"Over these five decades, I have watched that world oscillate constantly, between hope and disappointment. Too often, disappointment has been the dominant story. [One] response has been to revisit past glories, contrasting them with contemporary setbacks. Many Muslims in particular, recall a time when Islamic civilisations were on the cutting edge of world progress. They dream of renewing that heritage. But they are not sure how to do so. For some, renewal means recovering old forms of the faith, while for others it means rejecting faith itself. For some, recovering glory means opposition to the West, its cultures and its economic systems, while for others it means partnering with non-Islamic societies. [O]ne ingredient which holds particular promise in the search for fulfilment, is the search for knowledge.

"From the very beginnings of Islam, the search for knowledge has been central to our cultures. [W]e find knowledge best by admitting first what it is we do not know, and by opening our minds to what others can teach us.

"At various times in world history, the locus of knowledge has moved from one centre of learning to another. Europe once came to the Islamic world for intellectual enrichment and even rediscovered its own classical roots by searching in Arabic texts. Astronomy, the so-called “Science of the Universe” was a field of particular distinction in Islamic civilisation, in sharp contrast to the weakness of Islamic countries in the field of Space research today. In this field, as in others, intellectual leadership is never a static condition, but something which is always shifting and always dynamic.

"Indeed, Islamic culture in past centuries was distinctly dynamic, constantly reaching out both to India and the East and to Europe and the West for enrichment. Throughout history, confident
cultures from every part of the world have been eager to seek new learning, not to dilute inherited traditions but to amplify and extend them. The great civilisations of Islam were prime examples.

"More than a millennium ago, as early as the 8th century, the original Abbasids, ruling as Caliphs in Baghdad, set up academies and libraries where new knowledge was honoured, independent of its source. The Fatimids continued this tradition, reaching out from their base in Cairo -- established in the 10th century -- to welcome learned figures from distant lands. A bit later, Ghazni, in Afghanistan, became another centre of learning, again by reaching out....

"The Ottoman Caliphs in Turkey continued in this proactive tradition in the 19th century, borrowing now from primarily Western models. The Ottomans paved the way for the immense modernisations associated with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in the twentieth century. Ataturk’s reforms brought opposition from ulama and others. Nonetheless, scholars have concluded that “a great part of the population did not see Ataturk and his reforms as hostile to Islam.” Many saw them as extending a well-established pattern.

"I believe that same pattern must be our model today. In keeping with our past traditions, and in response to our present needs, we must to [sic] go out and find the best of the world’s knowledge, wherever it exists. But accessing knowledge, is only the first step. The second step, the application of knowledge, is also demanding. Knowledge, after all, can be used well or poorly, for good or evil purposes. Once we have acquired knowledge, it is important that the ethical guidelines of faith be invoked, helping us apply what we have learned to the highest possible ends. And it is also important that those ends be related to the practical needs of our peoples.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2006 American University in Cairo Commencement Address (Cairo, Egypt)

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