



Deutsche Welle Interview, Günter Knabe, 'There's No Conflict Between Islam and Democracy' (Berlin, Germany)

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Interviewer: Günter Knabe

Hello and welcome everybody to the DW TV interview. Meet with us today His Highness [the] Aga Khan, head of the Ismaili Muslims. His Highness is also head of the Aga Khan Development Network, and in that capacity very active [in] supporting economic and social development in many regions and countries of the world.

Günter 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?

His Highness the 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."

GK: I won't say that (laughter). But nevertheless Your Highness, in many Western countries, including Germany, there is an opinion prevailing that Islam and democracy are not compatible. If that opinion is correct, real understanding and effective co-operation between the Muslim world and the West would be close to impossible.

AK: I agree. Well I see no conflict between the faith of Islam and democracy. There was a consultation process. The consultation process occurred in the Muslim community at the time and two notions were retained. One was consultation and the other was hereditary continuation of religious authority, as well as secular authority. The second issue that occurred, is [that] it was consultation to achieve what? To achieve the best qualified people to lead the community. Now I think that democracy is founded on those two concepts. It's founded on the concept of consultation and it's founded on the concept of consultation for the purpose of merit — of finding the people best qualified to lead. So I see no conflict at all if I go back to the original construct of the Muslim community and how they dealt with the issues of leadership.

GK: Tolerance and pluralism are ranking very high on your agenda to improve the situation of mankind. Is it because your own followers, the Ismailis as a minority are also discriminated against, sometimes they are even called by other Muslims as heretics.

AK: Well I would start by saying that in all faiths there are differences of opinion between on interpretation and another. Today I wouldn't say that the Ismailis are discriminated against, on the contrary I think we are building more and more bridges with more and more different interpretations because the notion of pluralism in Islam is one which is well established. There are Hadith about the number of interpretations that would exist so the difference of interpretation is not an issue with Islam. I would go further. I would say that Islam is an encompassing faith. There is a very, very famous ayat in the Qur'an, for example, where Allah says I have created you — meaning mankind — from one soul.

GK: 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?

AK: 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.

GK: The Aga Khan Development Network is active in parts of the world even where there are no Ismaili followers at all. What's the purpose of that?

AK: Our role, I think, is to contribute to development on a national scale, or on a local scale if it's an enormous country, or on a regional scale. We have to select the scale which is appropriate. But we are inclusive and that is the nature of Islam.

GK: How much money does your Aga Khan Development Network spend on the various and broad variety of development projects in many parts of the world and where does that money come from?

AK: We are spending something of the order of \$200 million a year and the resources come from a number of different backgrounds. They come from development agencies, such as the agencies

in Germany, international agencies — therefore national and international, they come from the Imamat resources themselves, the come from ...

GK: Sorry that means from your own personal ...

AK: ... from the institutional income. And so it's a number of different resources. It comes from donations. More and more we have people who want to associate with programmes so they make individual donations. So it's a multiplicity of sources.

GK: You are a Muslim leader and the Aga Khan Development Network is a Muslim foundation but you're working together in several fields with the German non-Muslim government. What are the common grounds for that?

AK: I am very happy there are strong common grounds because Germany is generous towards the developing world. It analyses the problems and seeks solutions very much in the same direction as we are ourselves. We, I think, have had good partnerships and they are growing they're covering more and more fields — including culture which is a new resource now, at least I think so. So that's where we're working together and through Germany we're also working with the European Union.

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

AK: 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.

GK: Your Highness, thank you for this interview and I think we all wish you success in your development activities.

AK: Thank you very much (happy).

SOURCES

- [Video interview: http://www.akdn.org/videos_detail.asp?VideoId=53](http://www.akdn.org/videos_detail.asp?VideoId=53)
- [Published version: http://www.dw-world.de/english/0,1594,1433_A_1325811_1_A,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/english/0,1594,1433_A_1325811_1_A,00.html)