'Let me also comment on the sharpening of cultural conflict within Western societies. The past few years have been a dispiriting time in Europe -- in part because of what many describe as a clash of civilisations in Europe’s midst, triggered by the rapid growth of minority populations. Perhaps, under a revitalised leadership, Europe can lead the world in meeting that challenge. But it will not be easy. Cultural conflict in the past was often mitigated by the fact that sharp cultural distinctions were muffled by geographic distance. But geography as a cushion between cultures has been diminishing in recent years. The communications revolution has meant “the death of distance”. More than that, cultures are now mixing physically to an extent that would once have seemed impossible.

'Economic globalisation contributes to the trend. Some 45 million young people enter the job market in the developing world each year -- but there are not enough jobs at home for many of them. Immigrants now account for two thirds of the population growth in the 30 member countries of the OECD. Some 150 million legal immigrants now live outside their native countries, joined by uncounted millions of illegal immigrants. Remittances sent home by immigrants total some $145 billion a year -- and generate twice that amount in economic activity. The economic forces that propel immigration are far more powerful and relentless, I believe, than most people understand. They will not readily or easily be reversed or impeded.

'As once homogeneous societies become distinctly multi-cultural, the rhythms, colours and flavours of host communities change, inspiring some, but frightening others. More than half of the respondents in recent European opinion polls have expressed a negative view of immigration.
The frequent result of all these factors has been marginalisation -- socially and economically -- for many minorities. And we need not look very far to see the evidence. To be sure, the victims of marginalisation in our world can be found on the floodplains of Bangladesh, the village streets of Uganda, and the teeming neighbourhoods of Cairo. But they can also be found in the banlieu of Paris. The “Clash of Civilisations” is both a local and a global problem.

The world is becoming more pluralist in fact -- but not in spirit. “Cosmopolitan” social patterns have not yet been matched by what I would call “a cosmopolitan ethic”. One of the great stumbling blocks to the advance of pluralism, in my view, is simple human arrogance. All of the world’s great religions warn against self righteousness -- yet too many are still tempted to play God themselves -- rather than recognising their humility before the Divine.

A central element in a truly religious outlook, it seems to me, is a recognition that we all have a great deal to learn from one another. The Holy Qur’an speaks of how mankind has been created by a single Creator “from a single soul...”...a profound affirmation of the unity of humanity. This Islamic ideal, of course, is shared by other great religions. Despite the long history of religious conflict, there is also a long counter-history of religious tolerance.

Instead of shouting at one another, our faiths ask us to listen -- and learn from one another. As we do, one of our first lessons might well centre on those powerful but often neglected chapters in history when Islamic and European cultures interacted cooperatively and creatively to realise some of civilisation’s peak achievements.

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.’

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2007 address at the Masters of Public Affairs Programme, Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po) Graduation Ceremony, (Paris France)

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