a dialogical interaction in
which human beings (even at the level of communities and societies) are willing to open themselves to developing effective tools
for an engagement that incorporates multiple possibilities and rejects any form of Eurocentrism.

13 This resonates with Appiah’s cosmopolitan sensibility that develops through immersion and interaction with diversity. “One
distinctively cosmopolitan commitment is to pluralism. Cosmopolitans think that there are many values worth living by and that
you cannot live by all of them. So we hope and expect that different people and different societies will embody different values”

14 “Social capital is the currency of trust generated by social networks, allowing cooperation, collaboration and mobilisation
channels without which citizens are unable to effectively influence governments” (Schubert 2008, p. 166).

15 Judith Butler views the public sphere as the accomplishment of certain religious traditions that have always been a part of the
creation of the public sphere, which then “establish a set of criteria that delimit the public from the private”. She goes on to write,
“If we could not have the distinction between public and private were it not for the Protestant injunction to privatize religion,
then religion—or one dominant religious tradition—underwrites the very framework within which we are operating” (Butler
2011, p. 71).

16 “AKDN and Ismaili jamâ‘it institutions seek to emulate the progressive values of civil society in providing support for healthy
societal development. They have also produced in Ismailis a sense of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship. The imam’s
leadership is vital in this endeavor. He gives guidance to his adherents on maintaining a balance between the spiritual and the
material aspects of contemporary existence” (Karim 2015a, p. 256).

17 Shainool Jiwa acknowledges that the Fatimid model was not perfect. The Fatimids faced their own dynastic challenges in
instituting a fair policy over a diverse social and religious community in Egypt. Nevertheless, their history provides a possible
model of inclusivity and equitable governance influenced by the sociohistorical context of their time. For more details on Fatimid

18 In a chapter from the book Glimpses of Islam, entitled “The Fundamentals of Islam”, the Aga Khan introduces the concept
of monorealism as a way to understand Islam. This is something he later discusses in his memoirs as well. However, this
interpretation was first described by the Aga Khan in an earlier French article (1943) where he defines the “Islamic principle” as
“monorealism” rather than monotheism. The chapter in Glimpses of Islam is understood as an English translation of the earlier
French article (Boivin 2014, p. 413).

19 Poor (2014), through an interview with the late Mohammed Arkoun, also reveals an over-dependency on the Imam on all affairs
affecting the community. Despite the processes of consultation with the Imam that has been built into the institutionalization
framework, there is a lack of initiative or responsibility to pro-actively engage with day-to-day concerns that modernity places on
the community. “. . . [T]here is still a discrepancy between where the Imam stands and how the Community resposnds to this
new function” (Poor 2014, p. 135).

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