Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan explains the Clash of Ignorance: foreign policy compromised by ignorance and no foresight

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE OF IMAMAT SPEECHES, INTERVIEWS AND WRITINGS,

Nuno Rogerio: When you talk about the present state of affairs -- you travel a lot, you talk to all kinds of people -- are you worried with the so called Clash of Civilisations scenario and do you think you could do something to contradict that scenario?

Aga Khan: I'm very worried. I don't think since 1957 I have been ever as worried as I am today. I think we are in a genuinely very, very serious situation indeed and I don't think it's Clash of Civilisations, I think it's a Clash of Ignorance. I think many of the decisions that have been taken would not have been taken if there had been better understanding in various parts of the world about the differences which exist and what would be the consequences of actions because it's inability to predict the outcomes which is causing the problem at the present time. And that's why I say it's a conflict of ignorance.

[Emphasis original]

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 Sociedade das Nacoes Interview with Nuno Rogerio (Lisbon, Portugal)

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8856/

~~~~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Don Cayo: You've become in many ways a bridge between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world. Can we talk about the relationships between those two large groups, and the difficulties and the prospects for improvement?
**Aga Khan:** I think there are real prospects for improvement. But I think it's a question of the two groups knowing each other better than they do at the present time, because if you don't know the people you're talking to and you don't really understand the forces that are at play you cannot predict. You cannot look for areas of dialogue, and you cannot avoid areas where dialogue becomes impossible. So I think the first issue is what I would call the gulf or the crisis of ignorance, the clash of ignorance.

This ignorance is a source of very, very serious problems.

You can see it in Iraq. Frankly, much of the post-invasion of Iraq, many of the issues, were entirely predictable, Hundreds, if not thousands, of Muslim leaders would have told the Western world exactly what to expect when Saddam Hussein was eliminated. That's the sort of situation where predictability is absolutely critical. Because the single step of eliminating a regime is one thing, but then you live with the consequences. And you really have to think through very carefully the consequences of doing a thing like that. Certainly, from my point of view, that was a big, big, big failure....

Risk management in foreign affairs seems to me to be one of the really necessary attitudes towards global affairs today....

An important thing is looking forward across time, rather than being in a reactive mode. The reactive mode is a tremendous liability. Being in an anticipatory mode changes the whole nature of things, and the longer you have to change things, the better chance you have of making it work.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2008 Vancouver Sun Interview with Don Cayo (Vancouver, Canada)


-------------------------

**Eric Chol / Christian Makarian:** How can one explain the tremendous opposition today between the Shias and the Sunnis, particularly in Iraq?

**Aga Khan:** All of the ongoing world conflicts have a religious component, whether it is Islam, Christianity or another religion. In Iraq, a Sunni minority held power in a majority Shia country, which was itself surrounded by Sunni nations. This is a dominant model in Islam, the only reverse case being Syria, where a Shia minority governs a majority Sunni
population. It was perfectly predictable that, from the moment Saddam Hussein was relieved in favour of a democratic consultation, there would be a new re-balancing between the two main branches of Islam. The external effect was even more predictable: once it was established that Iraq is a Shia majority, the surrounding countries would react in accordance with their affiliation, and not in accordance with the process of democratisation. Alas, none of this surprised nor astonished me. The case of Afghanistan had proven it already: as soon as a Sunni majority found itself in a situation of extreme tension, the Shias were in danger. This is the case with the Hazara in Afghanistan, who are targets of assassination and fatwas. What is terrible is that the West seems to have only just discovered this reality, while we frequently alerted the entire world of this imminent, predictable risk.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2007 L'Express Interview with Eric Chol and Christian Makarian, (Paris, France) [Translation]

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8106/

"If we were to look at a map of the world that charted armed conflicts in the last 15 years, it would show that nearly two thirds have occurred in the developing countries of Asia and Africa. More than 80 per cent were internal conflicts, either full-blown civil wars or state-sanctioned aggression against minorities in those countries. In nearly every instance, these internal conflicts were predictable ...

"The question I have is this: if these breakdowns in governance were predictable, why was the international community powerless to get engaged at the early stages to help arrest the deterioration and avoid the suffering that resulted? Secondly, are there common factors in the majority of these situations which are insufficiently recognised?

"I suggest to you that a major problem is that the industrialised world too often is severely lacking in credible information about the forces at play in the developing world. Take as an example the phrase 'clash of civilisations' which has travelled far and wide. I have said many times previously, and I would like to reconfirm today my conviction that what we have been observing in recent decades is not a clash of civilisations but a clash of ignorance. This ignorance is both historic and of our time....

"The issue of ignorance, or lack of solid information, and its impact on our world today, is illustrated by events in Iraq. No less deplorable is that the 9/11 attack on the United States
was a direct consequence of the international community ignoring the human tragedy that was Afghanistan at that time. Both the Afghan and Iraqi situations were driven by lack of precise information and understanding.

"My fundamental point is this: since the collapse of the Cold War, the need has grown exponentially for the world’s leaders to be able to understand, and properly predict, what is likely to happen in parts of the world in which they previously had no reason to be involved. The task of addressing this need cannot be met by the resources presently being engaged."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2005 Keynote Address to the Nobel Institute's Seminar (Oslo, Norway)

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7255/

~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~

"In recent decades, inter-faith dialogue has been occurring in numerous countries. Unfortunately, every time the word 'faith' is used in such a context, there is an inherent supposition that lurking at the side is the issue of proselytisation. But faith, after all, is only one aspect of human society. Therefore, we must approach this issue today within the dimension of civilisations learning about each other, and speaking to each other, and not exclusively through the more narrow focus of inter-faith dialectic.... Learning must not be restricted, as it often is, to matters of theology. Today, theological interpretation and proselytisation continue to divide among Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant interpretations in the Christian world as it does in the Islamic world between Sunni and Shia and their various sub-divisions.

"I would hope to see the day when the definition of an educated person in Judaeo-Christian culture would include an intelligent understanding of the Muslim world. That person would appreciate the eminent position of Islamic civilisations in human thought and knowledge. That would include an understanding of their tradition of research and achievements, from philosophy and the arts, to the sciences, architecture and engineering.

"The current void of knowledge makes it impossible to establish a dialogue because you cannot build a dialogue based upon ignorance. With whom do you have dialogue? Without meaningful dialogue, you cannot construct coherent and sustainable foreign policy because you will not have the ability to predict. You will not understand the forces at play. How would the handling of the situations in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iraq and the wider
Middle East, or the Philippines, have been different if the main players had benefited from a thorough understanding of the history and culture of those regions?"

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2004 Keynote Address to the Annual Conference of German Ambassadors (Berlin, Germany)

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7073/

"It's not a conflict of civilisations; it's an enormous gap of understanding. And because that understanding is not there, the ability to predict, anticipate, reflect -- it becomes that much more difficult.... [Emphasis original]

"The knowledge of the different civilisations of the Islamic world, the knowledge of the pluralism of that world, the knowledge of the plurality of interpretations of Islam, of the languages of Islam, of the demographies of Islam is very, very shallow indeed. And I think that is a significant contributor to misunderstanding....

"And unless this whole notion of pluralism becomes accepted because it's a reality of humanity, I think we're going to continue to face situations where tribes are going to be killing each other, faiths are going to be killing each other, language communities are going to be killing each other and so on and so forth. And the thing that worries me most in this whole context is that a lot of that is predictable."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 Press Conference (New Delhi, India)

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7883/

Peter Mansbridge: Let me go a little deeper on that because it raises a question you have often raised and that's the issue of ignorance. You reject the theory of a clash of civilisations, or even a clash of religions. You believe there's a clash of ignorance here -- on both sides of that divide -- and you've felt that way for a long time. I was looking through the transcripts of an interview you gave in the 1980s in Canada where you were warning, the West, that it had to do a better job in trying to understand Islam. That clearly hasn't happened.

Aga Khan: No, it hasn't happened and a number of friends and people in important
places have tried to contribute to solving that problem. But it’s a long-established problem and it’s going to take, I think, several decades before we reach a situation where the definition of an educated person includes basic understanding of the Islamic world. And that hasn’t been the case. And the absence of that basic education has caused all sorts of misunderstandings but above all the inability to predict. Statehood, international affairs, economic affairs are often predicated on the ability to predict. If you don’t know the issues or the forces at play, the ability to predict is severely constrained. [Emphasis original]

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2006 CBC Interview (3rd) with Peter Mansbridge (Ottawa, Canada)

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7959/

~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on why the international community is unable to preempt predictable breakdowns in governance

~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~

NOTE: This post updated on 11 February 2013.

Click here for this post in PDF format.
Click here to review our Facebook posts organised by theme.
Click here to subscribe and receive our Facebook posts by e-mail.
[NOTE: For some reason NanoWisdoms' Facebook posts do not always appear in many Facebook newsfeeds due to a problem in Facebook and/or individual newsfeed settings. Please visit our wall to review all our posts if you do not always see our posts. Thank you.]