

"Islam Is a Faith of Reason"

Karim Aga Khan IV, descendant of the prophet Muhammad and spiritual leader of 20 million Ismaili Muslims, discusses the foundations of his faith, the controversy over the pope's recent statements about Islam and ways of preventing a global clash between religions.



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Karim Aga Khan IV: "Nobody will ever convince me that the faith of Islam, that Christianity, that Judaism will fight each other in our times -- they have too much in common."

SPIEGEL: Your Highness, in a lecture Pope Benedict XVI quoted Emperor Manuel as saying: "Show me just what Muhammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as a command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." This quotation from the 14th century has caused great uproar in the Muslim world. Why? And what was your reaction?

Aga Khan: From my point of view, I would start by saying that I was concerned about this statement because this has caused great unhappiness in the Islamic world. There appears to be momentum towards more and more misunderstandings between religions, a degradation of relations. I think we all should try not to add anything to worsen the situation.

SPIEGEL: Benedict XVI did explicitly dissociate himself from the emperor's quoted statement. The pope's own position with regard to his lecture is that he wanted it to promote a dialogue; and since then, several times, he has expressed his respect for the world religion that is Islam. Was it just an unfortunate choice of words? Or was he deliberately misunderstood?

Aga Khan: I do not wish to pass judgement on that, nor can I. And it might also be unreasonable for me to presume that I know what he meant. But that (medieval) period in history, to my knowledge, was one of the periods of extraordinary theological exchanges and debates between the Byzantine Empire and the Muslim world. A fascinating time. The emperor's statement does not reflect that, so I think it is somewhat out of context.

SPIEGEL: The theme of Pope Benedict's lecture was different, it was one of his favorites: the link between faith and reason which, he said, implies a rejection of any link between religion and violence. Is that something you could agree on?

Aga Khan: If you interpret his speech as one about faith and reason then I think that the debate is very exciting and could be enormously constructive between the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world. So I have two reactions to the pope's lecture: There is my concern about the degradation of relations and, at the same time, I see an opportunity. A chance to talk about a serious, important issue: the relationship between faith and logic.

SPIEGEL: If the pope were to invite you to take part with other religious leaders in a debate about faith, reason and violence, would you accept?

Aga Khan: Yes, definitely. I would, however, make the point that an ecumenical discussion at a certain stage will meet certain limits. Therefore I would prefer to talk more about a cosmopolitan ethic stemming from all of Earth's great faiths.

SPIEGEL: Does Islam have a problem with reason?

Aga Khan: Not at all. Indeed, I would say the contrary. Of the Abrahamic faiths, Islam is probably the one that places the greatest emphasis on knowledge. The purpose is to understand God's creation, and therefore it is a faith which is eminently logical. Islam is a faith of reason.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: 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.

SPIEGEL: It's true that horrible crimes were committed in the name of Christianity, for example by the crusaders. That was long ago, that's the past. But jihadists commit their crimes now, in our times.

Aga Khan: It is not so far in the past that we have seen bloody fights in the Christian world. Look at Northern Ireland. If we Muslims interpreted what happened there as a correct expression of Protestantism and Catholicism or even as the essence of the Christian faith you would simply say we don't know what we are talking about.

SPIEGEL: „The West (will stand) against the Rest“ wrote Professor Samuel Huntington in his famous book „Clash of Civilizations.“ Is such a conflict, such a clash inevitable?

Aga Khan: I prefer to talk about a clash of ignorance. There is so much horrible, damaging, dangerous ignorance.

SPIEGEL: Which side is responsible?

Aga Khan: Both. But essentially the Western world. You would think that an educated person in the 21st century should know something about Islam; but you look at education in the Western world and you see that Islamic civilizations have been absent. What is taught about Islam? As far as I know -- nothing. What was known about Shiism before the Iranian revolution? What was known about the radical Sunni Wahhabism before the rise of the Taliban? We need a big educational effort to overcome this. Rather than shouting at each other, we should be learning to listen to each other. In the way we used to do it, by working together, with mutual give-and-take. Together we brought about some of the highest achievements of human civilization. There is a lot to build on. But I think you cannot build on ignorance.

SPIEGEL: Nonetheless, it is striking that a particularly large number of Muslim-dominated states figure among the most backward and undemocratic states in the world. Is Islam in need of an era of enlightenment? Is the faith even incompatible with democracy as others claim?

Aga Khan: As I said before, one has to be fair. Some of the political leaders have inherited problems that are in no way attributable to the faith. New governance solutions have to be tested and validated over time. Nor do I believe Muslim states are systematically economic underperformers. Some of the fastest growing economies and some of the most successful newly industrialized countries are in the Islamic world. Now concerning democracy: My democratic beliefs do not go back to the Greek or French (thinkers) but to an era 1,400 years ago. These are the principles underlying my religion. During the prophet's life (peace be upon him), there was a systematic consultative political process. And the first imam of the Shiites, Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Hazrat Ali, emphasized: "No honor is like knowledge, no power is like forbearance, and no support is more reliable than consultation."

What makes democracies fail?

SPIEGEL: If pluralism, civil society and Islam can coexist harmoniously, as was proven in the past, then why is this so seldom achieved nowadays?

Aga Khan: I think we have a very diverse situation in the Islamic world. Wealthy countries with enormous resources, newly industrialized countries, extremely poor ones.

SPIEGEL: Not many are functioning democracies.

Aga Khan: People speak about failed states. I do not think that states can fail, but democracies certainly can. The failure of democracy is not specific to the Islamic world. Indeed, about two years ago, the United Nations carried out an in-depth analysis of democracy in South America. About 55 percent of the population in South American states said that they would prefer to live under a paternalistic dictatorship instead of an incompetent or corrupt democracy that is not improving their living condition.

SPIEGEL: Most of your Ismaili constituency lives in states that cannot be called perfect democracies: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria and Iran. What makes democracies fail?

Aga Khan: I ask myself every day what we can do to sustain the multiple forms of democracy, to make these forms of government work, whether it is in Latin America, Africa or the Middle East.

SPIEGEL: And what do you believe to be the answer?



Aga Khan: I admit that I live in a mood of frustration. What is the point in these areas of the world of carrying out a referendum in a population that essentially cannot read



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Pakistani protesters chant slogans and burn an effigy of Pope Benedict XVI, during a protest in Karachi: "A chance to talk about a serious, important issue which is the relationship between faith and logic."

and write? What is the point in testing a constitution with a population that knows no difference between a presidential regime or a constitutional monarchy? Elections, constitutions -- all this is necessary, but not sufficient. I think we have to accept that countries have different histories, different social structures, different needs, so we have to be a great deal more flexible than we have been.

SPIEGEL: Nor is democracy monolithic. 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 und the Sunni.

SPIEGEL: You mean the war created a new terrorist base and radicalized people?

Aga Khan: Indeed. It mobilized 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.

SPIEGEL: Do you share the view of the American professor and Islam expert Vali Nasr that the balance of power in the Muslim world is undergoing a decisive shift, that Shiites could become the most influential force from Baghdad to Beirut, that

the future of the Middle East will be shaped by wars between different Muslim factions?

Aga Khan: When the invasion of Iraq took place, we were told two things: (that there would be) regime change and democracy. Well, anyone who knew the situation in Iraq, as you did, I did, but what did that mean? That meant a Shia majority; it could not have been otherwise. Anyone who then concludes that the next issue is a Shia majority in Iraq is going to start thinking, What does that mean in the region, what does it mean in the Islamic world, what does it mean in relation to the West? All that was as clear as daylight, you didn't even have to be a Muslim or a scholar to know that.

SPIEGEL: In your opinion, was it pure ignorance and naivete that made the Bush government start the war? Was it really about introducing democracy or a strategic decision about conquering oil fields and military bases?

Aga Khan: I wish I could answer that question.

SPIEGEL: Are you in contact with the religious leaders in Iraq, like Grand Ayatollah Sistani? And with the religious leaders of Iran as well?

Aga Khan: We have frequent contacts with important personalities in both countries.

SPIEGEL: What would it take to get you to go to the region as a mediator?

Aga Khan: This is, at the moment, not one of my priorities. One day maybe, we might consider (participating in the) reconstruction (effort).

SPIEGEL: When you compare the invasion in Iraq with the one in Afghanistan, where the Taliban and al-Qaida worked hand in hand ...

Aga Khan: ... there I see a completely different picture. First of all, the Afghan regime at the time was quasi totally detested by the people; it was equally unpleasant for Sunnis as it was the for Shias and it was totally unacceptable I think just in terms of overall civilized life.

SPIEGEL: Afghanistan is currently being confronted with major problems and the situation seems to be deteriorating by the hour. What went wrong? And what can the West do to make the situation more stable?

Aga Khan: The security situation is indeed very worrying -- it is getting worse, especially in the south. Most of our projects are in the capital and in the north where (the situation) is better but not satisfying. We can supply energy from Tajikistan, we can provide civil services. We try to avoid the danger that certain areas in Afghanistan will be rehabilitated more quickly than others. If this development overlaps with ethnic divides you have another problem. But the main problem is that most people in Afghanistan have not seen an improvement in their daily lives. The process of reconstruction does not seem to be penetrating. We have not succeeded in bringing a culture of hope to this country. One of the central lessons I have learned after a half century of working in the developing world is that the replacement of fear by hope is probably the most powerful trampoline of progress.

SPIEGEL: President Karzai is a personal friend of yours. Many people see him as a weak leader, and some call him "Mayor of Kabul" because he is unable to control large parts of the country.

Aga Khan: We should do everything to help him. He has an enormously complex agenda to deal with. He is our best hope. And besides, he is the elected leader and we have to work with the parliament.

SPIEGEL: Even if warlords and a former members of the Taliban are represented in Afghanistan's parliament?

Aga Khan: You either accept the results of democracy or you don't. Otherwise you talk about qualifying democracy.

SPIEGEL: That means the West should deal with the radical Islamist Hamas as well?

Aga Khan: You have to work with whoever the population has elected as long as they are willing to respect what I call cosmopolitan ethics. Now, it's true that Hamas has a record of conflict ...

SPIEGEL: ... of outright terror ...

Aga Khan: ... but it would not be the only time that movements that have such a record make it into parliament, and even end up in charge of government later on. Can I remind you of Jomo Kenyatta and his Mau Mau movement in Kenya, for example, or the ANC in South Africa? Take away the causes of extremism and extremists can come back to a more reasonable political agenda. That change to me is one of the wonderful things about the human race.

SPIEGEL: You know Syria's president, Bashar Assad, very well. You recently visited him again in Damascus. In contrast to the American administration, the German government is trying to get him involved in the Middle East peace process.

Aga Khan: I would like to compliment the German government and others in Europe who have taken the decision to invite President Assad to be a party to the peace process. The process of change from decades of political directionalism is something that needs time, as you saw in East Germany. I think there are many reasons to go out of our way to assist Syria in making the transition from the past to the future.

SPIEGEL: If you look back at the years that have passed since World War II -- the Cold War between the East and the West, the ideological conflict with communism -- would you ever have thought that this conflict could be replaced by one between the West and radical Islamists?

Aga Khan: I beg you, please get away from the concept of a conflict of religion. It is not such a conflict. Nobody will ever convince me that the faith of Islam, that Christianity, that Judaism will fight each other in our times -- they have too much in common. That's why I am talking about this global ethic which unites us all. That's why we are trying to work with the Catholic Church in Portugal on a program aimed at immigrant minorities. I am aware of a sense of disaffection with the society that many young Muslims feel because they think that the Western society has the intention of marginalizing or damaging them.

SPIEGEL: The German government just organized a conference with many different Muslim groups and personalities who live in Germany. Do you consider such a forum useful or is it just window dressing?

Aga Khan: We can avoid misunderstandings by having such a forum where people from different faiths consult each other so they understand what really affects them. Once you have committed an offense all you can do is to try and reverse it. Anyone who knows the faith of Islam, for example, would have known that the caricatures of the prophet were profoundly offensive to all Muslims.

SPIEGEL: Again, this whole affair was misused by radical Islamists. They added caricatures much more offensive than the original ones to incite the masses.

Aga Khan: But I am told that there was an internal debate between the editors of that publication and they actually knew what they were doing. They took a risk and somebody should have said to them, Why get into that situation? Now we are talking about civility, which is a completely different concept. If we are talking about civility in a pluralist society, then how do you develop that notion of civility, particularly where there is ignorance. And that's the thing that's worrying. And that's why I get frustrated when I see these situations that go on and on and on. Because I'm not willing to believe that they are all inspired by evil intent.

SPIEGEL: Provocative, sad and distasteful. But the freedom of the press is one of the highest values in our democracy. We

have to balance one thing against the other and we will allow non-believers to express even outrageous opinions.

Aga Khan: I think that you are now referring to one of the most difficult problems that we have and I don't know the answer. The industrialized West is highly secularized; the Muslim world is much less secularized and that stems largely from the nature of the faith of Islam, which you know and I know has an intrinsic meshing with everyday life. And that is a scenario where people of goodwill need to think very, very carefully.

SPIEGEL: In some of your speeches you mentioned Kemal Atatürk in a positive context. Turkey followed his path and is one of the very few countries with a predominant Muslim population where there is separation of church and state. Would you like to see others go the same way?

Aga Khan: I am not opposed to secularism as such. But I am opposed to unilateral secularism where the notions of faith and ethics just disappear from society.

SPIEGEL: Your Highness, we thank you for this interview.

Interview conducted by Stefan Aust and Erich Follath.

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