



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**Speech at the Banquet Hosted in Honour of Governor Perry
His Highness the Aga Khan
June 23, 2002
Houston, Texas, USA**

Governor Perry,
First Lady of Texas, Anita Perry,
Mayor Wallace,
Leaders and representatives of the Congress of the United States, the State of Texas and the
City of Houston,
Consuls General,
Distinguished Guests

I will begin with an apology. I request your indulgence because following a good deal of food for the stomach I am going to use this occasion to dish up a fairly heavy serving of food for thought. I do so because this is the first time I have had the opportunity to speak publicly in the United States about the events of September 11th of last year. Since then many perspectives have been articulated in many settings - diplomatic, academic, the media, and in public opinion as expressed in the streets and measured in opinion polls.

That the acts of September 11th and all that is behind them are repugnant to the very spirit of Islam and to the beliefs and yearnings of the vast majority of Muslims around the world is beyond question. In the words of the Qur'an it is as if the entirety of humankind had suffered a death with every life that was so brutally ended. The shared destiny of the ethos of the Abrahamic tradition that unites Christians, Jews and Muslims is governed by the duty of loving care to help nurture each life that is born to its God-given potential.

But the cacophony of voices, both in the West and the Islamic world, has generated a great deal of confusion about the broader meaning of the events of September 11th. This confusion has outcomes that are potentially dangerous for relations between countries as well as for the safety and security of individuals as they go peacefully about their daily lives.

Some years ago, Professor Samuel Huntington warned of an impending "clash of civilisations" between the West and the Islamic world as the next great confrontation following the end of the Cold War.

My position is somewhat different. It is based on my perspective as the leader of a Muslim community that now lives in the West as well as in the Islamic world, and from an engagement in international dialogue, development and cross-cultural education for more than forty years. What we are now witnessing is a clash of ignorance, an ignorance that is mutual, longstanding, and to which the West and the Islamic world have been blind for decades at their great peril.

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For a number of years I have voiced my concern that the faith of a billion people is not part of the general education process in the West - ignored by school and college curricula in history, the sciences, philosophy and geography. An important goal of responsible education should be to ringfence the theologising of the image of the Muslim world by treating Muslims as it treats Christians and Jews, by going beyond a focus on theology to considering civil society, politics, and economics of particular countries and peoples at various points in their history. This will reveal the fundamental diversity and pluralism of Muslim peoples, cultures, histories, philosophies and legal systems. The Aga Khan University's newly established Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations in London will address these issues directly, as have the programmes of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture with respect to the field of architecture, and more recently music. Repositioning theology with respect to the normal forces of human society will help develop the understanding that Muslims too live in the real world and have to contend with the same issues of life - of poverty, hunger, tragedy and civil conflict as all others in the developing world.

Within the Islamic world there is work to do as well, starting with a better understanding and appreciation of the pluralism of cultures and interpretations among Muslims.

The legacy is rich, a source of strength, and needs to be encouraged and celebrated. It is also crucial that the Islamic world develops a creative and reasoned response to the impact of Western popular culture, which coupled with the dominance of modern electronic media by Western corporations, poses a serious threat to local and national identities and cultures, and their creative and sustainable evolution.

I will stop here, although there is much more to say. I warned you that my serving of food for thought would be heavy, and I hope that it has not caused indigestion. But I do feel that it is vital that we reduce the ignorance that contributes to misunderstanding and can feed conflict. The good news is that this is a process that each of us in this room can contribute to, whatever our vocations or positions in life, whether through small individual initiatives or major projects. Please do join me in this important endeavour.