The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Baccalaureate Address at Brown University
His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan
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Providence, Rhode Island, United States

President Gregorian, faculty members, postgraduates and graduating students, ladies and gentlemen,

President Gregorian, thank you for your very generous words. It is a great honour for me to be at this Commencement Ceremony as Brown represents much of what is best in Western liberal education. Let me also congratulate the graduating students for whom the memory of this day, I am sure, will remain with them throughout their lives.

One of the things most often said to university students on their graduation day is that they must now prepare to face the "real world". You should be glad to hear that I am not going to tell you that but as someone who has been living and working in the real world for a very long time, I can tell you this: the world is now a different place.

It is different from what it was forty years ago, five years ago, different even from last month's world. It is different because we are witnessing a massive acceleration in the rate of global change. Today's world is a living environment in which you will have to adapt much faster than your parents did, in order to have a positive and constructive impact on the future. Having said this, the means at your disposal to achieve such an impact have multiplied exponentially during the last decade. Never before has their been so much knowledge available about so many different people; never before have we known more about the physical world in which we live; never before therefore have the opportunities been greater to make a better life for more people around the globe.

For the last fifty years, our planet has been frozen by a paralysing bipolar political vortex which we call the Cold War. During those years, many allowed their views to stagnate and harden into notions so dependable that they became unrevisable dogmas: My capitalism versus your communism, your eastern bloc versus our western bloc and left versus right. But like the Berlin Wall, our old bipolar system was dismantled almost overnight, and with it the black and white world to which we had grown accustomed. Unfortunately, views and thought habits, although intangible, are less easily broken than bricks and politics. Learned human behaviour dies hard.

The world has become a hurtling place in which change occurs constantly, and in which we need to learn again, to evolve. Free now, from an artificial tug-o-war in which most were only expected to identify with the rope, we are facing a world of doubt and questioning, and universal uncertainty, the new hallmark of our time. Growing from our thawing earth today, is

the unsure and uncomfortable process of discovering and learning about mobility and change. In all societies, disconcerting but pertinent questions are being asked: Who will lead in the process of change? What beliefs should guide us? Will they be scientific statements and data, or philosophical visions? What constraints or opportunities will shape our future? What are the priorities that we must address first, and why should they be priorities? That these questions are answered correctly should be a source of concern to us all. Because if the responses do not come principally from those of us fortunate enough to have been educated, fortunate enough to have food and medicine and shelter, who can make progress in providing these things to the less fortunate, the responses will come from the contestations of the excluded. In short the responses should come from you.

In this new and challenging environment, the people and nations which were paralysed by someone else's struggle for supremacy are free now to hope. Despite global acceleration, America still benefits from the intellectual liberty and hope for the future on which this nation was founded. But these elements, too easily taken for granted by those who are used to them, are of primordial concern in many other societies. In Algeria, Bosnia, Rwanda, Tajikistan, people are fighting and dying because their lives can finally be changed. Those nations that used to be part of the Third World, have become an obscure “south” and “east” that in emerging from obscurity are increasingly present. Indeed, the world you are about to enter is a fluid one in which you will have to be flexible.

President Gregorian tells me that I am the first Muslim ever to give the Baccalaureate address at a Brown Commencement in the school's illustrious 232-year history. This makes the occasion a very special honour for me. It also carries the considerable, even intimidating responsibility to speak about the place of Islam and of Muslims in the world today, about their hopes and aspirations, and about the challenges that they face. It is also my responsibility, and indeed a pleasure for me, to speak about what might be done, and some things that are being done, to respond to these challenges. My position, since 1957 as Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims bears no political mandate, it is an independent one from which I can speak to you openly.

Today in the occident, the Muslim world is deeply misunderstood by most. The West knows little about its diversity, about the religion or the principles which unite it, about its brilliant past or its recent trajectory through history. The Muslim world is noted in the West, North America and Europe, more for the violence of certain minorities than for the peacefulness of its faith and the vast majority of its people. The words “Muslim” and “Islam” have themselves come to conjure the image of anger and lawlessness in the collective consciousness of most western cultures. And the Muslim world has, consequently, become something that the West may not want to think about, does not understand, and will associate with only when it is inevitable.

Not only is this image wrong, but there are powerful reasons that we cannot overlook, for which the West and the Muslim world must seek a better mutual understanding. The first of those reasons is that with the Eastern bloc weakened militarily, financially and politically, the Muslim world is one of only two potential geopolitical forces vis-à-vis the West on the world

stage; the other being the East Asian Tigers. There are large Muslim minorities living in, and impacting, many European countries. The Muslim world controls most of the remaining fossil fuel reserves. There is a resurgence of Islam in countries of strategic importance to the West such as Turkey. Several Muslim states have nuclear ambitions. The Gulf war proved that events in the Muslim world do have a direct impact on global economics and security. The West should ignore neither the evolution of the Muslim Central Asian Republics nor their interplay on the future of Russia. Much of Sub-Saharan Africa, is Muslim, and none of us can turn our backs on this continent in need.

The second reason why the Islamic world and the West should seek increased mutual understanding is that in the wake of the Cold War, it has become obvious that violence and cruelty of all ilk are a plague gaining ground around the globe. It can be military, or para-military and brutal, or it can be structural and inconspicuous, and no less brutal. It ranges from suicide bombings to ethnic cleansing to the forgetting and abandoning of large segments of society, even by industrialised nations such as this one.

Against this worrying global background it must be made utterly clear that in so far as Islam is concerned, this violence is not a function of the faith itself, as much as the media would have you believe. This is a misperception which has become rampant, but which should not be endowed with any validity, nor should it be accepted and given credibility. It is wrong and damaging. The myth that Islam is responsible for all the wrong doing of certain Muslims may well stem from the truism that for all Muslims, the concepts of *Din* and *Duniya*, Faith and World, are inextricably linked. More so than in any other monotheistic religion of the world. The corollary is that in a perfect world, all political and social action on the part of Muslims would always be pursued within the ethical framework of the faith. But this is not yet a perfect world. The West, nonetheless, must no longer confuse the link in Islam, between spiritual and temporal, with that between state and church.

With the deaths of King Charles the First, and Louis the Sixteenth, Western culture initiated a process of secularisation which grew into present day democratic institutions, and lay cultures. Islam, on the other hand, never endorsed any political dogma. So the historical process of secularisation which occurred in the West, never took place in Muslim societies. What we are witnessing today, in certain Islamic countries, is exactly the opposite evolution, the theocratisation of the political process. There is no unanimity in the Islamic world on the desirability of this trend but it would certainly be less threatening if the humanistic ethics of the faith were the driving force behind the processes of change.

The news-capturing power of this trend contributes to the Western tendency to perceive all Muslims or their societies as a homogenous mass of people living in some undefined theocratic space, a single "other" evolving elsewhere. And yet with a Muslim majority in some 44 countries and nearly a quarter of the globe's population, it should be evident that our world cannot be made up of identical people, sharing identical goals, motivations or interpretations of the faith. It is a world in itself, vast and varied in its aspirations and its concerns. Is there not something intellectually uncouth about those who choose to perceive 1 billion people of any faith as a standardised mass?

It is possible that the near-total burden under-development from which only a few Muslim countries have yet been able to extricate themselves, unites us in the eyes of the West and thus sets us apart from it. No world faith, perhaps, has such a high concentration of people living in poverty and fear, from disease to political disenchantment, to the defencelessness of national integrity, from the loss of cultural identity to confusion in the face of the new forces of pluralism, free market economics and meritocracy. No reasonable or equitable mind, could question either the logic or the justification for our fear of occidentalisation, or the loss of our Muslim identity. No one could question our fear of the disassociation of our belief and practice from our secular lives, of our difficulties in producing and managing wealth, of our need to create a system of laws compatible with the ethics of our faith, but no less compatible with today's world and the needs of tomorrow.

The Muslim world, once a remarkable bastion of scientific and humanist knowledge, a rich and self-confident cradle of culture and art, has never forgotten its past. The abyss between this memory and the towering problems of tomorrow would, cause disorientation even to the most secure societies.

You may ask, and justly so, what has happened to that world, and why has it reached such and advanced stage of fragility? Many contemporary problems in the Islamic world are the result of punctual political conflicts, prompted by the end of colonialism and the Cold War. Are the roots of the conflict in Kashmir not anchored in the partition of India in 1947? Are not the civil wars in Afghanistan and Tajikistan due more to the political convulsions of the dying Cold War than to religious conflict between Muslims themselves? Is the conflict in Algeria caused by differences in interpretation of the faith among Algerians, or by an attempt at political change which put to the test, has failed? These conflicts are some of the less fortunate legacies of Islamic states having been used, like others, as pawns or proxies in the Cold War.

Yet many other problems facing the Muslim world now, have existed for centuries. From the seventh century to the thirteenth century, the Muslim civilizations dominated world culture, accepting, adopting, using and preserving all preceding study of mathematics, philosophy, medicine and astronomy, among other areas of learning. The Islamic field of thought and knowledge included and added to much of the information on which all civilisations are founded. And yet this fact is seldom acknowledged today, be it in the West or in the Muslim world, and this amnesia has left a six hundred year gap in the history of human thought.

It was during the 15th century that Muslim civilisation began a period of decline, losing ground to European economic, intellectual and cultural hegemony. Islamic culture began to be marginalised, and worse yet, its horizons narrowed until it lost its self-respect, and pursued no further the cultural and intellectual search on which it was embarked. Even as Muslim learning was studied in the greatest universities in Europe, La Sorbonne, Oxford, Bologna, it was being forgotten in all Muslim societies from the fourteenth century on. Little of what was discovered and written by Muslim thinkers during the classical period is taught in any educational institution, and when it is, due credit is not given. This gap in global knowledge of the history of thought, and the faith, of a billion people is illustrated in innumerable ways,

including in such diverse worlds as that of communication and of architecture. Our cultural absence in the general knowledge of the Western world partially explains why your media sees Islamic thought as an ideological or political determinant in predominantly Muslim cultures, and refers to mere individuals affiliated with terrorist organisations as Muslim first, and only then by their national origin or ideological or political goals.

This is a considerable problem for the Islamic world in its relations with the West, particularly because of the impact your public opinion has on the decisions of your democratic governments. But rather than to dwell upon this sensitive issue, I would like to illustrate how, in another professional field - architecture - an analogous breach is being filled through an unprecedented joint effort by the Islamic world and the West.

Since 1957, the Aga Khan Development Network has been involved in building a large number of schools, hospitals, housing estates and other constructions in the Muslim world. It became clear that whilst the use of the building was usually adequately defined they had less and less to do with the architectural traditions of the societies that they were to serve. I found that others too were facing the same questions. Together, we enlarged our questioning, and it became starkly apparent that across the whole of the Muslim world, practically without exception, its great traditions of architecture had disappeared from its cultural expression. Once the issue had been identified, some of the greatest architects in the world, from some of the finest schools, and men and women from all disciplines and all religious backgrounds - Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist - joined me, creating an Architectural Award and educational programmes to help address the crisis in our own built environment. The aim was to widen for people of all backgrounds, the sources of knowledge and inspiration for the design languages of Islamic societies. After two decades the best buildings and spaces of the Islamic world, evaluated by international juries of the highest calibre, are exceptional once again. Designed and used by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, they now address some of the most intractable problems of our age: urbanisation, management of the built environment and shelter for the very poor.

This exemplifies the kind of remarkable outcome that educated men and women, from around the world, can achieve, in as little as twenty years, to begin reversing the hundreds of years of decay which have eroded our cultural identity.

Much of the West's knowledge, and intellectual potential, is concentrated in universities such as Brown, that have, in recent years, worked their way much deeper into their wider societies. They have developed global objectives addressing global issues, thus becoming more accessible as partners in the development efforts of the Third World.

The Aga Khan University was founded thirteen years ago in Pakistan with planning assistance from Harvard. It was the first private self-governing university in that county of 125 million people. Medical Science was the initial field of engagement. As Pakistan had one of the lowest ratios in the world of nurses to doctors, and the nursing profession was mired in mediocrity, social unacceptability and low pay, nursing became our priority. With the assistance of McMaster University in Ontario, a curriculum was designed and a School of Nursing launched. In addition to becoming a leading academic institution, it has transformed

the role of women in society by providing them with new educational and professional opportunities. This solution to some of Pakistan's most pressing health care problems, which has also enhanced the social self-worth and professional status of women in the county, may soon be replicated in other areas. Under the university's international charter, the nursing school now envisages the creation of an Institute of Advanced Nursing Studies in East Africa to extend the same professional and societal opportunities to the women of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and further afield.

First World knowledge *can* be introduced and creatively absorbed into third-world environments to assist in resolving some of its most challenging development problems. Success will depend, at least partially, on the adaptability of the knowledge to be shared, and the willingness and receptivity of the social structures that will be affected. The knowledge exists and its adaptability is proven, the material resources can be found, but the social and cultural empathy which prepare any successful long-term process of human change from one society to another, are still deeply lacking.

The same consideration also applies to ideas. Concepts such as meritocracy, free-world economics, or multi-party democracy, honed and tested in the West may generally have proven their worth. But valid though they may be, responsible leadership in the Islamic world must ask if they can be adapted to their cultures which may not have the traditions or infra-structure to assimilate them. There is a real risk that political pluralism could harden latent ethnic or religious divisions into existing or new political structures. There is a real risk that market place economics could lead to ruthless competition, and increased concentration of wealth, further marginalising the existing poor. There is a real risk that meritocracy could exacerbate, for example, the existing problem of equitable access to quality education and sophisticated healthcare. Although the modern page of human history was written in the West, you should not expect or desire for that page to be photocopied by the Muslim world.

You the graduates, are entering your own society at a time when it is questioning many of its own determinants, and seeking stability, direction and inspiration from its own ethical and cultural roots. In the Muslim world we are doing the same.

No doubt you are seeking to prepare yourselves, as well as you can, for the risks and opportunities of the suddenly globalised environment in which you will live and work. In the Muslim world we are doing the same.

As globalisation unfolds, the Islamic world will be there in myriad ways. Multitudinous encounters are inevitable.

It is time for all of us to ask: how can we ensure that these innumerable contacts will result in a more peaceful world and a better life?

We should be seeking out and welcoming these encounters and not fearing them. We should be energising them with knowledge, wisdom and shared hope.

But this will be enormously difficult to achieve unless the civilisations and faith of the Islamic world are part of the mainstream of world culture and knowledge, and fully understood by its dominant force which is yours in the West.

In this exhilarating new world of unprecedented knowledge, freedom to use it outside worn out dogmas, and immediate global communication, it should be a matter of serious concern to the West and the Islamic world, that such a deep gulf of misinformation and misunderstanding subsists. That gulf conditions the way we perceive each other. Its omnipresence damages our capacity to build a better world for ourselves. And it has no basis in logic. The great Muslim philosopher al-Kindi wrote eleven hundred years ago, “No one is diminished by the truth, rather does the truth ennobles all”. That is no less true today.

It is only here in the West that governments, intelligentsia, media, entrepreneurs are all - in some way - linked to your universities. They impact, or actually create, much of our world's general and specialised knowledge. They challenge what may be wrong and validate what is correct. They research what they do not know. Is it not time for you to use these tools to build a bridge across the gulf of knowledge which separates the Islamic world from the West? Do you question that we will be by your side? No, if I can judge from my own experience.

We have much to build with. A common Abrahamic, monotheistic tradition. Common ethical principles, founded on shared human values. Common problems of yesterday, resolved together. Common challenges of tomorrow, that we can best face together. These, and all that much more that I cannot enumerate, but are fact, are the materials with which to build a bridge. Enlightened by sound intellect, I see its structure strongly built from the realities of our world. But any structure requires bonding, and of all the bonds that can link societies, America epitomises the strongest. It is called hope. The right to hope is the most powerful human motivation I know. Its importance has been paramount in the history of this nation. It is a reasonable expectation that the next generation will be better equipped to address the challenges of life than the present one. How beautiful that bridge of hope would be between the West and the Islamic world.