Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on the absence of Islam in school curricula and redefining what it means to be well educated

"You can be an educated person in the Judeo-Christian world and know nothing -- I mean, nothing -- about the Islamic world.... One of the difficulties is that the Western world does not understand the pluralism of the Islamic world, which is heavily, massively pluralistic, even more so than the West. But the West does not understand it because it has not included the Islamic world in the teaching of what we call 'general knowledge.' This is a very important issue in democracies because democracies presume that the electorate is capable of commenting on major issues of national or international importance, and of choosing good government, [which, in turn, would formulate informed foreign policy].... [So] unless there is a better understanding of the Islamic world, democracies are not going to be able to express themselves on Islamic issues."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2005 Toronto Star Interview (2nd) with Haroon Siddiqui (Toronto, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7275/

"Unless the definition of an educated person includes basic knowledge about 1.4 billion people and their histories and their civilisations ... we are going to continue to live in a situation where this lack of understanding is there."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2005 Ottawa Citizen Interview with Chris
"A dramatic illustration is the uninformed speculation about conflict between the Muslim world and others. The clash, if there is such a broad civilisational collision, is not of cultures but of ignorance. How many leaders, even in the West, whether in politics, the media or other professions which in their own ways shape public opinion, grow up aware that the historic root cause of the conflict in the Middle East was an outcome of the First World War? Or that the tragedy that is Kashmir is an unresolved colonial legacy, and that neither had anything to do with the faith of Islam? To what extent is the public aware that the deployment of Afghanistan as a proxy by both sides in the Cold War, is a major factor in her recent history of tragic woes? These matters, which now touch the lives of all world citizens, are simply not addressed at any level of general education in most Western countries.

"Humanities curricula in many educational institutions in the West, rarely feature great Muslim philosophers, scientists, astronomers and writers of the classical age of Islam, such as Avicenna, Farabi and al-Kindi, Nasir Khusraw and Tusi. This lack of knowledge and appreciation of the civilisations of the Muslim world is a major factor that colours media stereotypes, by concentrating on political hotspots in the Muslim world, and referring to organisations as terrorist and Islamic first, and only obliquely, if at all, to their national origins or political goals.

"No wonder that the bogey of Islam as a monolith, irreconcilable to the values of the West or, worse, as a seedbed of violence, lurks behind its depiction as being both opposed to, and incapable of, pluralism. This image flies directly in the face of the respect that Islam's cherished scripture confers upon believers in monotheistic traditions, calling upon Muslims to engage with them in the finest manner, and with wisdom. History is replete with illustrations where Muslims have entrusted their most treasured possessions, even members of their families, to the care of Christians. Muslim
willingness to learn from Jewish erudition in medicine, statecraft and other realms of knowledge, is well exemplified by the place of honour accorded Jewish scholars at the court of the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs of Egypt.

"Intellectual honesty and greater knowledge are essential if current explosive situations are to be understood as inherited conflicts and -- rather than being specific to the Muslim world -- driven by ethnic and demographic difference, economic inequity and unresolved political situations."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2004 Keynote Address to the Governor General's 2004 Canadian Leadership Conference: 'Leadership and Diversity' (Gatineau, Quebec, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6977/

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]
**Peter Mansbridge:** What's been the resistance do you think?

**Aga Khan:** I think essentially historic. I think that the Judeo-Christian societies have developed their own education over decades, and more, and basic knowledge on the Islamic world has simply been absent. And if you look at was required educationally in the 1980s, for example -- I was a student in the U.S. -- basic education on the Islamic world was absent even on general courses on the humanities, for example.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 CBC Interview (3rd) with Peter Mansbridge (Ottawa, Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7959/

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"I am talking, please, about basic education. What is the definition of an educated person today? Does that definition include some basic knowledge about the Islamic world or not? If it doesn’t, perhaps that needs to be corrected.... 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."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 Press Conference (New Delhi, India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7883/

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"[The Aga Khan Academies] programme will also teach about world cultures. Inter-cultural conflicts inevitably grow out of inter-cultural ignorance -- and in combating ignorance we also reduce the risk of conflict....

"As we move into that future, we would like to collaborate with the International Baccalaureate movement in a challenging, but inspiring new educational adventure. Together, we can help reshape
the very definition of a well educated global citizen. And we can begin that process by bridging the learning gap which lies at the heart of what some have called a Clash of Civilisations, but which I have always felt was rather a Clash of Ignorances. In the years ahead, should we not expect a student at an IB school in Atlanta to know as much about Jomo Kenyatta or Muhammad Ali Jinnah as a student in Mombasa or Lahore knows about Atlanta’s great son, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr.? Should a Bangladeshi IB student reading the poems of Tagore at the Aga Khan Academy in Dhaka not also encounter the works of other Nobel Laureates in Literature such as the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk or America’s William Faulkner or Toni Morrison? Should the study of medieval architecture not include both the Chartres Cathedral in France and the Mosque of Djenne in Mali? And shouldn’t IB science students not learn about Ibn al-Haytham, the Muslim scholar who developed modern optics, as well as his predecessors Euclid and Ptolemy, whose ideas he challenged.

"As we work together to bridge the gulf between East and West, between North and South, between developing and developed economies, between urban and rural settings, we will be redefining what it means to be well educated."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2008 address to the Annual Meeting of the International Baccalaureate (Atlanta, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8435/

"From the seventh century to the thirteenth century, the Muslim civilisations dominated world culture, accepting, adopting, using and preserving all preceding study of mathematics, philosophy, medicine and astronomy, among other areas of learning. The Islamic field of thought and knowledge included and added to much of the information on which all civilisations are founded. And yet this fact is seldom acknowledged today, be it in the West or in the Muslim world, and this amnesia has left a six hundred year gap in the history of human thought...."
"Little of what was discovered and written by Muslim thinkers during the classical period is taught in any educational institutions. And when it is, due credit is not given. This gap in global knowledge of the history of thought, and the faith, of a billion people is illustrated in innumerable ways, including in such diverse worlds as that of communication and of architecture. Our cultural absence in the general knowledge of the Western world, partially explains why your media sees Islamic world and its thought as an ideological or political determinant in predominantly Muslim cultures, and refers to mere individuals affiliated with terrorist organisations as Muslim first and only then by their national origin or ideological or political goals."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1996 Brown University Commencement Ceremony Address (Providence, Rhode Island, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/5089/

Philip Jodidio: The press, at least, gives the impression that similar radical attitudes exist in other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia.

Aga Khan: You are right. There are parts of the Muslim world where those tendencies are present and parts of the Muslim world that have sustained the Taliban. That just goes to confirm that there is no unanimity in Islam with regard to this form of interpretation. Generally speaking, you will see as much diversity in the Islamic world as you do in the Christian world today. That is one of the big problems. The West does not really understand the pluralism of the Islamic world. Things will continue this way. The Islamic world has been exposed to your pluralism; we have been colonised for decades. We know a certain amount about the different interpretations of the Christian faith. Take the example of the Iranian revolution. Was the word 'Shia' in the common language of the Western world before that? If you went around the West and asked what the difference between the Shia and the Sunni interpretations is, how many people could answer? Reverse the question, go into the Muslim world and ask what basic differences there are between Catholicism and
Protestantism, for example, and many people would know. There is a gulf of misunderstanding, which is very deep indeed. It is very damaging because the Western world tends to interpret things on the basis of a lack of information and understanding of what is really happening.

**Philip Jodidio:** And that is the fault of the media?

**Aga Khan:** No, it is the education process that is at fault. If general knowledge at the beginning of this century can continue to ignore the basic dynamics of a billion people on the face of our planet, that is a phenomenal fact. But it is true. If you look at compulsory schooling at the primary or secondary level across Western Europe or North America, what is taught about the Islamic world? It is not part of general knowledge. It simply is not.

**Philip Jodidio:** Aside from the Award, do you see other ways of bridging this gulf of misunderstanding?

**Aga Khan:** Yes. It has to be done from within the Western world. I would hope that they would recognise this problem and that they would seek to address it. Secondly, they need partners from within the Islamic world. My sense is that it has to be driven within the academic context and not the theological context. There needs to be much more basic knowledge of Islamic peoples, their cultures, their countries, demographics and climates. My organisations have some programs that are working on that already, particularly in North America.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2002 Connaissance des Arts interview with Philip Jodidio (1st) (Paris, France)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9692/

"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.

"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.”

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2002 address at the Banquet in Honour of the Governor of Texas (Houston, Texas, USA)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/6256/

"As more nations develop increasingly multi-cultural rather than uniform or monolithic profiles, and as the process of globalisation continues apace, educators are confronted by the challenge to provide to the mainstream population of their society, an informed understanding of the culture and history of minorities domiciled in their midst, as well as other major civilisations beyond their shores. It must be said, that in this respect, most of the countries of the West have been staggeringly slow to face up to this challenge, at least as far as Islam is concerned.

"The media and some opinion-leaders tend, if not to actively perpetrate old cliches and stereotypes, show a lack of anything like a nuanced knowledge or appreciation of the traditions of the Muslim world. School curricula in the humanities and social sciences are often formulated as if Islam did not exist or was not the religion and culture of a substantial portion of humanity. As a result, even a distant acquaintance with the world of Islam is nearly totally absent from the general knowledge of Western society. Undergraduate courses in universities, when describing and evaluating major achievements in the arts, sciences, philosophy, religion and ethics, refer almost exclusively to figures in European or American history. Indeed, Islamic studies have been mostly relegated to the minute and
often-unheard minority of academic specialists in Western universities. [Emphasis original]

"In an effort to address these concerns, the Aga Khan Development Network is working closely with a number of leading North American universities and State educational authorities with a view to developing and implementing appropriate school curricula on Islam. In a related, though separate, initiative, the Ismaili Imamat is currently in the process of establishing a museum in Toronto as a significant resource for disseminating information and education about Islam's vast and varied heritage, and its interface with the many cultures in which it has evolved."

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"[S]chool curricula in Western and developing countries rarely give young people a sound understanding of their own cultures let alone the diverse religious, linguistic, social and artistic forces of communities around them....

"It is my profound belief that the Judeo-Christian world will find it a hopeless endeavour to try to address the issues of democracy, civil society and pluralism in the Muslim world unless a major effort -- and I mean an absolutely major effort -- is made by the Judeo-Christian world to acquire deeper and wider knowledge about Muslim civilisations. This is a first step toward building dialogue and understanding. The effort I am describing will have to be systematic and extended over many decades to be successful. It must reach a wide spectrum of students in secondary schools and not be restricted to the specialised knowledge of higher education as it is today. In this regard, I applaud the initiative the German Government has made in introducing material about Islam into the public education curriculum. As a Muslim, I accept that such a truly comprehensive effort is likely to cause unwelcoming reactions from a large number of forces in the Judeo-Christian world. [Emphasis
"Relations between this world and the world of Islam historically have been conditioned by inter-faith attitudes. They were vividly and brutally illustrated at the time of the Crusades....

"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/

Aga Khan: ... Here we can, myself, the Ismailis and all Muslims, play a role through what I may call 'humanistic infiltration' of the industrial society in such a way that Islam may be looked upon not only as a religion, but also as a way of life, as a history of rare intensity, as a tradition and as a total culture. They will then have to integrate one way or the other with the cultural stream and with the humanistic tradition that remains in this industrial society: they will have to penetrate its core and not remain in the margin. They will
be able to do that because Muslims amount to eight hundred, nine hundred million people representing cultures with infinite variety and splendour which the world cannot afford to ignore, and because Muslims represent an infinite variety of traditions, ways of life and economic experience.

There remains the more important question - how can we manage to make these traditions an essential part of the industrial society? ...

The transposition of this idea into practice would begin with education and education begins with the pre-school child. It is through education that the message should be transmitted. We all know that all the main religions are taught in the schools of the West -- all except Islam. It follows from that, that Westerners and non-Muslims have no knowledge of the world of Islam. This in itself is unbelievable. It also follows that our humanistic traditions, our architecture, our literature are totally unknown in the West -- except perhaps through colourful publicity catalogues. Thus we have failed in our task of showing our culture as a living, creative and reasoning culture. This is probably the main motive behind the establishment of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. The magnificent monuments shown in such colourful publicity catalogues are great in themselves, but they are not the Islamic culture as it lives with us nowadays. Therefore I have endeavoured to transmit one integrated image of the world of Islam in its pluralism and variety, with its many languages and several interpretations of religion, with its numerous racial and geographical backgrounds.

Riad Naguib: But how can we persuade the West to introduce the study of Islam in their school curricula?

Aga Khan: I shall be frank. This is one of our rights -- a right which we must exercise through student movements and our representatives therein -- only by the democratic means available to us. However, the way in which our cause is presented is more important. This should stress the fact that it is not our intention to act as missionaries in order to convert Christians to Islam. We should not do anything that could be interpreted as such. Our aim is to see Islamic traditions represented in the school curricula of the West on equal footing with other similar traditions.
**Riad Naguib:** But it is inevitable that the West will resist our endeavours even though they represent the exercise of our democratic rights with the industrialised world.

**Aga Khan:** It may be true that there is traditionally in the West a hostile religious attitude towards Islam, and a corresponding political attitude going back to the Crusades. But this is the past and the Western world must abandon this mentality wherever it persists. The fear of the West is that the introduction of a new culture and a new religion into their curricula may have political objectives, rather than the fear of Islam as a threat to Christianity. What they fear is politics not religion, and that explains why they hesitate to open the door for us at a time when they are obliged to open similar doors for all other racial and religious minorities in their countries. Yet, frankly, it all depends on us, on our ability to present our case in a just and correct manner. We may not succeed everywhere, we may succeed here and fail there. But then the door will have been opened for us and time is on our side. The world of today can no longer afford to ignore the world of Islam. The wind of change has blown and our duty is to help change to move forward.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1986 Riad Naguib El-Rais Interview, ‘The Critical Time’ (Al Mustaqbal, Cairo, Egypt)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2074/

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**Times of India:** Would you elaborate on ‘clash of ignorance’, the phrase you prefer to Samuel Huntington’s now-notorious ‘clash of civilisations’?

**Aga Khan:** Today’s world has a new set of opportunities and centrifugal forces in place of the Cold War’s context. But the definition of an educated person hasn’t changed perceptibly since that of the 1960s; the paradigm of education certainly has not kept pace with globalisation. It does not yet provide a comfort level with pluralism. The West’s understanding, its academic context is still Judeo-Christian. It’s apprehensions rise from a lack of knowledge about Islam.
Don Cayo: The clash of ignorance that you mentioned -- how are we dealing with that? Or are we dealing with it? Are, first of all, Western countries and institutions making any inroads to deal with our side of that problem?

Aga Khan: Yes, you are. You are.

A number of forces are at play. Your educational institutions are recognising the fact that they -- quite logically, it's not criticism -- were born in a Judeo-Christian society or Judeo-Christian environment. That environment had nothing to do with the Islamic world -- it wasn't even aware of it at the time that these institutions came into existence. So I don't think it's up to us to turn round and point fingers. I don't like that attitude at all.

What I do think is that these institutions must accept the fact we're living in a different world, and the definition of an educated person today will be different from an educated person 100 years ago in Judeo-Christian society. So, fine, we have to encourage a better understanding, a better knowledge, of what's happening.

What I would hope, however, is that the opening of this knowledge domain is not aimed at sustaining a particular attitude or interpretation of faith or culture from the Islamic world. The Islamic world is very, very pluralist and, to me, what is important is that the industrialised world should understand that pluralism.
"I visited numerous countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East and I came into contact with men and women who were intelligent, mature, responsible and who were seeking to build nation states ... but these builders were seeking to build on the basis of an enormous knowledge deficit....

"The key question is a deficit of what knowledge? What knowledge is necessary in these environments, so that in the decades ahead we can look towards stable nation states around the world?

"My conclusion was that the deficit of knowledge is in many areas which are not being offered in education, which are not being taught. Because what have been inherited are curricula of the past, reflections of the past, attitudes of the past, rather than looking forwards, asking what do future generations need to know. And that is the central question which needs to be asked, and on which an academy such as this can have such a massive impact....

"Let me mention three areas. First of all, there is the nature of society in these countries. One of the characteristics of all these countries is that they have pluralist societies. And if pluralism is not part of the educational curriculum, the leaders and the peoples of these societies will always be at risk of conflict, because they are not accustomed to pluralism and they do not value it. People are not born valuing pluralism. Therefore pluralism is the sort of subject which needs to be part of education, from the youngest age onwards."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2009 Acceptance Address □ Investiture as a Foreign Member, Class of Humanities, Academy of Sciences of Lisbon (Lisbon, Portugal)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9244/

"The second democratic pillar I would mention is education: rigorous, responsible and relevant education.... Are the curricula we teach relevant to the knotty problems of the future? Or are we still providing a twentieth century education for twenty-first century
leaders? ... An important goal of quality education is to equip each generation to participate effectively in what has been called 'the great conversation' of our times. This means, on one hand, being unafraid of controversy. But it also means being sensitive to the values and outlooks of others.

"This brings me back to the current headlines. For I must believe that it is ignorance which explains the publishing of those caricatures which have brought such pain to Islamic peoples. I note that the Danish journal where the controversy originated acknowledged, in a recent letter of apology, that it had never realised the sensitivities involved.

"In this light, perhaps, the controversy can be described less as a clash of civilisations and more as a clash of ignorance. The alternative explanation would be that the offence was intended -- in which case we would be confronted with evil of a different sort. But even to attribute the problem to ignorance is in no way to minimise its importance. In a pluralistic world, the consequences of ignorance can be profoundly damaging.... I am suggesting that freedom of expression is an incomplete value unless it is used honourably, and that the obligations of citizenship in any society should include a commitment to informed and responsible expression.

"If we can commit ourselves, on all sides, to that objective, then the current crisis could become an educational opportunity -- an occasion for enhanced awareness and broadened perspectives. Ignorance, arrogance, insensitivity: these attitudes rank high among the great public enemies of our time. And the educational enterprise, at its best, can be an effective antidote to all of them."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 Address to the Evora University Symposium (Evora, Portugal)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7653/

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