Excerpts: His Highness the Aga Khan on Islam and terrorism

_Peter Hahne_: Your Highness, Islamic believers are spreading fear and terror across the world in the name of Allah, as witnessed again most recently on the island of Bali. What does all this have to do with religion?

_Aga Khan_: Nothing at all. Islam and terror have not the slightest thing in common. Islam does not teach terrorism any more than Christianity or Judaism. He who blows himself and others up is a criminal and cannot claim to be a servant of God, praise be to Allah. The world religion of Islam teaches peace, compassion and tolerance.

_Peter Hahne_: But that, if I may say so, is not always the way it seems.

_Aga Khan_: You need to take a closer look, then. We all need to take a closer look to comprehend the reasons behind terrorism. Unfortunately, far too little attention has been paid to this until now. Terrorism has many causes. Poverty, underdevelopment and despair are without doubt among the most important causes. And unsolved political conflicts dating back decades can nearly always be found in the background. If you take Kashmir or Afghanistan, Iraq or Palestine: colonialism, cold war and other political disputes have left their mark. One can hardly blame Islam for this. Religion has been added on to the political conflicts, to lend greater legitimacy to personal interests. But the original conflicts themselves have nothing to do with Islam. This is a very important difference if want to take the trouble to understand things.

_Peter Hahne_: Do you mean that the West has a too one-sided view to this question?

_Aga Khan_: Often this is the case, yes. In the West today, Islam is
predominantly seen as a source of terror and a synonym for bloody conflicts. Many people are not aware that there is not just one 'Islam'. The Islamic world is highly pluralistic, even if radical forces have been at work over the last few years which do not tolerate multiplicity and who want to force others to share their view of Islam.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2005 Neue Ruhr Zeitung (NRZ) interview with Peter Hahne (Essen, Germany) [Translation from German back to English]
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7558/

Caroline Pigozzi/Jean-Claude Deutsch: Let us touch on the important subject of fundamentalism.

Aga Khan: If fundamentalism means the destabilisation of a society, I am certainly opposed to it. We have taken up the annoying habit of linking each sporadic act of terrorism to the Muslim world. It is a painful confusion. The Muslim world is made up of 1 billion believers, living in 30 to 40 countries, speaking 500 languages and dialects, people who come from countries which became Muslim -- some at the time of the Prophet, others three hundred years later -- some speaking Arabic, others that do not. There is no Islamic entity where 1 billion believers interpret and practise their faith in the same manner. The truth is that you from the West, perceive so badly the Muslim world, that you judge it as though it was only one single block. We have a better understanding of you in the West than you do of us, because you colonised and governed us for some period of time. The destabilising activities are a reality, but are minor compared to the mass of silent believers that we are. It is sort of like if I said: 'The IRA commits acts of terrorism in England; therefore, all Catholics are dangerous terrorists.' You tend to confuse the religion of people and their political goals. While many fundamentalists have clear and precise political objectives, far less often are their objectives uniquely centred about proselytising. In some cases even, the West has gone as far as peddling their own ideologies by manipulating the Mujahadeen to remove the Soviets from Afghanistan, and have used extremists to counter the communist threat. The free Western World must establish a distinction between political ambitions and the religion of Islam. It cannot be denied that the ideological frustrations of the Algerians, the Jordanians or the
Libyans have created extremist movements, but this should not smear the credibility of the entire Muslim world.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1994 (1st) Paris Match Interview (Paris, France)  
[Translation]  
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/850/  

Rajiv Mehrotra: What would you say to, sort of, your Islamic brothers such as, you know, Osama bin Laden and others, who sort of in the name of Islam, are wielding so much terror?

Aga Khan: I have to say, very frankly, that I don’t accept the notion that the faith of Islam is associated with terrorism. I have to say very frankly that in my interpretation, just about every area where we have conflict, in the Islamic world and outside, is essentially driven by political issues. Either historic issues that we have inherited, problems which have not been solved, 1947 Partition in India, the Middle East, what is it? It is [a] result of the First World War, decades ago. These are problems which we have inherited which have not been solved. And I think we need to give more time to solving those problems. And, secondly, predicting where things can go wrong. A lot of these issues are actually predictable, but they are not addressed in good time.

Rajiv Mehrotra: So, how intense is your feeling of anguish with that much of, you know, the violence and the terror in the world is ascribed to Islam and 9/11 and thereafter in particular, has brought a great deal of prejudice and hostility to the faith and people who manifest that faith?

Aga Khan: As I said, I think that it is wrong to associate the totality of a highly pluralist faith in many parts of the world, many communities, many backgrounds, many languages with individual specificities. I will give you an example, I doubt that any educated person would have seen in Northern Ireland a representation of the Catholic faith or the Protestant faith. And yet what was it? It was a conflict of two communities. But it was pitched into the context of faith conflict. But to extrapolate from that one situation and say that one situation illustrates the whole of the attitude of these faiths would be totally wrong. Then if you apply that
equity to the way you interpret the situation in Northern Ireland and in many others, then let’s apply the same equity to the Islamic world.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2004 DD TV (Delhi Doordarshan) Interview with Rajiv Mehrotra (New Delhi, India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7089/

Roy Bonisteel: Another image we have is of the Ayatollah and we associate Islam with terrorism. Is terrorism Islamic?

Aga Khan: It certainly isn’t. Unfortunately it is a part of our modern life and in fact it is also part of our history. But it is prevalent in Western Europe, it is prevalent in South America. It takes religious expressions, it takes economic expressions. I don’t think one should, in all honesty, look at terrorism as being an Islamic force. I don’t think it is in any way an Islamic force. It is an expression of other forces which may seek at times to use Islam as one of the binding ingredients. Just as I think other terrorists forms in Western Europe for example, do the same thing; the I.R.A. can hardly be expressive of the Catholic Church and yet it calls itself a Catholic movement. So I think we have to be careful not to attach to the term terrorism a religion connotation ‘par excellence.’ That there are elements in those forces of terrorism which may seek legitimacy from a faith, is something which is worldwide not specific to the Islamic world.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1986 CBC interview with Roy Bonisteel (Canada)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/3268/

Gunter Knabe: Your Highness, the world is shocked by terror attacks, again and again, committed by people who claim that they are fighting for Islam. You are an outstanding Muslim leader. You are calling Islam a religion of peace. That is a gross contradiction. Does that mean that Islam has two faces?

Aga Khan: No, I don’t think so. I think to keep in mind is that these situations represent a very, very small minority of the Muslim population
around the world. Secondly they are driven essentially by political issues rather than issues of faith and I think it would be completely wrong to view these situations as being representative of the faith of Islam. The Western world needs to look carefully at what are the forces at play to understand them and to make the difference between faith and issues which are nothing to do with the faith. We as Muslims would be expected to apply the same questions to situations such as in Northern Ireland. If I as a Muslim came to you and said 'Well what has been happening in Northern Ireland is an equitable representation of the Catholic faith and the Protestant faith' you would look to me and you would say 'You are uneducated.'...

Gunter Knabe: Since September 11 2001, the West tried very hard to establish some kind of dialogue between the West and the Muslim world. [But] more and more people are feeling frustrated because there seems to be no real response from the Muslim side. They’re waiting for the voices of moderate Muslims, to raise their voices, and speak out clearly and loudly against terrorism, terrorist attacks, in the name of Islam. Why [don’t] we get these voices?

Aga Khan: Well I think you are seeing these voices more and more coming forward. I think the other thing to keep in mind is that there are forces at play within the Islamic world itself which do not encourage free communication and particularly free communication on faith....

Gunter Knabe: Your Highness, what are the hopes to overcome terrorism for good.

Aga Khan: Well first of all I would say lets try and and resolve the issues that are causing terrorism, and the issues generally are political frustration, they are not issues of faith. Now what we have in the Middle East is a situation that was not born from the faith of Islam. What we have in Kashmir is an issue that was not born from the faith of Islam. What we have in Afghanistan is an issue that was not born from the faith of Islam. So we have to resolve the essence of the issues which are the political issues. Once these centres of frustration -- that carry people to despair -- [are resolved], then I think we will be able to address it. In the mean while let us build everywhere we can to construct a better world in the Muslim world and in the Developing world generally. That’s got to be our goal.
Ashfaq Ahmed: How do you see the problem of terrorism in the world? Do you think it is widening the gap between the West and the Muslim world or even the Muslims and the non-Muslims?

Aga Khan: I personally don't ascribe these [extremism or terrorism] to Islam. I ascribe these to a portfolio of political issues. I consider these political issues the essence of the problem in the Middle East. It started in 1917 and, since then, the problem has been becoming worse. The problem of Kashmir is again a political problem which started after withdrawal of the British from the subcontinent. Similarly, the problem in Iraq today is also political and has nothing to do with Islam. But now we have an overlay. Since these political problems are located in the parts of the Muslim Ummah, the totality of the Ummah is being held responsible for this situation.

The media also tends to concentrate on the problem areas even as they ignore the Ummah's successes. Painting a negative picture of the entire situation is wrong because it does not involve the face of Islam. It involves essentials of politics within the Islamic world.

Secondly, it [the problem of extremism and terrorism] does not cover the Islamic world alone. Countries in Eastern Europe, Ireland and Spain face similar issues. I think that we should not say that the Ummah is unstable and the rest of the world is perfect.
empire, and brand leader for cultural development, how do you react to your faith being seen as synonymous with terrorism?

Aga Khan: I am deeply worried about more than a billion people being tarred by specific historical and regional issues projected as a religious one. Whether you look at the Middle East or Kashmir, there are issues of extreme frustration and despondency. It is unfair to look at hot spots only in relation to Islam. I give you North Ireland, Spain, the Tamil question, the tribal relations in Africa. The Middle East is an inheritance of the first world war. If you leave a problem to -- forgive me for using an ugly word -- pullulate, decade after decade, it's certain to end up with deep sickness.

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2004 Times of India Interview (New Delhi, India)
http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7094/

"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/

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Stefan Aust / Erich Follath: So, what are the root causes of terrorism?

Aga Khan: Unsolved political conflicts, frustration and, above all, ignorance. Nothing that was born out of a theological conflict.

Stefan Aust / Erich Follath: Which political conflicts do you mean?

Aga Khan: The ones in the Middle East and in Kashmir, for example. These conflicts have remained unresolved for decades. There is a lack of urgency in understanding that the situation there deteriorates, it's like a cancer. If you are not going to act on a cancer early enough, ultimately it's going to create terrible damage. It can become a breeding ground for terrorism.
Now to the issue of spreading faith by the sword: All faiths at some time in their history have used war to protect themselves or expand their influence, and there were situations when faiths have been used as justifications for military actions. But Islam does not call for that, it is a faith of peace.

Stefan Aust / Erich Follath: ... The American model of democracy is no panacea for the rest of the world. Has George W. Bush aggravated the situation with his particular way of bringing democracy to the Middle East? Can the United States still win the war in Iraq?

Aga Khan: I am very, very worried about Iraq. The invasion of Iraq had an impact across the world like nothing before in modern times. The invasion has unleashed every force in the Islamic world, including the relations between the Arabs and non-Arabs and the relationship between the Shia and the Sunni.

Stefan Aust / Erich Follath: You mean the war created a new terrorist base and radicalised people?

Aga Khan: Indeed. It mobilised a large number of people across the Islamic world, who before then were not involved, and indeed I think they did not want to be.

Equally disturbing, most of these conflicts were predictable, and greater focus should have been put on them before they became explosive. The capacity of the international community to assess the degree of future heat isn't as well defined as it should be.

Richard Engel: The American global war on terrorism is often seen as a war against Islam on the popular level. Do you think the wars that have been launched by U.S. administrations over the last decade or so have done more harm than good?
Aga Khan: I certainly think the invasion of Iraq was a serious mistake. We had crisis situations before that. We had them in Kashmir. We had them in the Middle East. If you look at the origins of those crises, they were political not religious. At the moment, it’s the horrible conflicts which are dominating the image of the Islamic world and I can say without one iota of fear that is totally wrong, totally wrong. You had wars in the Christian world, you had wars in the Jewish world. But you don’t define them in theological terms anymore, except Northern Ireland.

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 2010 NBC Interview with Richard Engel (USA) http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9644/

"Today in the Occident, the Muslim world is deeply misunderstood by most. The West knows little about its diversity, about the religion or the principles which unite it, about its brilliant past or its recent trajectory through history. The Muslim world is noted in the West, North America and Europe, more for the violence of certain minorities than for the peacefulness of its faith and the vast majority of its people. The words 'Muslim' and 'Islam' have themselves come to conjure the image of anger and lawlessness in the collective consciousness of most Western cultures. And the Muslim world has, consequently, become something that the West may not want to think about, does not understand, and will associate with only when it is inevitable....

"it must be made utterly clear that in so far as Islam is concerned, this violence is not a function of the faith itself, as much as the media would have you believe. This is a mis-perception which has become rampant, but which should not be endowed with any validity, nor should it be accepted and given credibility. It is wrong and damaging. The myth that Islam is responsible for all the wrong doing of certain Muslims may well stem from the truism that for all Muslims, the concepts of Din and Duniya, Faith and World, are inextricably linked. More so than in any other monotheistic religion of the world. The corollary is that in a perfect world, all political and social action on the part of Muslims would always be pursued within the ethical framework of the Faith. But this is not yet a perfect world. The West, nonetheless, must no longer confuse the link in
Islam, between spiritual and temporal, with that between state and church.

"It was during the 15th century that Muslim civilisation began a period of decline, losing ground to European economic, intellectual and cultural hegemony. Islamic culture began to be marginalised, and worse yet, its horizons narrowed until it lost its self-respect, and pursued no further the cultural and intellectual search on which it was embarked. Even as Muslim learning was studied in the greatest universities in Europe, La Sorbonne, Oxford, Bologna, it was being forgotten in all Muslim societies from the fourteenth century on. 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/

"We live in a time when the quantity of information has exploded in incalculable ways. Data flows in greater volumes, at higher speeds, over greater distances to larger audiences than ever before. And yet the result has not been greater understanding or enlightenment. In fact, it has often been just the reverse. One is reminded of T S Eliot’s haunting question: ‘Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?’ Only as we reach beyond mere information and superficial knowledge can the spirit of Creative Encounter flourish.

"Again, it is the press which should lead the way -- not just newspapers and broadcasting outlets, but also the news service and press agencies
which serve them and the organisations which support them. For centuries, the press has cast itself as the champion of understanding and enlightenment. And yet, even as the press has become more international, it has often left a trail of misunderstanding in its wake. Confident that more information is a good thing in and of itself, the press has often focused too much on the quantity of what it can deliver, and too little on the quality of what it presents.

"But if the media have sometimes been part of the problem -- amplifying the threatening aspects of globalisation -- then the media can also be part of the solution. If a careless or superficial press can exacerbate the clash of cultures, then a more sensitive and studious press can accomplish the opposite. The same media which serves to distort or discredit old cultures, can also be used to re-validate them, and to help explain them to others....

"Without a proper sense of context, it is little wonder that those exceptional instances of Muslims theocratising Islamic politics are mistaken for the norm, and that the humanistic temper of Islamic ethics is overlooked. Among some observers, there is even a tendency to see political violence as a function of the faith itself -- when in fact nothing could be further from the truth. You may agree that all of this is regrettable. But I wonder how many of our news divisions, our reporting teams, our agency staffs, or even our journalism schools, include people who can recognise such distortions, much less set them right. When the educational background is so barren and when the rhythm of our learning -- as reporters and as readers -- is so often that of crisis, crisis, crisis, then deep misunderstanding will be the inevitable result.

"I am not suggesting that every journalist must become an expert on Islam. But it would help greatly if more journalists at least were aware of when and where they need to turn to find out more. It should not be forgotten that journalists also have a broader educational role -- a responsibility to provide readers and viewers with a context in which to understand individual events properly. My concern about Islam is just one of countless examples which could be cited to make this point. I could also present a long list of examples growing out of my experience with media reporting on Africa."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1986 Commonwealth Press Union Conference Keynote Address (Cape Town, South Africa)
See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the offensive caricatures (cartoons) of the Holy Prophet (pbuh)

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on the war on Iraq: 'a big, big, big failure' and 'a serious mistake'

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan on a manipulative, superficial media

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