

# Rethinking our World: the Search for a Pluralistic Vision

Azim Nanji

May 2003, Geneva

## History

Let me begin on a historical note. We are gathered in a space of significant historical importance, I believe for the last time. This particular location [the UN building in Geneva] grew out of the original League of Nations, which was established here in the late twenties and the mid-thirties. The institute I represent was founded by His Highness the Aga Khan, the present Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community. His grandfather, the previous Imam, Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III, was president of the League of Nations in 1937. At one of the speeches he made in these surroundings he quoted from a very famous Muslim poet who wrote in Persian, a poet called Sadi. It says:

*The Children of Adam, created of the self-same clay,  
Are members of one body,  
When one member suffers all members suffer, likewise.  
O Thou who are indifferent to the suffering of thy fellow,  
Thou art unworthy to be called man*

Quoted in Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah (London: 1997) p.1157

That message spoke to the need to sustain an international institution, the League of Nations, to continue the work of healing and to grow seeds of avoidance, to enable world societies to avoid conflict and devastation. I am going to refer to two key metaphors in the poem, one of unity across the diversity of societies, the other is compassion and self-awareness. The League of Nations was created to follow up on the ravages of the first world war and to create structures, and a vocabulary to enable old and new societies to live together in peace. It worked for a while. Then in the thirties and forties we had Nazism, fascism, and the second world war, where effects were felt in virtually every region of the world. Once again, after the war, people came together to find another way of repairing the harm that had been done and the United Nations was created. Much of what is represented in the buildings we are in today, is an effort to do that work of healing and rebuilding. Unfortunately at the level of international politics the efforts to try to create a vocabulary that would prevent further crises has not always worked. More recently we have seen the difficulties that have arisen with regards to Afghanistan and Iraq.

This context of institution building at an international level to resolve political crisis has had its ups and downs and there is nothing to suggest that the immediate future will be any different. Where then can we look for an international resource that can help us counter the current shortcomings of our global political inheritance?

## The International Baccalaureate Organization

The International Baccalaureate Organization was founded explicitly to promote better intercultural understanding, but also to promote peace through education, and in many ways it parallels what the United Nations, what the League of Nations and what other international organizations seek to do. However, in my view its work lies at the core of civil society, by building a common platform of learning that encourages growing minds to cultivate understanding of disciplines across national and political boundaries. That knowledge recognizes that that “self-same clay” is informed by the intellect and that the intellect remains our most enduring tool for creating common purpose and shared understanding of the human condition.

### “International”

The work of the IBO also depends on the way it defines its notion of the word “international”, which is inscribed in the very title: The International Baccalaureate Organization. The baccalaureate itself is the programme of study leading to the diploma that students will carry with them as both an imprimatur of what they have become and in terms of what they are looking to do in the world. But the international part is harder. Does it simply mean that this is an organization that exists in different parts of the world, and is therefore international? Or does the word international carry a deeper connotation with it and a significance that needs today to be rethought? The analogous word that we have become very familiar with in recent times is the word “globalization”. If we go by the title of a recent work written by the Nobel Prize winner, Joseph E Stiglitz, *Globalisation and its Discontents*, there is not very much to commend that word, it has become too hackneyed. But the word “international”, I would suggest, indicates two realities. It reflects the reality that we live in a world of nation states, and that the primary entity that governs society in most parts of the world is a nation state. This is important to acknowledge, and is a fairly new idea—primarily nineteenth century in its modern formation. I believe it was the one time premier of China, Chou en Lai, who when asked “What do you think of the French Revolution?” is believed to have replied “It’s too early to tell!” Perhaps it is too early to tell about the nation state. We have other boundaries that have emerged: the European Union with all of its trials and tribulations, NAFTA, WTO, etc. But the nation state remains at present our reference point for how we govern ourselves in the present world.

I also want to suggest that, in addition to this boundary of governance, the word “international” is built on a vision of pluralism. This pluralism needs to take account of the diverse way in which we become nations and the capacity for both diversity and unity that is represented by the pluralistic underpinning of the concept of “international”. There are a number of publications of recent vintage that challenge how we look at the world and the implications of pluralism on our understanding of international relations. The two publications that I have singled out, seek to rethink contemporary history particularly in view of the collapse of communism and the end of the cold war. One is Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilisation* (Touchstone Books, 1996) and the other is Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* (Free Press, New York, NY, 1992).

## International Boundaries

Both publications in a way have been surpassed by more current events. Conflict has been inevitable, but is it civilizational? In our turbulent times it is easy to reduce tension to a clash of civilizations, but this trivializes both history and civilizations. The market economy has displayed severe shortcomings and dramatic ethical failures: Enron and Worldcom, come to mind. I think we are learning that the promotion of a notion of market economy is not sufficient because all of the forces that control the values of the market economy are not necessarily forces that are primarily economic. It is not a matter of simply predicting the quantifiable consequences of applying certain economic policies. This is reinforced by the fact that economies, particularly in East Asia and Latin America, which looked so promising a few years ago, are now also finding themselves in a great deal of difficulty. The advantages of the market economy and its globalization need to be balanced by combating an “ethos of business” that sees the market and economic growth as the sole reference points for international connectivity and international relations.

Democracy too has to prove itself everywhere. Its establishment in American and European contexts over two centuries ago was an evolving process. The European Union still struggles about how it can be one boundary, and yet respect national priorities and identities. What kind of a democratic process will govern the growing entity? Much of the Muslim world needs to think seriously about how its institutions begin to become part of a framework of democratization within its own cultural contents. About fifty years to almost this very date, the discovery of the DNA structure was announced and the later half of this past century witnessed spectacular advances in medicine and other sciences. Today, we have the genome map. But is it any more than a map? Like all maps, it shows contours and reveals surfaces, but can it tell us about what lies between and beneath? Like all maps it traces the surface. I think one of the aspects of that map that we need to unravel is the particularities that are on the ground and are not on the map: the complex human mind and the persistence of human culture. I am reminded of a very thoughtful and major work that the great French philosopher Paul Ricoeur devoted to “evil”. We thought that the theological idea died with the Enlightenment. Of course it did not; we saw it in the second world war. It may be disguised under titles like “weapons of mass destruction”, but it keeps reappearing. To erase words is not to erase the idea. Evil lurks, not as a simplistic theological notion, but as a sign that not everything in the genome map works to perfection. The circuits in our brain can misfire and understanding this misfiring process may take us a long way to identifying steps to reverse it—both behavioural as well as ethical. Weapons of mass destruction are not confined to one place, weapons of mass destruction are everywhere. Some of them are not under our control. SARS is not under our control. It is not a weapon of mass destruction, but it causes a lot of destruction.

I am suggesting that all these boundaries are shifting; whether they are boundaries that define the spaces and societies in which we engage with life, or boundaries of knowledge and the choices guided by that knowledge. An organization like the IBO is well placed to anticipate these changes and to plant into the educational framework what might be called “seeds of avoidance”, because that is what we do in schools. We seed minds, giving them the capacity to grow and the capacity to be able to allow these seeds to bear fruit. The nature of these seeds, as much as the quality of the programme, will determine our ability to do this successfully and in a sustainable way.

## Religious Tradition

It has been disturbing for me, particularly living in London and working with many organizations on both sides of the Atlantic, to find a stereotypical and often abusive definition of the religious tradition, Islam, that nurtured me as a child and to find individuals within the tradition who misapply the terminology of Islam to justify the most horrible and inhuman actions. I do not recognize the learning that I received in such interpretation and actions. But it troubles me that there is a framework, which might for lack of a better word be called a learning framework, that generates disingenuous and narrow ways of looking at faith. It is not that this is the only time that this has happened in the world—the religious Inquisition, the conflicts in Ireland, certainly all of the attitudes reflected in some “colonial” encounters in the Americas and elsewhere generating notions about native peoples as “barbaric”, represent a way of thinking about traditions that diminished the dignity of other peoples’ beliefs, or that diminished themselves.

I think pluralism is the one tool that can become a resource for us to uphold human dignity. By pluralism I do not mean simply the existence of difference, or the acknowledgment of difference. Pluralism represents the value that enables us to negotiate difference while being aware that we are another among others. While diversity represents the acknowledgment of difference, pluralism is the quality of mind and value that acknowledges and negotiates diversity. Unfortunately that negotiation has not always been a capacity that faith traditions have possessed at all times, and I include all of the major religions traditions in this. There have been exceptions; we can think of people like Ashoka the great Indian King who decided to give up what he called “human conquest”, and replace it with what he called “dharma” conquest, a conquest based on good deeds. There have been similar moments in medieval Muslim history in Cairo and Cordoba as well. I think we need, in our educational processes, to be able to look at these moments, to see how pluralism is built and sustained and how we might incorporate it in our “international” setting. One of the tasks my institution has set itself in collaboration with others, is the development of a curriculum to enable Ismaili Muslim children all over the world to study and understand their diverse heritages that link faith, culture, history, ethics and modernity. Our goal is to provide life-long learning habits but also to encourage and promote an intellectually grounded understanding and commitment to pluralism together with an appreciation of worldwide traditions and beliefs in addition to the students’ own. The curriculum is in nine languages, linked by the common thread of diverse heritages. As an example, the curriculum looks at Cordoba. You might ask “Why Cordoba? It’s not part of the Muslim world—it’s in modern Spain.” But I think the history of Cordoba represents one of those moments in time when you can begin to see pluralism emerge as a positive force, because it was nurtured by several traditions. It was nurtured by its Mediterranean roots. It was nurtured by its Christian and Hispanic roots. But it came to be further nurtured by additional traditions that came from the Muslim world, and from the Jewish world. So what you had was a context in which three major religious traditions came together to build on a Greco-Roman and Mediterranean heritage, and to allow for a time a moment to appear in history where, within a creative civil society, Jews, Christians and Muslims talked to each other in the same language, created a shared vocabulary, and built some of the most exquisite spaces that the world has known. Some of those spaces, as many of you know, still survive in Cordoba. In these spaces and in the vocabulary hinted at in their presence there are moments and footprints that transcend time.

## Changing Teaching Practice

How do we teach pluralism? I recall as a young child, growing up in Kenya, a tradition preserved from the Prophet Muhammed inscribed on one of the blackboards in my classroom. It said “Seek knowledge even unto China”. That saying has always stayed and grown within me: it talks about knowledge as a process without frontiers and that indeed may be the key to our common search: how do you make knowledge frontierless? The IBO is an organization without frontiers. Therein may be the clue to its global appeal and its continuing success. The IB has travelled and its future may very well be in its ability to locate in that journey all the moments of time and knowledge that enhance a pluralistic approach to education.

The principle that underpins the goals and objectives of the IB are the promotion of critical thinking within the context of a theory of knowledge course and the enhancement of mutual learning and understanding. I want to talk about some additional principles that emerge from these two. These are probably things that we share, I just want to nuance them a little bit in our present context.

## Complexity

One of them has to do with giving students the tools, and also giving them a sense that they need today, more than ever, to embrace complexity as an underlying factor in all disciplines and in particular in the sciences. A science that simply spells out formulas and solutions is no longer sufficient. We have already touched on DNA. Similarly there is considerable new knowledge emerging with clear implications for our daily lives, where science is converted into technology. We cannot any more adopt a simplistic, one-dimensional approach to science, delinking that knowledge from its applied consequences to human beings and to society.

What I am suggesting is that students need to think about ways in which not only the world but the cosmos is much more complex than we have hitherto imagined. If they embrace complexity, they will not jump to ready solutions. They will not think in formulaic terms: for example the “seven” steps to “happiness”, the “eight” ways to achieve a brilliant market economy, the “nine” keys to successful investment banking! They will not fall into the trap of thinking about all these matters in simplistic ways. This is particularly relevant when we think of the complexity of society and issues such as faith, and its relationships to society. When faith and society are reduced to dogma, then people fail to understand how complex religious phenomena is, how complex religious vocabulary is, and how it can be abused as well as used. The knowledge and the tools necessary to understand complexity are critical. For too long, I think, and much more so in recent times, religious vocabulary has been reduced to present the world stereotypically. Some of this may stem from a secularization of our attitudes today. Much of my early teaching in the United States was done in the South, very close to what is called “the Bible Belt”. When North Americans there talked to me about fundamentalism in India, or Islam, and so on, I said “let’s start by understanding fundamentalism in our own backyard”—the type of fundamentalism that has been exported in the developing world, for example, where such fundamentalism thrives. I am not saying that peoples’ religious connections should not affect their thinking about social and political issues; it is when narrow conceptions of religion are harnessed to ideological goals that I think we have a problem. While the West has, over time, evolved a relationship and even a separation between Church and State, this does not imply that faith has no role in society. What is at stake is institutional control and balance. And this cannot

be the same across nations, cultures and faiths. Faith is an ancient and venerable element of human life and society. That relationship will continue as an important element of personal and social life and needs to be understood in its historical and civilizational contexts. Islam cannot be reduced to theology nor understood as simple dogma. Over 1400 years and more, it has created a framework for practice but also informed culture and sustained civilizations. Surely how societies create meaning and seek to inform their lives in ethical ways has to become an important element in learning about human life.

We cannot allow future generations to be illiterate about this human dimension because we leave them vulnerable and without the intellectual tools necessary to understand religion as a historical expression and faith as a resource for society.

## Pluralism

The second principle that should be mirrored in the curriculum, is pluralism. There was a time when one could think of Europe, or of North America, as indeed the West, representing a monolith as has been done with Africa and the Muslim World today. We need to bring coherence and integrity to the learning of other cultures. They cannot be taught as part of a “Cook’s tour” of the world, as something unconnected to our own world. I still remember an old postcard I have kept. It said “Africa” on it, and it had a picture of a tree, with Tarzan, Jane, and a chimpanzee. The only things that were African were the tree and the chimpanzee! Now, this kind of caricature and stereotyping applies to all cultures—I have chosen Africa because that is where I grew up and lived this stereotype. We need to develop into the framework of the IBO a much more significant effort to build a kind of pluralism into the curriculum. That is a challenge because it is a difficult thing to do. I think we need to bring many people together to be able to see how that pluralism in the curriculum is built in because that will teach, over time, students both to learn about difference but also to respect difference. Those are the two qualities that underlie a pluralistic curriculum.

## Moral Reasoning and Compassion

My third point relates to the teaching of moral reasoning and compassion. We are already benumbed by statistics that show how the world is divided in so many different ways: developed/developing, north/south, rich/poor etc. How do we enable students through a curriculum to develop at least the tools of moral reasoning, where they recognize that ethical engagement with the world is something that should be built into their very fibre, that their concern for the environment, their concern for the impoverished, their concern for the rights of people in all societies have to be part of their make-up as human beings. We no longer can live in a world where we can allow this asymmetry to be perpetuated, not just for pragmatic reasons but also for moral reasons. Courses on ethics, development and human rights need to be integrated into the curriculum. The benefits of teaching these values cannot be quantified. Compassion is a fundamental human value if the generations to come are to build mutually caring societies.

## Building Partnerships

Earlier a reference had been made to building partnerships. Your presence from all over the world makes it important that you be seen as a partner, not as a dominating influence that has come with a ready-made curriculum that you can simply impose on everyone and that is stamped into their diploma. The local constituency has to be able to take ownership of the IB programmes. That will mean that they need to validate it in their own cultural and local contexts. It is a journey that will allow for interaction with local school boards within an international environment that enhances their own curriculums, but also enriches your own, by building best practice that balances local and international standards.

## Spirituality

Finally I would like to make reference to spirituality. Every journey of knowledge has a surface: the subject matter that is covered by the experience. We are probably the most-travelled generation. We travel for business, but we also travel because we seek to learn and even to escape. What do we hope to find when we arrive? Is it an imagined equilibrium in a place of tranquillity that is meant to revitalize our bodies and spirits, something special waiting to be discovered away from where we live, a kind of utopia? It might be helpful to go back to an ancient metaphor—that of paradise and the garden. The notion of the paradise-garden is probably one of our most enduring images. When we read many of the scriptures of the world we are reminded that there was a garden. Creation took place in a garden. This is a story that is common to the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, but it is true in many other traditions as well. I grew up in the heartland of Kenya where there is a wonderful story told by the Kikuyu of how God created that first space around a tree and where the first family met and out of which emerged the tribe living in that beautiful environment.

In the Qur'an there is a reference to the garden as containing four rivers. It is those four rivers that I want to end with as symbolic of an integrated, international education. The first is a river of water. The second is a river of milk. The third is of honey, and the fourth of wine. Across Muslim cultures, over space and time, this notion of paradise has been translated on earth as a garden, and many of you who have travelled to parts of the Muslim world will have seen the classic "chahar-bagh"—the four-squared garden fed by a fountain divided into four streams. For me this evokes among other things, a vision of knowledge: water as the basic source of knowledge—that grounding that we all need, the tools that enable us to create other kinds of knowledge that we want. It is the stuff of life, and we need it because it is important in the way we build on foundations.

The river of milk in my view might symbolize that content of knowledge that enables and builds on the foundation. These are the seeds that nurture the mind, for milk is the first taste of food and nurture after birth—it enables further growth. I must admit that from the point of view of exegesis, the river of honey may be the most difficult to elaborate upon. Knowledge must become an act of love to which we are attracted, not acquired for mere pragmatic considerations or indeed a burden to be endured because it is imposed. The poets speak of the "sweetness" that comes out of learning and indeed the metaphor of the bee attracted to honey might here be the most appropriate. Knowledge should attract, even seduce the learner so that, like the bee, he or she may pick up the pollen and seed further the garden and enlarge the space of fragrance and beauty.

Finally, there is the river of wine. It symbolizes the cumulative wisdom that comes to society drawing and building on all resources. It is also the most mature and enduring dimension of knowledge, transcending time and space. It is in one sense, knowledge that has no frontiers. Ultimately the chahar-bagh has become meaningful in its natural as well as its cultural form, because it reveals knowledge as interdependent and continuous. The fountain that brings the streams together and sends them out again represents the totality of the human heritage as well as its potential for development. Ultimately it is our task as educators to plant and cultivate the gardens of knowledge that will endure through the minds of the future.