Jubilee for an imam among equals

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After 50 years as the spiritual leader of 15 million Muslims, the Aga Khan is known for his progressive views - and his Irish connections

THE AGA KHAN was at the Curragh to watch the Irish Derby last Sunday. Not that you'd know it. While reporters scurried around trying to pick out the famous faces in the parade ring, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV and his daughter, Princess Zahra, came and went from the race track unnoticed by the 35,000 or so racegoers.

The imam, or spiritual leader, of 15 million Ismaili Muslims doesn't court publicity. But that doesn't stop the western media's fascination with his private life. There's plenty of material to choose from, whether it's his vast wealth (more than €1.5 billion, according to the latest Sunday Times rich list), his hundreds of racehorses or, most recently, his reported hiring of Paul McCartney's lawyer, Fiona Shackleton, to handle his divorce from his second wife.

He agreed to a rare interview with The Irish Times after becoming an honorary doctor of laws at NUI Maynooth this week, but it was requested beforehand that no personal questions be asked. When you are facing a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammad, it doesn't seem like a good time to ask about celebrity tittle-tattle.

Prince Karim was a 20-year-old student at Harvard when his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, died after naming him as his successor to lead the Ismaili Muslims. The Ismailis, the second-largest group of Shia Muslims, are scattered across 25 countries in five continents.

There was some surprise when the young prince was chosen, thus bypassing his father, Aly Khan, who led a flamboyant life which included joining the French Foreign Legion and marrying Rita Hayworth.

That accession took place more than 50 years ago and the 71-year-old father of four is now seen as one of the most progressive and liberal Islamic leaders.

Through the Aga Khan Development Network, he runs a group of development agencies working in areas such as health, education, enterprise, architecture, culture, micro-finance and disaster reduction. Its programmes are open to all, regardless of gender or religion. The network includes 235 non-profit hospitals and clinics and more than 300 schools.

BECAUSE OF HIS humanitarian work and promotion of equal rights, he has received many decorations and awards, yet he seems genuinely moved by the award from NUI Maynooth.

"I am deeply honoured," he says "because this institution is a remarkable institution in its own right and therefore to receive an honorary degree from an institution such as this is very meaningful indeed."

He hopes to work with NUI Maynooth on projects such as student exchanges and joint research programmes. Maynooth's roots in Catholicism are particularly interesting to him because many universities in the developing world started as faith institutions and are now trying to transform themselves into modern research facilities.

"In the developing world, at least, we have an enormous amount of mediocrity," he says. "Standards are terribly, terribly low and unless those standards are enhanced . . . you are not making a permanent contribution to the processes of change."

So the connection between Ireland and the Aga Khans, which began in his grandfather's lifetime, may well be strengthened. The Aga Khan owns several stud farms here, including his public stud at Gilltown, in Kilcullen, Co Kildare.

"We are not what I would call a commercial enterprise," he says. "We are a traditional breeding operation and therefore our goal is to produce every year, if we can, outstanding thoroughbreds. And Ireland has made a massive contribution to that ever since my grandfather started."

A large bronze statue of his most famous horse, Shergar, stands at Gilltown Stud. The Epsom and Irish Derby winner was kidnapped in 1983 while at stud.

While the IRA was widely thought to be responsible for the kidnapping, no one was ever charged with the crime. Fifteen years later, the Aga Khan still mourns the loss of Shergar.

"I think Shergar was only one aspect of the internal conflict in Ireland, one of the tragedies of this conflict," he says. "Obviously I think it was a massive loss to Irish breeding, but the country has paid a very, very high price for its internal difficulties and there's a lot to be learned about the way it got past that situation.

"I think there's a lot to be learned also about how it got into that situation, because I still see the need to divide between faith issues and political issues."

This is something he regularly emphasises as he urges the western world not to generalise about the Muslim world, saying it would be akin to taking the Troubles as the model for Catholicism.

"Certainly in the Islamic world we are tending to see issues which are political presented as faith issues, which they're not," he says.

The Aga Khan says it is unacceptable that religions are put forward as the major cause of situations when political problems are really to blame.

"The Middle East, after all, is a political issue first," he says. "Kashmir was a political issue first. Even Afghanistan was a political issue first, rather than a faith issue. So I think it's very important to understand what are the main forces that are playing in these contexts."

He is interested in the current debate on whether the hijab, the Muslim headscarf, should be worn in Irish schools and cautions against the issue being used to create division.

"My own sense is that if an individual wishes to associate publicly with a faith, that's the right of that individual to do that, whether he's a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim. That is, to me, something which is important," he says.

But he says that people should not be forced to wear the hijab. "To go from there to an imposed process by forces in society, to me is unacceptable. It's got to be the choice of the individual who wishes to associate with his faith or her faith. I have great respect for any individual who wants in the right way to be associated with his own faith. I accept that totally and I would never challenge it."

He is a fervent believer in pluralism in education and thinks people must be taught in early childhood to see those from different backgrounds as equals.

"It's an issue of equity of people in society," he says, adding that he has been encouraging governments in developing countries to provide for equality of opportunity in their constitutions. "So governments have to answer to the question: 'Are you governing in an equitable manner?' "

And how is his advice being received?

"Sensitively," he says. "But it is essential."

IN THE 1960S he founded the Nation Media Group in Africa, and the Daily Nation now has more than four million readers. Street vendors rent out the paper so that each copy is read by 12 or 13 people, he says.

The Aga Khan is now trying to create a network of correspondents across sub-Saharan Africa "so ultimately we're able to become the African information enterprise for Africa, because that doesn't really exist in Africa. It's very much a regional resource or a national resource."

Africa is in a learning process with "fragile democracy, fragile economics", but ultimately he has great hope for the continent. "The African leadership I know is acutely aware of the necessity to move forward in these critical areas for national development. That wasn't the case in the 1960s and 1970s."

Inevitably, talk turns to Zimbabwe and Robert Mugabe's controversial re-election.

"I'm not a politician, but what we are talking about again is every African having the right to aspire to a better quality of life. And that is the goal of good government: to improve the quality of life of the individual in society," he says. "If this particular government is failing, then that government is answerable for failing."

He points to the recent crisis in Kenya and says the non-governmental bodies and faith institutions played a key role in resolving that conflict.

Since he left Ireland on Monday, the Aga Khan has embarked on a seven-day visit to the UK to mark his golden jubilee. In 1931, his grandfather's 50th anniversary was celebrated by Ismailis sending him his weight in gold. On another occasion he received his weight in diamonds.

These weighing ceremonies were a widespread means of fundraising by religious groups and local rulers in colonial India and other areas. Ismailis still pay a proportion of their income back to the community, but needless to say the current Aga Khan has never been weighed in gold. Nor would he wish to be.