The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Address by His Highness the Aga Khan to the Tutzing Evangelical Academy Upon Receiving the "Tolerance" Award

His Highness the Aga Khan
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Tutzing, Germany

Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim

Herr Minister
Dr Greiner
Herr Landesbishof
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Minister Steinmeier has been very generous in his remarks -- for which I thank him most sincerely. And I would like to take this occasion at the opening of these comments, to tell him how much all the people who work with me around the world appreciate the support and the partnership of the people and Government of Germany in the work that we are doing. You have brought imagination, you have brought sophistication, you have brought flexibility to areas of need, areas of intellectual activity, which we consider unique, and I thank you for that.

In these times of misunderstanding and mistrust, I applaud the realistic outlook on international affairs that His Excellency Minister of Foreign Affairs brings to his work. I know that he views a constructive relationship between the West and the Muslim world as critical to global peace and stability, and I am grateful for his contributions to that goal.

I am also deeply grateful for your kind invitation and your generous award. This honor takes on special distinction for me because of the very high value I attach to the award's purpose, that is to increase awareness and respect between peoples and cultures through a discussion of political, cultural and religious topics. It is to these subjects that I will address my comments today.

In doing so, I would like to draw on my personal experience, as one who was educated in the West, but who has spent nearly 50 years working largely in the developing world. My particular preoccupation during this time has been with the countries of South and Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East, where the Ismaili community is concentrated.

Since I became Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, I have watched my world -- or should I say the entire world? -- oscillate between promise and disappointment. In many cases, the disappointments can be attributed to the absence of a culture of tolerance.

Of course my experience includes the religious faith in which I have been nurtured. I was born into a Muslim family, educated as a Muslim and spent many years studying the history of the faith and its civilizations. My commitment to the principle of tolerance also grows out of that commitment.

One of the central elements of the Islamic faith is the inseparable nature of faith and world. The two are so deeply intertwined that one cannot imagine their separation. They constitute a "Way of Life." The role and responsibility of an Imam, therefore, is both to interpret the faith to the community, and also to do all within his means to improve the quality, and security, of their daily lives.

I am fascinated and somewhat frustrated when representatives of the western world -- especially the western media -- try to describe the work of our Aga Khan Development Network in fields like education, health, the economy, media, and the building of social infrastructure.

Reflecting a certain historical tendency of the West to separate the secular from the religious, they often describe it either as philanthropy or entrepreneurship. What is not understood is that this work is for us a part of our institutional responsibility -- it flows from the mandate of the office of Imam to improve the quality of worldly life for the concerned communities.

Our spiritual understandings, like those of your Academy, are rooted, of course, in ancient teachings. In the case of Islam, there are two touchstones which I have long treasured and sought to apply. The first affirms the unity of the human race, as expressed in the Holy Qu'ran where God, as revealed through the Holy Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, says the following:

"O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from the twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women." (4:1)

This remarkable verse 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.

The second passage I would cite today is from the first hereditary Imam of the Shi'a community Hazrat Ali. As you know, the Shi'a divided from the Sunni after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Hazrat Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, was, in Shi'a belief, named by the Prophet to be the Legitimate Authority for the interpretation of the faith. For the Shi'a today, all over the world, he is regarded as the first Imam.

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I cite Hazrat Ali's words so that you may understand the spirit in which I have attempted to fulfill the mandate left to me as the 49th hereditary [Ismaili] Imam after the death of my grandfather. I quote:

"No belief is like modesty and patience, no attainment is like humility, no honour is like knowledge, no power is like forbearance, and no support is more reliable than consultation."

Hazrat Ali's regard for knowledge reinforces the compatibility of faith and the world. And his respect for consultation is, in my view, a commitment to tolerant and open-hearted democratic processes.

These Islamic ideals, of course, have also been emphasized by other great religions. Despite the long history of religious conflict, there is a long counter-history of religious focus on tolerance as a central virtue -- on welcoming the stranger and loving one's neighbour.

"Who is my Neighbor?" - one of the central Christian narratives asks. Jesus responds by telling the story of the Good Samaritan -- a foreigner, a representative of the Other, who reaches out sympathetically, across ethnic and cultural divides, to show mercy to the fallen stranger at the side of the road.

I know you will find nothing unusual in this discussion given your own spiritual foundations. But it is striking to me how many modern thinkers are still disposed to link tolerance with secularism -- and religion with intolerance. In their eyes -- and often in the public's eyes I fear -- religion is seen as part of the problem and not part of the solution.

To be sure, there are reasons why this impression exists. Throughout history we find terrible chapters in which religious conflict brought frightening results. Sometimes, a part of the problem grew; it came from proselytizing -- in which faith was not so much shared as imposed. Again in our day, many ostensibly religious voices aggressively affirm a single faith by denying or condemning others.

When people speak these days, about an inevitable "Clash of Civilizations" in our world, what they often mean, I fear, is an inevitable "Clash of Religions." But I would use different terminology altogether. The essential problem, as I see it, in relations between the Muslim world and the West is "A Clash of Ignorance." And what I would prescribe -- as an essential first step -- is a concentrated educational effort.

Instead of shouting at one another, we must listen to one another -- and learn from one another. As we do, one of our first lessons might well center on those powerful but often neglected chapters in history when Islamic and European cultures interacted cooperatively -- constructively and creatively -- to help realize some of civilization's peak achievements.
[I think] We must also understand the vast diversity that exists within individual faiths and cultures, including the diversity now at play within the Islamic world. And we must acknowledge that while such pluralism can be healthy and enriching -- it can also become destructive and deadly as it did for the Christian community in Europe half a millennium ago and it does in some parts of the Islamic world at the start of this new millennium.

Intolerance can thus result from one sort of presumably religious attitude, but profound tolerance can also be a deeply religious commitment.

The spiritual roots of tolerance include, it seems to me, a respect for individual conscience -- seen as a Gift of God -- as well as a posture of religious humility before the Divine. It is by accepting our human limits that we can come to see The Other as a fellow seeker of truth -- and to find common ground in our common quest.

Let me emphasize again, however, that spirituality should not become a way of escaping from the world but rather a way of more actively engaging in it.

There are a variety of ways in which we can work to build a culture of tolerance in a turbulent time. Many of them are reflected in the work of our Aga Khan Development Network. One example is the new Global Centre for Pluralism which we recently established in Ottawa -- in partnership with the Canadian government. The Centre sees the minority experience of the Ismaili community as a helpful resource in the quest for a constructive pluralism -- along with the pluralistic model of Canada itself.

The challenges to tolerance are manifold -- in both the developed and the developing world. The revolutionary impact of globalization means that many who never met before now intermingle continually -- through modern communications media and through direct contact. The migration of populations around the world is at record levels; peoples who once lived across the world from one another, now live across the street.

But societies which have grown more pluralistic in makeup, are not always growing more pluralistic in spirit. What is needed -- all across the world -- is a new "cosmopolitan ethic"-- rooted in a strong culture of tolerance.

I recall a conversation I had some years ago with Jim Wolfensohn, then President of the World Bank, about perceptions of happiness in various societies -- and especially among the very poor. We decided that we should 'listen to the voices of the poor"-- and the World Bank commissioned an important study on that topic. One of its conclusions was that the emotion of "fear" was a central factor holding these societies back. Such fear could have many forms: fear of tyrants, fear of nature, fear of ill health, fear of corruption, violence, scarcity and impoverishment. And such fears inevitably became a source of intolerance.

There is a human impulse it seems -- fed by fear -- to define "identity" in negative terms. We often determine "who we are"-- by determining who we are against. This fragmenting impulse not only separates peoples from one another, it also subdivides communities -- and then it subdivides the subdivisions. It leads to what some have called the "fraying" of society -- in which communities come to resemble a worn out cloth -- as its tight weave separates into individual strands.

But the human inclination to divisiveness is accompanied, I deeply believe, by a profound human impulse to bridge divisions. And often the more secure we are in our own identities, the more effective we can be in reaching out to others.

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If our animosities are born out of fear, then confident generosity is born out of hope. One of the central lessons I have learned after a half century of working in the developing world is that the replacement of fear by hope is probably the single most powerful trampoline of progress.

Even in the poorest and most isolated communities, we have found that decades, if not centuries, of angry conflict can be turned around by giving people reasons to work together toward a better future -- in other words, by giving them reasons to hope. And when hope takes root, then a new level of tolerance is possible, though it may have been unknown for years, and years, and years.

Tolerance which grows out of hope is more than a negative virtue -- more than a convenient way to ease sectarian tensions or foster social stability -- more than a sense of forbearance when the views of others clash with our own. Instead, seen not as a pallid religious compromise but as a sacred religious imperative, tolerance can become a powerful, positive force, one which allows all of us to expand our horizons -- and enrich our lives.

Thank you for the honour of this Award.