



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Civil Imagination after September 11, 2001

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“Sometimes I read that Islam is in conflict with democracy. Yet I must tell you that as a Muslim, I am a democrat, not because of Greek or French thought, but primarily because of principles that go back 1400 years, directly after the death of Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). At that time, Muslims debated how best to implement the premises he had established for being qualified for leadership... These principles are consistent with democratic models that exist around the world today.

His Highness the Aga Khan
Keynote to German Ambassadors, Berlin, 6 September 2004

It is one of the ironies of our time that a global consensus on social governance, pluralism and the rule of law as the pillars of mature democratic life has never been stronger - yet achieving those goals seems harder today than at the end of the Cold War. Religious traditions that should enrich the quest for inclusive, accountable and ethical lives have too often become captive to the politics of exclusion, inequity and violence. And not only in the developing world, where most of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims live. In the West too, seemingly liberal societies have frequently failed to uphold their traditions - notably since September 11th, 2001.

Our collective optimism of a decade ago about the emergence of a shared ethos of civility and democratic governance seems naïve. Civil strife is rampant and threatens to become more so - while the promise of globalization as a road to creative and peaceful interface among peoples and cultures looks ever elusive. Are the Internet and television bearers of vital knowledge for civil action and solidarity, or sites of distemper and division between (and within) societies? Is the dream of a world without frontiers turning sour, as borders become hostage to paranoia about dark threats to national security?

All in all, there is a real danger that a new pessimism will take over from the old optimism, leading us down the path to societies that are fortresses of incivility. After all, that has been the dark vision sketched by some of our finest writers - George Orwell, Franz Kafka, William Golding, Aldous Huxley, Arthur Miller, and Margaret Atwood. It is echoed by the Lebanese author, Amin Maalouf, and by a host of gifted Iranian film-makers who have set aside award-winning celebrations of the innocence of childhood and the beauty of landscapes, in favour of laments on social plagues that could poison the richest of civil heritages.

Then again, who said pluralist governance - an ethos of inclusion, participation and respect for the rule of law - was easy? For all our past illusions on this score, about liberal humanism as a child of modernity, a quick glance at our record is hardly reassuring: two world wars, the genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda, and countless civil conflicts on every continent. Is it any wonder that many historians consider the 20th century the bloodiest on record? Surely such a failure of pluralism in the 21st century will extract a human cost too high to contemplate.

Making Space for Change

“Pluralist societies are not accidents of history,” His Highness the Aga Khan observed at Oslo's Nobel Institute in April 2005. “They are a product of enlightened education and continuous

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investment by governments and all of civil society in recognising and celebrating the diversity of the world's peoples.”

To generate such pluralism - a diversity that is not only cosmopolitan but also engaged rather than passive - several key vectors must come into play. We generally define civil society as the public space that lies between the State and the individual, shaded by the umbrella of the rule of law. Citizens' organizations and movements, free media, trade unions and professional associations thrive in that space. But how can they generate pluralism, instead of fragmenting into warring factions?

Three important features distinguish a positive transition. First, a commitment to *civility* - not merely *politesse*, but a willing attachment to the whole of society rather than just parts that serve narrow concerns of the moment. A social conscience that resists the temptation to constantly favour self-interest, or that of one's kith, kin and clan, is the driving force behind civility. That same conscience insists that conflicts of interest be resolved by dialogue: resort to violence is the ultimate denial of a civil ethos.

Second, the creative energy to *institutionalize* values into action. The “rule of law,” for example, is the notion of justice made into an institution that will have stability, continuity and (when it is successful) legitimacy. Likewise, the notion of every citizen's right to information is institutionalized by a free media that is responsive to the public interest, and makes power accountable. Such institutions, when freely chosen, make civility an attractive proposition and cherish the diversity of the citizens and communities they serve.

Finally, the readiness to enlarge economic welfare, so that inclusion is genuine. While large scale poverty and deprivation are especially common in the developing world, the affluent societies of North America and Western Europe are not immune from the scourge of exclusion, notably when it comes to cultural minorities. Economic injustice is potentially the most crippling of all the vectors. As the Nobel-laureate John Kenneth Galbraith puts it, “Nothing so comprehensively denies the liberties of the individual as a total absence of money.”

Realizing the Vision

But how do we harness civility, institutionalization and economic justice amidst so much global strife? Clearly the ethical values we attach to Muslim heritages, most notably those of social justice, solidarity and integrity, would serve us well. Yet what turns normative values into lived experience?

This is where educators, writers, artists and public intellectuals play a crucial role. They shape our *social imaginaries*, the way in which we picture the world we inhabit. Shared public images lie behind how we understand ideas like “democracy,” “justice” and “religion” - *and act accordingly*. As our background imaginaries change, so do the related practices of democracy, justice and religion. It is in this sense that the poet Shelley deemed writers to be the “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

When Orhan Pamuk tells a tale about artistic pluralism in Ottoman Istanbul (*My Name is Red*, 2001), then another about headscarves in modern Turkey (*Snow*, 2004), and the stories become bestsellers, they shape what he calls “the landscapes of our minds.” That is what Azar Nafisi achieves among those who encounter the characters in her luminous book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). Nafisi celebrates the literary imagination as essential to a modern democratic culture, a shaper not only individual but also of collective, civic identity.

That is what public architecture at its best can achieve as well. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture's Al Azhar Park near *Darb al-Ahmar* in Cairo, for example, not only serves the practical needs of visitors, but also moulds a wider cultural memory and sense of civic belonging. It does so by reclaiming ancient city walls and degraded urban living spaces, turning them into congenial bowers for citizens from all walks of life. Egypt's own Hassan Fathy demonstrated this in a lifetime of remarkable 20th century building, including an “architecture for the poor” that insisted on the social dignity of the home.



Or consider the dual role of public gardens as spaces for cultivating communal tranquillity, as well as earthly celebrations of the divine across Muslim civilizations from Andalusia to Mughal India. Indeed, the Qur'an offers more than one hundred and twenty references to the idea of *jannat al-firdaus* or gardens of paradise, ranging from blissful retreat to secure refuge. These images have fed centuries of Muslim art, narrative and design.

Again, the graphic narrative of Noah's Ark and the Flood from the Qur'an and the Bible was doubtless evoked in many minds when the fury of the Indian Ocean tsunami last December swallowed whole communities. For some this was about "divine rage," for others about "divine absence." Cultural narratives are filtered through our intuitive and rational resources - our imaginaries. Surely the primary message in the Noah's Ark tale is one of redemption. The extraordinary empathy of millions of ordinary citizens across the world for the tsunami victims drove governments to act with generosity; if sustained, this can provide a redemptive Ark for the living victims.

Social imaginaries know no borders. They are local and global, drawing on traditions in which cherished values come alive. Attar, Rumi and Ibn Tufayl knew this, as did the musicians, painters and traders who trekked the transcultural pathways of the medieval Silk Road. Among their creative heirs today are Saadi Youssef and Naguib Mahfouz, Abbas Kiarostami and Samira Makhmalbaf, Khaled Hosseini and M.G. Vassanji, all of whom sculpt the landscapes of our minds and influence the way we see the world. This civil imagination is where an ethos of pluralism ultimately takes root, against the dire tides of chauvinism.

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