The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**Keynote Address at the Commonwealth Press Union Conference**
**His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan**
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Mr Chairman, my Lords, distinguished guests, members of the Commonwealth Press Union, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an enormous pleasure for me to join you today. I only wish I could have attended all of your sessions, for your programme touches on many subjects which are of great interest to me – and your speakers have included an impressive array of distinguished personalities.

In fact, as I looked at the long list of those who have already come to this podium, I wondered whether you would have any capacity left to absorb whatever I might say!

It was a great comfort, therefore, to see that, as the first speaker on the morning after a day of R & R, I could attack you while you were still fresh!

As I prepared for this talk I also wondered whether you would have the foggiest notion of why I was invited to this conference.

Who is the Aga Khan after all – and what is he doing here?

Some of you may have known that my title - which I have held since 1957 - means that I am the Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. But I suspect that this phrase only makes my appearance here seem even more incongruous.

Others may have seen my name connected with the breeding and racing of thoroughbreds - but this connection will also seem incongruous for many of you and won't help much at all in explaining my place on this programme.

Still others of you may have heard me described as a "Paper Tiger", in a recent book by that name which portrayed a long list of international publishing figures – thus the pun on the term "Paper Tiger". We were all people whom the author took to be "media moguls".

I am not sure whether it is better to be called a "media mogul" or a "paper tiger". Personally, I would prefer to have been called a mogul tiger!

Perhaps all of these incongruities will seem less puzzling if I point out that, in the Islamic tradition, there is no sharp separation of the spiritual and material worlds - which is so pronounced in some faiths. For all Muslims, the concepts of *Din* and *Dunya*, Faith and World, are inextricably linked. So it is not such a surprising or incongruous thing for a Muslim leader also to be involved in the world of business, the world of sport, the world of science – or the world of publishing.

Nor does it seem incongruous for me to be speaking to an audience which represents large populations in the developing world – where my family has worked for generations and I have concentrated so much of my work over the past four decades. My presence here today, in fact, grows directly out of my interest in the developing world and the forces that shape it, including the critical influence of the press.

The intertwining of these two interests - the developing world and the newspaper world - began for me in Kenya nearly forty years ago – when the British government was moving away from its colonial role. It became clear to me that this weaning process, in the political realm, could never wholly succeed unless it was matched by a similar process in the realm of public education and journalism.

At that time, East African journalism largely meant colonial journalism – and it was to help change that picture and with the encouragement of young African pre-independence politicians that I entered the newspaper field.

Our objective as we began our venture was to create a different sort of newspaper company, one that would truly speak for the new Kenyan nation. Our first step was to purchase a Swahili publication in Nairobi called *Taifa* – and we made it our base. A new English language paper — the *Nation* — came a bit later. And through both newspapers we have since pursued a single mission: to report and reflect on those matters which are of direct and proper concern to the indigenous majority of Kenyans.

I tell this story because so many of you share my interest in journalism as a force of development. And I suspect, as a result, that you have been asking many of the same questions I have been asking.

One of these questions looms particularly large as we approach a new century. It is a question which arises in every part of the world where people of diverse cultures are building new relationships. And the question is simply this: how can the rapid acceleration of contact among these cultures be turned into co-operation rather than conflict?

Or to put it another way: How can the growing demand for cultural integrity be reconciled with the dazzling rise of “the global village?”

The Commonwealth experience is itself a tremendous resource as we explore this question. And so is the profound experience of the country in which we are meeting this week. Indeed, the recent progress of South Africa in bridging historical gulfs while honouring historical identities is one of the most inspiring stories of the twentieth century.

Such inspiring stories will be increasingly important for us as time moves on. For the challenge I am describing will grow more difficult as contact among cultures escalates in intensity.

The notion that our planet is shrinking is a commonplace one — but it has recently taken a radical new turn. It is no longer a simple matter of geography, with cultures bumping up

against one another – and struggling over borders and territories. Thanks to new methods of communication, cultures now increasingly intermingle — mixing with growing familiarity.

Some say that the fall of communism has brought us to "The End of History". But an even more profound development has been "The End of Geography". The connection between community and geography has been broken. A single community can thrive across immense distances, while a tiny dot of land can be home to many communities.

Not only can we transport ourselves in a few hours to any spot on the planet, we can also transport our words and our values, our songs and our dreams, our newspapers and our films, our money and our credit, our books and even our libraries to any part of the world - in a fraction of a second. And we can do so at a rapidly shrinking cost - and a rapidly accelerating pace.

Some suggest that the developing world, and Africa in particular may be left behind by this revolution in communications technology – or worse still, be drowned by a burgeoning flood of information and influence. But I would argue that societies which have invested less in old technologies have the potential to leapfrog more quickly into new technologies. The telecommunications revolution - including the Internet and World Wide Web - is providing us with ever greater power at ever lower prices. And this fact could help enormously in redressing earlier imbalances in information flows.

Already we see hints of what new developments in tele-medicine or in tele-education can mean to rural communities - as they suddenly participate in advances which once were distant dreams. The "end of geography," after all, can also mean the end of isolation – and the end of isolation can mean an end to ignorance and impoverishment.

But if new technology can break down walls which have isolated whole communities from progress and enlightenment, that same technology can also remove the barriers to less welcome change. The communications revolution is a two-edged sword, opening exciting doors to the future, yes, but also threatening venerable cultures and traditional values.

On every hand we can see the rise of the global economy – and with it the global career and multinational family life, international fads and intercontinental life styles. Some find this process exhilarating, but many others find it frightening. And some even fear that this new intermingling of cultures will someday lead to cultural homogenisation.

Yet even as the waves of globalisation unfurl so powerfully across our planet, so does a deep and vigorous counter-tide. In every corner of the world one can also sense these days a renewal of cultural particularism, a new emphasis on ethnic and religious and national identity. What some have called a "new tribalism" is shaping the world as profoundly on one level as the "new globalism" is shaping it on another.

Sometimes this new tribalism can be a liberating thrust, as was the case when national movements overthrew the communist empire. Sometimes it can express itself in terribly destructive ways, as in the former Yugoslavia, or in Rwanda or Burundi. Sometimes it means a radical casting off of foreign influences, as happened in Iran. Or it can take on a

separationist personality, as has been the case from Quebec to Kurdistan, from Scotland to Sri Lanka, from Northern Italy to East Timor. From the most developed to the least developed countries, we also see a resurgence of protectionism, a wariness about foreign immigration, a fascination with ancient languages, a rise in religious fundamentalism.

It is not surprising, of course, that the global and the tribal impulse should surge side by side. The desire to protect what is familiar intensifies in direct proportion to the challenge of what is different.

Wherever we look, we find people seeking refuge from the disorienting waves of change in the tranquil ponds of older and narrower loyalties, in the warmth of familiar memories, in the comfort of ancient rituals.

This recovery of cultural identity can be a nourishing and creative force, to be sure. But it can also mean a world where we define ourselves by what makes us different from others – and thus a world of chronic conflict.

Surely, one of the great questions of our time is whether we can learn to live creatively with both the global and the tribal impulse, embracing the adventure of a broader internationalism even as we drink more deeply from the wellsprings of a particular heritage.

The communications revolution means either a growing "homogenisation" that we know breeds its own hostile reactions, or we can search for a better course. We can hope that the spirit of the 21st century will be a spirit of Creative Encounter.

And this brings me back to the topic of publishing. For the spirit of Creative Encounter will never become a dominant force in our world without the strong and effective leadership of the information media.

How can the press best contribute to a spirit of Creative Encounter – here in Africa and around the world? One simple requirement towers above all others: the ability to respect that which is truly different, to understand that which we do not embrace.

It is not as easy as it sounds. For it means much more than tolerance and forbearance. The word sensitivity is one of the most overused words of our time - and one of the least honoured. Why? Because sensitivity is too often seen as an emotion which can simply be willed into existence by a generous soul.

In truth, cultural sensitivity is something far more rigorous, something that requires a deep intellectual commitment. It requires a readiness to study and to learn across cultural barriers, an ability to see others as they see themselves.

Cultural sensitivity is hard work.

We live in a time when the quantity of information has exploded in incalculable ways. Data flows in greater volumes, at higher speeds, over greater distances to larger audiences than

ever before. And yet the result has not been greater understanding or enlightenment. In fact, it has often been just the reverse.

One is reminded of T S Eliot's haunting question: “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

Only as we reach beyond mere information and superficial knowledge can the spirit of Creative Encounter flourish.

Again, it is the press which should lead the way – not just newspapers and broadcasting outlets, but also the news service and press agencies which serve them and the organisations which support them. For centuries, the press has cast itself as the champion of understanding and enlightenment. And yet, even as the press has become more international, it has often left a trail of misunderstanding in its wake.

Confident that more information is a good thing in and of itself, the press has often focused too much on the quantity of what it can deliver, and too little on the quality of what it presents.

But if the media have sometimes been part of the problem - amplifying the threatening aspects of globalisation - then the media can also be part of the solution. If a careless or superficial press can exacerbate the clash of cultures, then a more sensitive and studious press can accomplish the opposite: The same media which serves to distort or discredit old cultures, can also be used to revalidate them, and to help explain them to others.

In some cases, this will mean a greater effort to adapt to the world’s ways – to write or speak in the English language, for example, as we tell old stories to new audiences. If the mysteries of ancient Samarkand or Turfan or Kashgar are relayed predominantly in Uzbek or in Uygur, then the sharing will be incomplete - and inconsequential. Global technologies imply the use of a global language - not to obliterate old traditions, but to rescue and revivify them.

There was a time when a variety of authentic cultures could thrive because of their separation from one another. But that day is past. The only answer now is that we come to understand and appreciate one another. And in that endeavour the media must play a central role.

I thought I would use the remainder of my time this morning to discuss three specific challenges which I believe the media must meet or obstacles it must overcome if it is to foster a spirit of Creative Encounter.

1. The first is the imperative need for expanded expertise, for a higher level of professional knowledge.

It is no longer enough that a journalist be a curious layman, who writes clearly and asks good questions. Good journalists in our time must be well-educated journalists. They must include in their number linguists able to understand the expressions of other cultures, anthropologists who can consider their deeper meanings, in addition to experts trained in their laws and histories, in their economics and sociology, and in a wide variety of other disciplines. Our

publications must have access to a wide array of professional insights – not only through their own journalists, but also through the better use of press agencies and news services and outside guest writers.

The Commonwealth Press Union has done a great deal over the years to improve the level of journalistic education – in many parts of the world. In the years ahead, such work will be more important than ever.

As an example of the need for greater expertise, I hope you won't mind if I share an example which is particularly close to my heart. I refer to the superficial and misleading way in which much of the world's media treats the world of Islam. Muslims now constitute nearly a quarter of the world's people. They comprise a majority of the population in some 44 countries and no less than 435 million live in the Commonwealth. And yet, this vast and varied group is often viewed by the rest of the world as a standardised, homogenous mass.

If asked to characterise Islam, many non-Muslims would have little to say, except perhaps that the world of Islam seems to them a distant and different world, a strange and mysterious place, a world which makes them a bit uncomfortable, and perhaps even a bit afraid.

The cultural contexts in which over one billion Muslims have been reared and shaped are simply not understood in much of the world. Even the most basic elements of 1400 years of Islamic civilization are absent from the curricula in most of the world's schools. The subject is just not on the world's educational radar screen. And the result is an enormous vacuum. When developments in Islamic societies break into the headlines, few journalists, and even fewer of their readers can bring the slightest sense of context to such news.

These failures are compounded by our pernicious dependence on what I call "crisis reporting" – the inclination to define news primarily as that which is abnormal and disruptive. As one journalist puts it: "It is the exceptional cat, the one who climbs up in a tree and can't get down, that dominates our headlines, and not the millions of cats who are sleeping happily at home".

Most of the public, however, has no context in which to place the story of the exceptional cat that climbs a tree. And without that context, the casual reader or viewer, never hearing about the cats that stay home, comes to think of all cats as tree-climbing pests who are forever imposing on the fire departments of the world to bring out their ladders and haul them down to safety.

Unfortunately, much of what the world thinks about Islam nowadays has been the result of crisis reporting. When terms like Shi'a and Sunni first entered the world's vocabulary, for example, it was in the emotional context of revolutionary Iran. Similarly, recent press references to the *Shari'a*, the traditional Islamic system of jurisprudence, are illustrated by its manifestations in Afghanistan.

Journalists learn to use these words - but how many of them know what they really mean? How many of them understand, for example, that the *Shari'a* is seen by most Muslims as a changing body of law, subject to what we call the *fiqh*, the capacity for evolving interpretation. How many of them are aware of the selective and moderate application of the

*Shari'a* in the legal systems of those Islamic countries which do allow its application? How many of them know that Arabic translators of the Old Testament used the word *Shari'a* to designate the Torah, underlining a shared perception of the Divine Law that governs the spiritual relationship between God and His believers? How many are knowledgeable enough to appreciate the *Shari'a*'s illuminating qualities in civil law?

Without a proper sense of context, it is little wonder that those exceptional instances of Muslims theocratising Islamic politics are mistaken for the norm, and that the humanistic temper of Islamic ethics is overlooked. Among some observers, there is even a tendency to see political violence as a function of the faith itself - when in fact nothing could be further from the truth.

You may agree that all of this is regrettable. But I wonder how many of our news divisions, our reporting teams, our agency staffs, or even our journalism schools, include people who can recognise such distortions, much less set them right. When the educational background is so barren and when the rhythm of our learning - as reporters and as readers - is so often that of crisis, crisis, crisis, then deep misunderstanding will be the inevitable result.

I am not suggesting that every journalist must become an expert on Islam. But it would help greatly if more journalists at least were aware of when – and where they need to turn to find out more.

It should not be forgotten that journalists also have a broader educational role – a responsibility to provide readers and viewers with a context in which to understand individual events properly.

My concern about Islam is just one of countless examples which could be cited to make this point. I could also present a long list of examples growing out of my experience with media reporting on Africa.

The central point is simply this: no matter what group or what subculture we are covering, we must insist that our journalism is not only about what is perceived as unusual and bizarre.

If the spirit of the 21st century is to be a spirit of Creative Encounter among cultures, then journalists must relay to us the deeper truths about our neighbours, giving us a better sense of how they typically feel and think. They must dedicate themselves not merely to being "up-to-the-minute" but also to seeing each passing minute within the larger sweep of history.

But there is no way this can happen - in an ever more complex world - without a substantially higher level of journalistic education and expertise. And that is the first of the three challenges I would present to you this morning.

2. The second challenge is equally demanding. It has to do with the goals we set for ourselves, and the need - as we set those goals - to rise above a domineering profit motive.

That sounds like a cliché. But clichés often identify important problems. And no media problem is more evident to me than the terrible distortions which occur when the highest

priority, from influential world media groups to Third World pamphleteering, is merely to "maximise profitability".

Invariably, what the pursuit of short-term media profit means is the near-term pursuit of the largest possible audience – the highest ratings, the best demographics, the most impressive circulation and advertising numbers. Inevitably, it seems designing products with instant mass or sectarian appeal - focusing on what is divisive or dramatic or diverting or sensational - at the expense of what is in the interests of society or truly significant.

Particularly deplorable is the growing journalistic tendency to exploit "quirks" in the human or societal psyche. This is a major problem in the developing and the developed world alike. By "quirks" I mean curiosities, idiosyncrasies, anomalies, and dormant resentments or frustrations which can be developed among various segments of society. An irresponsible communicator can create an appetite for such materials by catering to one public's voyeuristic curiosity, through the invasion of privacy for instance, or by pandering to the secretarian prejudice of one group about another. A market space for such offerings can be teased into existence and then prodded and nourished so that it becomes not only economically viable but commercialy irresistible as well.

The public, at least in many Third World societies, is not as voyeuristic as some may assume. It is, however, immediately sensitive to secretarian views or news and the converse seems to hold true overall for Western societies.

The key is to sort out properly what belongs in the public sphere – and what does not. And the complicating factor is that different cultures will draw that line in different ways. The same news story can thus have a different impact with different audiences.

It is not easy to be a sensitive journalist in a multi-cultural world. But the task will be far more difficult if our central concern is to attract the largest possible audience with the most easily digestible headlines.

The runaway profit motive is a culprit that must be curbed. But having said this, let me also argue that the best way to organise any publishing enterprise is as a private business entity. Private capital is the backbone of an independent press – and private capital will flow only where it sees the prospect of reasonable long-range earnings.

Only when newspapers are healthy in the financial sense can they be healthy in the journalistic sense – attracting and developing talent, investing in technology, pursuing difficult stories, eliminating dependencies on patronage resisting the pressures of aggressive advertisers on the one hand and the lure of passing tastes on the other.

Our experience with the Nation newspapers in Kenya has demonstrated that journalistic improvement goes hand in hand with financial health. Both the content of our publications and the methods for producing them have grown more complex in recent years – and the only way to keep pace was by making new investments out of increasing earnings. The Nation was in the 1960s among the very first newspapers outside North America to embrace computerised typesetting. More recently, we have moved into the new multimedia

technologies – our major publications are now globally available "online." And before the end of this current year we will open, just outside Nairobi, one of the most advanced new printing plants anywhere in the developing world.

There has been much discussion of late about how to improve the quality of journalism in places where the traditions of good journalism are still thin. But this endeavour will not only depend on the quality of editors and reporters. It will also depend on the skills and energies of capable commercial managers. Fostering business skills among media executives is a critical ingredient in the development equation; it too is part of creating an enabling publishing environment.

In its proper context, the profit motive will contribute to the success of all our publications. But only if we can avoid too much focus on short-term financial gain. And that, in sum, is the second of the three challenges.

3. The third of the media challenges I would discuss today is the need to balance concerns about press freedom with a greater emphasis on press responsibility. In my view, we are sometimes too preoccupied with the rights of the press as an independent social critic – and we pay too little attention to the obligations of the press as an influential social leader.

Too often, the press seems to be caught up with that obsessive individualism which seems so rampant in our world, an expectation that we must make our way in life through a sort of meritocratic free-for-all, ignoring those who are hurt in the process and those who are left behind.

Too often, we join in the celebration of success for its own sake, regardless of the means by which it was achieved or its impact on society. Too often the media spotlight overlooks the corrupt or manipulative methodology and dramatises the triumphant result. Too often, the right of an individual or the right of a publication to unfettered self-expression is enshrined as the most sacred of all values - independent of its impact on social or moral standards.

One of the most familiar of western political values is expressed in the phrase: "Freedom of the Press". I believe that Press Freedom, properly understood, is a universal human right. But we must be careful about how we define it and that it does not isolate the press from the rest of the social order. What is originally meant - and properly still means for me - is that the press should be free from the control or constraint of governments, and strong enough to resist all forms of intimidation.

Why is this precept so important? Because the health of any government should depend on public evaluation of its work. Not even the most enlightened government can do this for itself. And only if a pluralistic press is allowed to report freely about any government, will the public be able to hold their governments accountable.

The problem comes, of course, when Freedom of the Press is stretched beyond this meaning and used to shield the press - not just from government interference, but from any sense of social accountability. And that is when press liberty turns into press license.

Just as press freedom is a means for holding governments accountable, so must the press itself be held accountable for the way it does its work.

Accountable to whom?

To the politcal leaders of the moment? Never.

To the larger community and the cultures that comprise it? Always – provided we see the community not as a mere majority of the moment, but as an organic, pluralistic entity.

A most remarkable thing in our experience is that the larger community has invariably demanded better forms of journalism. Despite their relative lack of formal education, the first readers of the *Nation* sought something well beyond what the colonial press had given them.

Through the years, answering to the wider community has posed a changing array of challenges. When the demand for self rule dominated everything, our tasks were fairly straightforward. The rise of tribal divisions which were then reflected in political parties complicated that picture, and so did the interplay of cold war rivalries. As the years passed, we also found that our work would sometimes be more in favour and sometimes less in favour with particular governments.

In recent years, the need for regional integration has become a central concern for the peoples of East Africa. Cross-border co-operation is essential if the patchwork quilt of small African nations is to cope effectively in a globalised economy. The Nation Group’s commitment to regionalism was reflected in the founding, two years ago, of a successful regional newspaper, the weekly *EastAfrican*.

But perhaps the most dramatic way in which the Nation Group has expressed its ties to the larger community was through the broadening of its public shareholdings. We are particularly proud that a majority of the Nation's shares are owned by more than 9,000 indigenous Kenyan shareholders. This policy has widened the Group's financial base - making it a more stable and resourceful business. This policy has also broadened our social and cultural base - making our publications more responsive and responsible.

Our journalistic code - a set of explicit written standards about editorial goals and practices - was submitted to our shareholders for their deliberation and approval because we want our shareholders to feel involved and responsible, not just for the Nation's financial success but also for its moral success. They are, after all, the ultimate stewards, not only of the Nation's corporate body, but also of its journalistic soul.

In short, we have pursued a concept of Press Freedom which not only means Freedom “from” but also Freedom “to” – not just Freedom from improper governmental constraints but also Freedom to advance the common purposes which give meaning to our lives.

Such a sense of social accountability is not an easy thing to achieve. It must begin with those into whose care the institutions of the press have been entrusted, our editors and proprietors. Those who are in charge must really be in charge.

Freedom of the Press does not mean the right of any journalist to write and to publish anything he or she wants to say. It is not acceptable for a reporter to cry “censorship” when an editor or a publisher questions his accuracy or his judgement. Nor is it acceptable for editors, managers and proprietors to slip their solemn responsibilites by invoking the same line of defence.

They may sometimes say they don't want to “meddle” with the contents of their publications. This is a weak and dangerous excuse. And too often that comment really disguises an abdication of moral responsibility.

This abdication is particularly troubling when it is used by proprietors or editors to mask their personal quest for financial gain or political influence – or to sustain divisive sectarian agendas. For in the final analysis, the press and those who manage it must also be held accountable to the collective judgements of the community.

Responsible journalists and managers will not want to shield themselves from such judgements. To the contrary, they will eagerly seek them out. They will want to know what thoughtful readers are saying and how responsible advertisers are thinking. They will talk constantly with scholars and religious leaders, with artists and business leaders, with scientists and labour leaders, with educators and community leaders - and yes, with politicians and diplomats and governmental leaders as well. And through such continuing interaction they will develop and refine their sense of how the larger community can best be served.

Let me conclude by citing once again what I consider to be the enormous opportunity for the media to foster that new spirit of Creative Encounter which I described at the outset of this speech. And let me express my hope that as we in the press embrace that opportunity, we will respond creatively to the three challenges I have been discussing.

I hope, first, that we will contribute to a more expert and educated press – whose achievements can be measured in the depth of its journalistic insights as well as the speed of its crisis reporting.

I hope, secondly, that while recognising the importance of the financial viability of the media, we press leaders will put the profit motive in proper context. This means resisting the temptation to define everything in terms of profit, and giving audiences due credit by producing socially responsible publications, rather than catering to quirks and sectarianism.

And finally, I hope that we will recognise and foster press responsibility as vigorously as we defend press freedom.