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# Q and A with the Aga Khan

## The global spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims holds forth on the state of the world

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Following is a transcript of a conversation between His Highness the Aga Khan, Imam (spiritual leader) of the Ismaili Muslims, and founder and chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), and Don Cayo of *The Vancouver Sun*. The interview took place Nov. 23 in Toronto.

CREDIT: Ian Smith/Vancouver Sun

Vancouver, B.C.-11/25/08-His Highness the Aga Khan, the Iman (spiritual leader) leader of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims is greeted by Premier Gordon Campbell, then having a meeting and continuing to a luncheon. Here, he speaks at luncheon. Ian Smith/Vancouver Sun [PNG Merlin Archive]

**Sun:** You've talked a lot about the failure of democracy, and you differentiate that very sharply from the failure of states. I'm interested in how you define this failure of democracy and its significance.

**AK:** The failure of democracy? Well, I think what we're seeing in a number of countries is situations where the political process has moved forward and you have parliaments in place which are based on electoral processes that are more or less, often less, sound than one would want. You find governments which are not relating to parliament in a structured and creative way. You find parliaments where the quality of human resources is not what it might be. You find constitutions which are extremely difficult to interpret in practice, and where heads of state or heads of government consider it necessary to change these constitutions. And the nature of change itself is a problem.

So I think we're going to go through a long period of search for new democratic formats in the developing world. I often give the example of Uganda with three monarchies. You say to yourself, how does a country remain a republic with three monarchies which it wants to recognize?

You have other countries where the level of authority of the provinces versus the centre becomes a major issue, and where the provinces have sought powers which the centre probably should have and doesn't have. So you get the centrifugal forces in these countries in a sense making central national thinking extremely difficult to implement.

You get the difficulty in changing legislation. Many of these countries have inherited colonial legislation in one area or the other - particularly in, for example, education, economic institutions etc. They find it difficult to change that legislation.

Very often the background to that legislation is an attempt to control rather than to empower. So instead of the legislation coming into the public domain with the goal of enabling change, it's actually very often drafted on the

premise of control and centralization.

So I think that we are going to be seeing a large number of situation - you can think of Afghanistan, you can think of Kenya, you can think of Uganda, Eastern Europe, you see these situations all over the world. And I think it will require a lot of patience and wisdom and care to develop systems that are going to work, which do represent a consultative process which we all consider equitable and solid and good, that allow the processes of change in government to occur in an organized way, but that at the same time don't create a situation where there is tremendous volatility all the time in the environment.

Because one of the problems is volatility in the environment in which institutions are trying to develop. That's why yesterday, for example, I referred to the role of civil society, because civil society goes through government change. It's not affected by these political processes.

I'm not challenging in any way the notion that these political processes are necessary. I'm simply saying I think it is important that the world look at these processes for what they are. They are difficult. They are complex. There is no historical record that you can refer to in many of these countries.

You have national forces which sometimes will play for or against regional arrangements. And these regional arrangements are becoming very, very important, because in our world there are very few micro-states that survive well. OK, you can refer to Singapore, you can refer to Hong Kong. But they're the exception rather than the rule.

Therefore these small states need to come together so that they can insert themselves in a wider marketplace, etc.

So that's really what I mean by the fragility of democracy.

**Sun:** I'm not sure how close the parallel is with a failed market economy and a failed democracy, but I think there is some overlap. And I think in a sense it's the failure of a faux market economy and perhaps, in some cases, a failure of a faux democracy - that there was the vigorous election, which is that great trapping of a democracy, but there weren't all of the checks and balances and messy little mechanisms that actually make it work.

**AK:** Without any doubt, without any doubt.

And I think the relationship between democracy and resources is a very sensitive one in the developing world. Even in the industrialized world it's sensitive, but in the third world it's even more sensitive - who is using what resources to achieve what goal?

And if elections take place and the outcome is not what people expect or like, suddenly there's an issue - has democracy shown up the best? Well, that's up to the population to decide. You can't challenge that.

So these are situations which we're learning about.

**Sun:** What's the role of a functioning democracy like ours in terms of facilitating, fostering? What can we do beyond cross our fingers?

**AK:** Oh, I think you can do an enormous amount. I think you can do an enormous amount because first of all I think that you have, as far as I can tell, made a wise divide between the economics of the country and the politics of the country. You, generally speaking, have a situation where governments are concerned about the quality of the economy of the country and obviously coming out of the Soviet and the Cold War era that was very, very different.

So I think there is a respect for the notion that economic management today

is a science, it's not a political football. It's a science and it must be run as a science and not run as a political football. That's the first thing.

I think the second thing is that you have succeeded in creating a democratic context in which various groups feel comfortable. You have created a genuine pluralist society. And you have looked for leadership in all your groups. That leadership, which is very diverse in Canada, gives all these communities a sense of comfort that when they have a man or a woman of exceptional talent, the background is not going to come into cause. What's going to come into cause is the performance of the individual for society. That's very important.

If you look at African states or Asian states, you can see there are communities that have been totally marginalized whether they have competent individuals or not. So I think that's a second issue which is very important.

I think the third issue is that at a certain stage national goals - where does Canada want to be in the community of nations - is extremely important. And it seems to me that there has been intelligent continuity in that issue, although it's debated within Canada. But the fact is that you have achieved a certain position in the world community and it is very much my hope that you will continue to sustain that position.

So there's an awful lot to learn from Canada. And, I've said to my friends here, sometimes you're just too humble.

**Sun:** But we can't take a cookie cutter of what we've done and impose that on another nation. How do we facilitate the transfer of the underlying principles?

**AK:** Sharing knowledge. Sharing information. Building institutional capacity across frontiers, between Canada and other parts of the world. Applying Canadian principles to what you do abroad. That is a very important thing.

It's not how Canada sees its work abroad, it's how people abroad see Canada that is the really critical issue. And I think sometimes all of us working in this part of the world have a sense of understanding of what Canadian identity means to these countries. It's a very powerful and very singular identity, a very respected identity.

**Sun:** What's the consequence of failure to do this and what's the potential reward of success? How far can this go?

**AK:** Well, the failure means having parts of the world which are causes of concern, being unable to work their way out of that situation. Because that's really the critical issue - how do these countries, these regions, work their way out of these difficulties? So the risk of failure is that these parts of the world will remain fragile, ill-governed, with weak economies. Internal stresses will become external stresses. They will start gaining a global dimension.

So the risk is very, very high. This is one area where I think one needs to look quite cautiously at the notion of risk management. Because risk management in foreign affairs seems to me to be one of the really necessary attitudes towards global affairs today.

The successes? The successes if you make it work are parts of the world which are unstable, are volatile, becoming more stable, more vigorous and eventually becoming competitive.

You need to accept - I think all of us working in development need to accept - that at certain stages these countries are going to become what are called newly industrialized countries. They will actually become competitors. But it doesn't mean competition has to be unethical or disloyal or anything of the sort. You simply create a new dimension in which relationships take place.

So I think the downside is very, very serious. And the upside is encouraging and can be achieved.

If you think of countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, and you think back to the position of these countries 30 or 40 years ago and where they are today, there's an enormous change.

**Sun:** The downside is really manifested sharply in a couple of countries you know very well - Afghanistan and Iraq. And I can't imagine a Canadian who wouldn't think it would have been better to have not had all those factors that contributed to the mess that's there today. But we have troops in Afghanistan right now, and we have to do something next week, next month, next year. We have to either leave them there, or bring them out, or do something else while stumbling towards a better solution. How do we handle those interim challenges with the things that have already gone so seriously wrong?

**AK:** Well, I tend to think of Afghanistan as a number of countries, not one country. I tend to think of it as a series of provinces with different ethnic backgrounds, different levels of security and peace. Therefore what seems to me very important is not only to deal with the security issue where the security issue is severe, but to continue to build and build strongly and confidently in the other areas where reconstruction is taking place.

Reconstruction has its own dynamic at a certain stage. All of us are concerned in making it self-sustaining. Once it becomes self-sustaining, it tends to grow across divides. Because people look at what's happening next door, village to village or province to province, and they ask themselves "Can we get there?" And if they say, "Can we get there?" they then open immediately the question of dialogue. And that is the basis of everything. The moment you don't have dialogue, that really is the war. It's Berlin.

**Sun:** Is it realistic to hope we can chip away incrementally, and if we deal effectively with the places where effectiveness is possible that success will spill over to the others?

**AK:** Our experience would say definitely yes, definitely yes.

There are a number of criteria. Obviously security is a key one, because development cannot take place in an environment of insecurity.

I think regionalism is another issue. Afghanistan has a very complex geographic situation with a number of countries around it which have their own interests in what happens in Afghanistan. Therefore building - for example like we're trying to do now in the two Badakhshans - building regional stability which can come from outside the country into the provinces of the country is very important.

The same thing is true of the frontier with Pakistan, of course.

So I would say very, very definitely yes.

But I think one's got to accept the notion that the tribal areas of Pakistan is a problem area which is not new. You see very often people look at that situation and they say, "This is a catastrophe." But if you look back to history, that area in Pakistan has never been a governed area by the government of Pakistan. So what we're talking about is gaining central control over an area of a country which was never governed. It was allowed to auto-govern itself. They have never benefited from the processes of development, and tribal forces have remained in place for decades and decades and decades. It's one of the most frozen societies you will find.

**Sun:** So these are micro-states that aren't drawn on the map?

**AK:** Yes, yes, these are the micro-states. Or micro-regions, because they're

really regions. Frontiers in that situation don't mean anything, people just go across - they walk across, they drive across, they go across on horseback or on mule. They trade across frontiers. There is no customs, no immigration, no control.

**Sun:** In the two other primary religions that we're familiar with here, you don't get the same blending of the secular and the religious. I'm interested in the Muslim ethic of blending the work you do - the involvement you have in the affairs of the world, as well as in the spiritual affairs. Can you explain it to me?

**AK:** Well that really is one of the issues that was part of the roots of Islam when Islam was revealed.

The Prophet himself, peace be upon him, really was an individual who looked at the quality of life, of people who were Muslims. He didn't only look at the issue of religious practice, he looked at the issues of security of his people. He looked at the issues of quality of life. He looked at the issue of poverty. He looked at the issues of marginalized groups etc. He looked at the issues of integration of communities that were not Muslim, that became Muslim.

So a lot of the things we see in the modern world in their own way were addressed at that time - in totally different circumstances, obviously.

But the notion of intersection between faith and world actually was part of the revelation of Islam, very much so. And I think every Muslim leader, every Imam, whether he's a Sunni or a Shia, would confirm that that is the case. We don't make that divide. And indeed there are schools of thought that say that line of thought would not be acceptable in Islam.

**Sun:** I don't presume to know there's religion behind what I see as a growing movement, but I do see blending of the ethical aspects of what you're speaking of and business life in the broader society. We have the greed and all those things, but we also have huge new initiatives driven by people like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. Vancouver alone has two people giving a hundred million dollars each to international development. I'm interested because you seem to have pioneered this use of, if I can call it, business tools for social goals. Is that a fair description?

**AK:** Well, yes and no.

Let me first of all talk about the business tools and then I'll come back to the other question.

I think for a long time there was a notion that development support, development activities, should not be measured because it was unethical to measure something which was done with a charitable attitude and all the rest. And I think since then what's happened is that donor agencies - government, individual organizations, the World Bank amongst others - came to the conclusion they needed to understand what was the impact of what they were doing.

Understanding the impact doesn't mean that it's a commercial goal. It's understanding the impact on the constituencies you want to help. If your programs of support are not doing what they should do, you need to know that. And you need to understand what's going wrong, and you need to be able to correct it.

So you start off with, at least in a number of our programs, with a given constituency - a regional constituency or a national constituency, or a constituency of people. And you say, "This is the target I'm aiming at. Is the support that I'm going to give quantifiable?"

Now we're actually looking at what I would call definitions of quality of life,

because we actually think that that's changed since the original World Bank criteria. We have a whole exercise under way at the present time to try to get a better handle on perceptions of quality of life seen from communities in the developing world rather than from an institution in the industrialized world.

So point number one - measuring doesn't mean measuring for commercial purposes. It means measuring for the purposes of doing your work better than you might otherwise. And I have no ethical discomfort with that. Indeed, that measuring is done with the local communities, because they are the ones who are the best articulators of whether you're achieving your goals or not.

And I think one of the lessons we've learned in this exercise is to listen - quite simply to listen and listen and listen and listen. The moment you become deaf in development activity, you're out of the park.

To get back to the issue of ethics, I am very, very, very pleased that there is a sense of social ethics which is coming back into parts of the world that I thought had become so materialistic that they had lost notions of ethic. That they had lost notions of the unity of humanity and the fact that you couldn't leave people, millions and millions of people at risk of ill health, of marginalization, of lack of security and these sorts of situations. I am very, very pleased to see that happen.

But it's interesting to see how this notion of ethics is not yet, in my view, strong enough in education. I think in a number of situations national curricula at the school level, maybe even at the university level, are important. Many of the institutions in the industrialized world refer to moral reasoning, so the word "moral" is in there. But at one time I thought things were really becoming just too materialistic. And I think Bill Gates and other people around him have started to reverse that whole attitude.

**Sun:** I see, for example, that the Canadian International Development Agency is starting to focus on some of these issues of civil society that you've talked about frequently. But one thing that concerns me is the difficulty of measurement. If you have a program to immunize children, it's easy to know your effect - you count the kids that got shots. But of you have a program to foster civil society, I'm not sure how you measure that and determine if you're being effective. I've thought about this from the point of view of government, but obviously it must be of concern to an agency like yours as well.

**AK:** I agree very much. I think there are things that have to be measured with different criteria.

If you measure a healthcare program or an educational program, you can measure the degree of penetration of that program in a given constituency. What you can't measure in quantifiable terms is whether a society that was conflictual in its composition has become a pluralist society. You can't measure that.

But that's where you get back to the notion of quality of life. Because you can measure that in terms of whether the quality of life of the individual, as seen by the individual or the community, has a sense of hope in the future that it wouldn't have had in the past.

So I think there are two levels of measurement. One is the specific measurement of what you're doing. The other is in the much wider definition of quality of life. And that's where we're looking at this issue of quality of life because we're worried about it, frankly.

**Sun:** You've spoken of how important it is to pre-empt disaster rather than to react to it. And, of course, if you pre-empt it, it's very difficult to measure what you've avoided.

**AK:** That's absolutely correct, that's absolutely correct.

What you can do is you can look at an individual situation, and you can predict hypothetically what might happen. But there's no proof it would have happened if you don't intervene.

The only thing you can do is you can say you've consolidated a given part of the world so that given part of the world is no longer a high risk area. And thank God in our globe there are areas of high risk which we know about which we can identify, and we need to go and look at them and work in them.

There are other areas which don't need this sort of support. They're extremely wealthy, they don't have any major material problems. But there's such diversity of difficulty, governance is a real issue in many cases.

**Sun:** When you measure quality of life, is there a universal yardstick?

**AK:** The World Bank tried to develop a criteria. Jim Wolfensohn and I actually discussed that in great depth because we were worried when Jim was president of the bank. We were worried about how much our institutions, our programs really understood about the nature of quality of life. And he launched a major program that resulted in a book which I think was called Voices of the Poor.

Voices of the Poor was an extremely important document - very intense, difficult to read but which repositioned the notions of quality of life as seen by populations at risk.

So I think the answer is yes, you can measure. But you have to measure with the criteria of the populations concerned. You can't apply your own criteria, because if you do apply your own criteria you're going to get it wrong.

There are social forces in the developing world which have been there for centuries. You can't change them overnight and if you do change them overnight you create more trouble than you would otherwise.

**Sun:** There's a category of what I broadly call good works that is never going to have a pay-off. I would cite, for example, Mother Theresa's work in Calcutta. To give dignity to the poor and dying is not an economic proposition. In the Muslim ethic, in your world, is there a role for that sort of pure charity?

**AK:** Oh yes, very definitely.

Islam defines charity in many ways, and it doesn't in any way challenge that form of charity.

What it says is that there are areas in society where charity has to have an impact on the way people become autonomous.

There are situations such as the one you're referring to where people probably have no alternative. It is the end of life. They are marginalized. Very often they have no family around them. These, in the Islamic faith, also are people for whom we all have an obligation.

So that category of charity is absolutely respected and recommended and sustained, particularly, for example, in the case of orphans. "Orphans" is probably the major category in Islam for that sort of situation.

But then there's the other attitude, which is to say if you can give to make an individual or institution autonomous - give them the capacity to be masters of their own destiny - that is referred to as the best form of charity. But obviously in the case you're saying it wouldn't apply.

**Sun:** There's so much to do. How do you prioritize? How do you decide to tackle this wrong, but not that one today? Because you have to make choices.

**AK:** Well I think you have to categorize the nature of human life. So I think, in many cases, what we're looking at is security. We're looking at the quality of life in terms of the security of life. Therefore we have to be looking at issues of protecting people from threat, either human threat or natural threat. That's obviously basic.

You're looking at survival, which is food. Therefore you're looking at food independence, and trying to get to a situation where people will always be able to feed themselves. That's the next thing. So there are, I think from my point of view, levels of difficulty you have to address.

I think the third thing is that life is so complex, both at a given time and over time, that you're looking at the need for multiple inputs. And you can't always tell from one decade to the next what is going to be the need for those additional inputs.

If you go back to the colonial times, for example, the notion of a cultural identity was not a powerful force in society because it was the colonial identity that we were talking about rather than the identity of individual peoples. Today, the search for identity is extremely strong and getting stronger all the time. So that's the sort of thing where you say to yourself, 'Well, what does that mean? Does that mean identity against somebody or other people? Or is it identity because people want to belong to a particular community?'

So you then have to start asking yourself what are the consequences of doing that? What you try to do is make sure that if there is a search for identity it is within a pluralist context. [And] if it can be a development support, then that's better because using cultural assets for economic development is a desirable goal.

So, frankly, I think that's an issue of time. It's not an issue of being able to say in 1960, I know what I'm going to have to do in 2010. Honestly, I don't know that.

What I have to do is try and listen and learn and evaluate the forces at play and that changes over time. And thank God it does change over time.

**Sun:** You mentioned standing up for Canadian values, and I think certainly your own agency stands up for the values that are important to your religion. It strikes me that sometimes these conflict with local cultures and values. Take the position of women - a lot of societies in various parts of the world have historically marginalized women. The development I favour, and you do, does not marginalize women. In fact, it's the opposite. Is this a conflict with the existing culture?

**AK:** It can be, it can be. And it is changing.

It's changing slowly because, I think, there is an undercurrent in some parts of the world of threat. I don't necessarily understand it myself, but I think there is a sense of discomfort. There are societies, for example, where the educated woman will not find a husband because she's educated.

So you need to be very, very careful in handling these things, because they can be a real boomerang if you get them wrong.

I think it is a process of change. I think it's also a social issue. In many countries that I know, women do certain tasks and men do other tasks. That's a traditional outcome of the economics of society. In rural communities the role of the woman is very, very different from urban communities, obviously. So there are a lot of criteria there and it's a difficult problem. But it's one that needs to be handled with immense care.

**Sun:** Should development agencies draw a line in the sand and say, "For

these things we will not bend"? Is there a list of things that shouldn't bend to the local cultural preferences?

**AK:** Yes, I think there are things one would like to see changed. But it's not the issue of whether you want to see them changed, it's a question of how you change them and the timeframe and the methods you use to do that.

You can handle it with tact and a sense of respect for traditions. You can allow society the time to make those changes. Or you can try to impose them.

But if you do try to impose them, you very, very often, as I said, get a very uncomfortable reaction.

You know it's not just in issues such as this where we're talking about the role of women. Look at the de-socialization of the ex-communist countries. Look at how long it's taken to change people's attitudes to individual initiative, to the management or otherwise of individual wealth versus state rights.

You don't change the psyche of societies overnight. It can't be done. And if you try to do it, you create very, very great discomfort.

So that's where the notion of time comes in.

**Sun:** Do you have a sense of how long it will take to essentially deal with mass poverty if we get the policies and the approaches right? What kind of time-frame would we be talking in the best of all worlds?

**AK:** Fifteen to 25 years, something of that time-frame. And you'll never get to the absolute bottom of it. That's not realistic. What you will be able to do is reduce it to a level where you know that going further than that is simply not part of human society. There are always going to be people who are marginalized.

**Sun:** I differentiate between poverty, which we have everywhere, and mass poverty, which is a different phenomenon that we really don't know here in North America.

**AK:** Well mass poverty. I'm thinking of food self-sufficiency. I'm thinking of shelter. I'm thinking of access to basic healthcare. I'm thinking of those sorts of things. That's what I'm talking about when I say 15 to 25 years.

Because we're worried about another form of poverty, which is lack of access. We're beginning to sense the lack of access in society for the ultra-poor is one of the things that defines poverty from one generation to the next. People simply don't have access to the social support systems that a normal individual would have. Therefore it's not only material poverty, it's actually quality of life poverty, and that is a dramatic situation.

**Sun:** I think I've also seen what I would also call poverty of aspiration - people who don't know life could or should be better. And sometimes that leapfrogs into aspirations that are way beyond obtainable. So I don't know how you deal with managing aspirations or building them in realistic ways.

**AK:** I think you're right. The process of development does create new aspirations. And very often it has a backlash also. Because what it does is, it changes the nature of social structures. Traditional authority tends to be challenged. New forms of knowledge are resisted because they change society, so in that sense you're absolutely right.

When these new forces come to play you very often get reactions which stymie that. And then the question is what do you do about it?

I think in our experience it's been essentially generational. It's gender and generation - those are the two things that condition those processes of

change.

**Sun:** And you've found these can evolve in a realistic way?

**AK:** They can evolve, but you have to be patient. You have to let time play its role. You cannot force change in society. It's been tried, let's be frank about it. But I'm not sure it's been very successful.

**Sun:** 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?

**AK:** 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.

So I would say the first thing is to understand the complexities of the Muslim world. The individualities of the communities in the Muslim world. The differences of interpretation of faith in the Muslim world. The relationship between faith and state, which is very, very sensitive in the Muslim world and where you see many, many formulae today which you no longer know in the Western world. Those formulae aren't present in the Western world any more - that's gone - [but] they're still very present in the Islamic world.

**Sun:** When I look at the Western perceptions of freedom, which we value highly, I sometimes think we interpret it as the whole world should be free to be like us. Is that how we are seen from the other perspectives?

**AK:** I think that's certainly one aspect - the feeling that the societies of the industrialized world are always right, and therefore what they get right should be the norm for everybody else. I think there are areas where we don't agree with that.

We think freedom is important, of course. But we think that freedom really is not something that one has to take in the absolute. There is abuse of freedom. And when freedom is abused, what does it become?

**Sun:** License, I guess.

**AK:** Exactly. And that's where parts of our world say "Stop!"

That boundary between freedom and the abuse of freedom is something which is driven by so many different notions of thought, faith, society, the whole thing.

**Sun:** But that comes into play in a large way as an impediment at times to the pluralism that you work so hard to foster.

**AK:** If pluralism means abuse of faith, I would agree with that. I think that's something we would not want to see.

But I'm seeing a reaction. I may be wrong, but you mention the recurrence of ethics in Western society. Western society has its own means of correcting itself, and I think Western society is in the process of looking at that very, very great problem. Look what's happening in the Anglican Church; look what's happening in the Catholic Church. Faith institutions are dealing with very, very severe problems of freedom and abuse of freedom.

**Sun:** In Canada I think some of our success is the comfortable tolerance of letting people set different standards for themselves. So, yes, some people may choose license and other people choose some realistic guidelines, if you like, to exercise their freedom. Is that what you see as the goal for the broader society. or is it a little different from that?

**AK:** Well I think it's difficult to impose a firm line. But I think that when you look at history, the history of humankind, you will find that when freedoms have become license, society tends to disaggregate. And I think that what we're seeing in the Western world is that very issue on the table, and a reversal. I think there is a reversal under way.

Freedom doesn't mean that if you want to abuse that freedom, whatever it is, you legitimize or impose that on others.

**Sun:** 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?

**AK:** Yes, you are. You are.

A number of forces are at play. Your educational institutions are recognizing 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 industrialized world should understand that pluralism.

There are so many forces at play that tend to make that difficult for you. First of all, you refer to the Muslim world - have you ever heard a Muslim refer to the Christian world?

**Sun:** No, perhaps not.

**AK:** So right there you have an amazing difference in attitude.

**Sun:** But I do hear references to the Western world.

**AK:** Ah, but that's geographic. That's not faith driven.

**Sun:** But it's also cultural. We have something of a common culture and it is based on those Judeo-Christian traditions.

**AK:** Yes. But we don't refer to the faith of the West, whereas in our case you're referring to our faith.

**Sun:** But your faith does encompass both sides of the secular.

**AK:** Yes, and much of the Muslim world has wanted that. But that desire has been not only driven by faith, it's been very often driven by political issues.

**Sun:** How about on the other side of the divide? Are there similar encouraging steps to understand our side?

**AK:** Yes. Yes, I think there is. And I think there is a desire to access knowledge from your world to improve quality of life. I think there's some diffidence, that's the right word, that if you open those doors too wide you'll get the good, the bad and the indifferent. So the diffidence tends to reflect itself in saying, "Can I take what's best and stop what we don't like?" I'm not sure that's very easy. I don't think so.

But I think that we, on the other hand, have to tell you what we're worried about. It's the lack of confidence of expressing the issues. Because very often if we express issues, people look at us and say, "How can that be an issue for you?" But it is an issue.

**Sun:** If I can go back to the broad question of what's wrong with the world and how to fix it. . . .

**AK:** That's a terrible question to ask anybody!

**Sun:** And this is a terribly hard question I'm going to ask now. But if you look at what your hopes are for the world, and what your expectations are, how far apart are they?

**AK:** Well they're closer together than they were in 1957. Very much closer, very much closer.

The world I became involved in 1957 was a very, very difficult world to work in, and the forces at play there were dramatic. Frankly, that's all changed significantly. And I think that if you look at the developing world - I've said to the leaders of the community very often - our concern in terms of the institution is that the areas of the world we're involved in should become areas of opportunity.

That's the basic goal, is to make all these areas, areas of opportunity where people can have hope and confidence in improving quality of life with all the complexity that that is. That may be naïve; I hope it's not.

**Sun:** It strikes me the success of your community in Canada is really the poster child, if you like, for Canadian immigration policy. Has it been as smooth an integration as I see from the outside?

**AK:** It has. It has been a remarkably smooth integration, one of the reasons being, I think, that there's been complete openness over the issues on both sides. The original discussions that I had with Prime Minister Trudeau were very, very clear as to why he felt that Canada should welcome members of my community [and] why I wanted them to come to Canada. And that foundation has continued in time, and it has been built upon in a very significant way.

So I think it has been a good process. I understand the government has actually asked us to illustrate to them what we have been able to do on our side to make the process easier and more functional because they wanted to use some of our experiences as case study situations for other communities.

**Sun:** That's interesting. Because if you look at subsequent communities that

have come under difficult circumstances, I don't know if there are any success to this degree, and some are troubling.

**AK:** Well there are a number of issues obviously that helped. The fact that the community had English as a language was, I think, a great facilitator, because when these communities came into Canada they were able to communicate very, very early on in the language of the country. So I think that was important. I think basic levels of education were important because people came in to Canada who already had a basic quality of education, although they came from Africa and other areas.

Where you get communities that are neither English-speaking and have no educational base whatsoever, or are essentially rural communities, then that must become more difficult.

**Sun:** One thing astonishes me when I look at many other groups who've left homelands under difficult conditions. They often look back with anger, with bitterness, with resentment which sometimes lasts for generations. You guys go back and help out!

**AK:** As I told you, our hope is that these countries will become countries of opportunity, and we've lived through some pretty difficult situations.

**Sun:** But is it the faith? Is it a plan? Is it a policy? What has allowed or fostered that sort of graciousness in your community, to look back not with anger and resentment?

**AK:** In a funny way I think many of the countries we have lived in have gone through a maturing process. They are coming out of a historical context which was theirs, and then they come into a new context and they move forward and they don't necessarily understand when they get things wrong.

Look at Africa and look at the 60s and look at the one-party states and all of that. Look at the consequences of the Cold War on countries like Uganda and Tanzania, and you say to yourself, "What did the heads of state really have to choose from?" The West? The East? Or non-alignment? That's all they had. They had to fall into one of those three categories. That's not freedom. . .

I don't think [our] communities [now] should envisage leaving these countries. You see, that's one of the reasons why we're concerned about where they're going.

If you look at the Ismaili community - or in any other community that's as diverse as this - it's unrealistic to expect it. Hundreds of thousands of people will not be able to move from a country like Pakistan or India or Afghanistan to the West. That's not realistic, and therefore we are actually committed to try to improve what happens there.

If it takes five years or 10 years, we just have to try and make sure it's as good as possible and as quick as possible. But we can't change the historic demography of the community. It is what it is.

There is more mobility, but what we're really excited about is mobility of knowledge. That's the thing we're really excited about.

If you go back to 1957 the possibilities we had for mobility of knowledge were just about zero.

When my grandfather died, I think there were probably 10 members of the community who lived in the UK. There was no-one in Canada, no-one in the US. Now these communities are trampolines of knowledge, of service, which are absolutely amazing.

So that mobility of knowledge is fantastic - and it's not one way. We can bring

people from the developing world in to the Judeo-Christian world to try to help the Judeo-Christian world to do things it couldn't do otherwise. Our centre in London, the ISMC (Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations) - these are fora.

We're not going to change things overnight. It's going to take time. But I think we have to try and ring-fence risk at the present time, which means identifying the areas of risk and trying to do something about it. Not easy.

But what's very encouraging from my point of view is that this identification of risk is something I can talk to Western governments about.

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.

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