

ISLAMIC UNITY— THE IDEAL AND OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF ITS REALIZATION

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

Unity is an attribute of Allah who, according to the Qur'ān, is both *al-A'ād* and *al-Wā'ād* and *taw'ād* is conceived in Islam as a spiritual principle which at the highest level pertains solely to God. Division and multiplicity belong to the realm of creation and our human world reflects unity to the extent that it remains faithful to the ideal of unity which comes from God and His revelation. The very fact that the ideal of Islamic unity is present in the heart, soul and mind of Muslims is due to the persistence of the effect of the message of the Noble Qur'ān and the teachings of the Blessed Prophet and the reason why unity is not fully realized on various levels, including the outward, is because there are obstacles and impediments, both inward and outward, which prevent its full realization.

The most profound obstacles to unity lie within the mind and soul of Muslims. The soul of most of us is not integrated into its center and is usually scattered in many directions, pulled by the passions which manifest themselves outwardly as actions that bring about division and discord. Likewise, the mind of many Muslims, and especially those who hold the reign of power in their hands, is dispersed by numerous concepts derived to an ever degree from non-Islamic sources and resulting in a world-view in which there is no center and no integration, resulting consequently in a segmented world which of necessity comes to surround such a human collectivity. There inward causes are the most essential and central reasons for the lack of unity on the more outward plane, a unity which many nevertheless seek because the faith in Islam and hence the thirst for unity on all levels of existence remains strong among Muslims despite the fact that the ideal of unity is not fully realized. There is still an Islamic *ummah* despite the segmentation within it.

Before turning to the more external obstacles in the path of the realization of unity, it is important to make clear that unity in the Islamic context does not mean uniformity. If God had wished to create a single nation or people, He would have done so, whereas the Qur'ān asserts clearly,

“O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another.” (Qur’ān; xlix, 13). Unity on the human level means integration of diverse elements, whether they be the male and the female, various ethnic groups, tribes or social classes into a whole by means of a higher principle in the same way that inwardly unity does not mean the destruction of the various tendencies of the soul or thoughts in the mind, but their integration which bestows wholeness upon the human being.

Historically, Islam has been able to achieve this goal to a large extent inwardly and even outwardly without destroying that diversity which belongs to the richness of God’s creation. But today many Muslims feel quite rightly that they have fallen below the norm achieved earlier and hence seek to understand the obstacles which prevent the realization once again of that norm.

Now, putting aside the inward obstacles and turning to the more outward causes, it must be said that Islamic history itself displays a gradual falling away from the unity achieved by the Prophet and the Medinan community. Even the rightly guided caliphs were confronted with divisive forces including tribalism, while the Umayyads, who were the last Muslim rulers to rule over the whole of the Islamic world, nevertheless faced strong forces of division such as the polarization between the Syrian and Khurasani garrisons reflecting Arab-Persian rivalries the Shi’ite protest in Iraq and Arab tribalism against the sedentary centers. After the Umayyads, political rivalries became a feature pitting the Abbasids against the Spanish Umayyads, later Abbasids against the Fātimids, local rulers against the center, and later the Ottomans against the Safavids, etc. Likewise, theological and juridical confrontations and diversions came to the fore ranging from Sunni-Shi’ite interpretations of the various tenets of faith to differences between various schools of law. There were also ethnic rivalries between Arabs and Persians, Turks and Arabs, Turks and Persians and the like.

Despite these historical divisions, however, Islamic civilization preserved its unity to a remarkable degree through the ubiquitous presence of the Noble Qur’ān and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, the practice of the Divine Law, the use of the Arabic-Persian script, modes of thought and motifs of art which cut across ethnic and political borders and many other factors. The Islamic world was not politically united as in its earliest history, but the ideal

of unity was nevertheless realized to a large extent religiously, culturally, intellectually, artistically and also socially and economically.

The gradual weakening of the Islamic world and the imposition of Western colonialism caused a much greater division and loss of unity within the Islamic world bringing about forms of diversity which persist to this day. Western domination destroyed to a large extent communication between various parts of *dār al-islām*. Even today one has to go through the Paris telephone operator to call from Morocco to some Muslim country in the Middle East, and many Muslim educated people can learn about other parts of the Islamic world only through Western sources whether they be newspapers, journals or the television. An interruption of lines of communication among Muslims was brought about which has never been fully amended to this day. This can be seen even in language, that supreme means of communication, where foreign influences have even succeeded in separating speakers of a single language from each other not to speak of causing greater separation of various Islamic languages from each other. For example, Persian or *darā* spoken in Tajikistan has absorbed many Russian words, in Afghanistan English words and in Iran French. The result is that the poetry of Rudaki is perfectly comprehensible to people of all those regions but the current medium of expression poses occasional problems. The same can be seen in the case of Turkish and other Turkic languages.

Colonialism also bequeathed upon the Islamic world Western style nationalism which grew out of the French Revolution and which must not be confused with the earlier identity with one's own land and country which existed in earlier Islamic history and to which the well-known *hadāth* of the Blessed Prophet, "The love of one's country (*waṣan*) comes from faith (*āmān*)" refers. Even in earlier times an Egyptian knew that he was not a Syrian and a Persian that he was not an Arab or a Turk a Persian. But this kind of national or regional identity allowed itself to be integrated into larger wholes as Islamic history bears witness. The new type of nationalism, however, created a notion of the nation-state alien to the Islamic ethos, a reality which remains one of the main impediments to the creation of Islamic unity to this day. This is especially true because many of the Muslim nations now on the map were created by European powers on the basis of their own interests and not on the basis of ethnic, historical or natural regional distinctions. And of course whenever these borders continue to serve the

interests of the world powers, they suddenly become sacrosanct and immutable, while if their violation poses no great threat to such interests, then few forces on the outside care much about what goes on across such borders.

Not only the very process of modernization but also the manner in which colonial powers modernized various Islamic countries or these countries followed paths of modernization has also had a profound effect upon further loss of unity in the Islamic world and continues to remain a main impediment towards bringing about greater unity. Certain parts of the Islamic world such as Nigeria, Egypt, the Sudan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia were modernized through British colonial influence; Muslim North Africa, Syria and Lebanon through the French; the Muslim Central Asian and Caucasian republics through the Russians; Indonesia through the Dutch, etc. Furthermore, countries which remained nominally independent also emulated different models of modernization. For example, Turkey followed mostly the Germans, the Iranians, the French at least until a few decades ago and the Saudis the Americans. The differences in Western models is reflected deeply to this day in the modern educational institutions or the institutions of “model” countries to which most of the young from each country who study abroad continue to be sent. It is enough to ponder how deep is the effect of things French upon young Algerians and things English upon young Pakistanis to understand this point. Even the contemporary literature of various Islamic countries reflects the different paths of modernization followed and the reflections within the Islamic world of the diversity and even opposition of many strands of modern Western civilization remain among the major obstacles to unity among Muslims.

When the colonial powers left the Islamic world, at least in name, and Muslims gained their independence, in most regions ruling elites came to power who were highly Westernized and did not rise from the traditional elements in Islamic society for which the ideal of Islamic unity and the *ummah* has always remained strong. Many of these leaders and also rulers of those countries which had preserved some semblance of unity were patriots, but whether patriots or representatives of special interests including their own, they usually sought to modernize their countries on the Western model and therefore upon the foundation of the nation-state imported from 19th century European history. The independence of Islamic countries, therefore, did not

lead automatically to greater Islamic unity. On the contrary, in several instances it made possible more severe conflict between Muslim states, conflicts which were and remain of course opposed to Islamic unity but were and are often of the greatest benefit to the world powers.

The experience of colonialism also destroyed the economic unity of the Islamic world. Main trade routes such as the Silk Route and the sea route from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, all of which had been in Muslim hands, were lost over a period of three centuries and gradually the economy of each Muslim region became more tied to that of some Western power than to the economy of other Islamic lands. That pattern has far from disappeared today and the dependence of the economy of the various Islamic countries upon what is usually called the world economy, but which in reality is the economy dominated by the highly industrialized countries, continues unabated. In many ways this dependence has grown and not diminished during this century, creating a formidable obstacle to Islamic unity. It is quite obvious that if this unity were to be realized, it would be of great economic detriment to many powerful countries.

This question of political and economic interest of strong foreign power to preserve disunity in the Islamic world and to prevent the realization of unity is of great importance, although the Muslims cannot ultimately blame anyone but themselves for the fact that there is so much discord in the present-day Islamic world. It is well known that Western powers sought to aggravate and accentuate all the differences they could find and make use of among the Muslims over whom they ruled whether it was Sunnism and Shi'ism, Arab Turkish rivalries, dynastic claims, tribal differences or something else of similar nature.

Nor have they ceased to draw as much benefit as possible from such differences during the past few decades with every effort possible being made to benefit from conflicts which can be of great economic and political importance to them. It is sufficient to think how different the situation would be and how much benefit would have accrued to the Islamic world, if let us say all of the North African countries or the eastern Arab countries were really united in their economic and political policies or if Iran, Turkey and Pakistan had become really closely knit together and been able to include Afghanistan as well within their embrace when they formed R.C. D. And on

an even larger scale how much of the economic resources of the Islamic world would have been saved if the Arabs, Turks and Iranians, not to talk of other Muslim lands were as closely united in their policies as Western Europe has become during the past few decades. Just the amount of arms Muslims would not have had to buy indicates how precious are the differences among Muslims to those who wish not only to buy their natural resources especially oil but also to take back in one way or another most of the money they have paid for those resources. Any talk of obstacles to Islamic unity cannot disregard a realistic appraisal of the very powerful interests which wish to prevent such a unity that is often depicted in the West as the rising danger of a so-called “fundamentalist” Islam at the very moment when Europe, that cradle of modern nationalism, is becoming united into a single economic if not political block.

The great obstacles on the path of Islamic unity must not, however, be interpreted as an excuse for indifference or passivity. First of all steps must be taken to unite the minds and souls of Muslims and integrate them inwardly once again through recourse to the Islamic intellectual, artistic and of course religious tradition and rejection of the totally anti-Islamic alien concepts, motifs and models which have cluttered the Islamic landscape during the past century. And this must be done most of all through the re-Islamization of education at all levels in the Islamic world. Secondly, while persevering in this process of re-integration and inner unification, attempts must be made to remove these obstacles which it is in the present day power of Muslims to remove, such as creating more mutual respect and understanding between sunnis and Shi'ites, those who accept only the external interpretation of the Divine Law and the people of the Way or the Sufis, Arabs and Turks, Persians and Arabs, Pashtus, Uzbeks and Tajiks, etc. By creating greater understanding and mutual respect through the most universal interpretation of the message of Islam which would embrace all the members of the *ummah*, at least those differences, which are so easily manipulated by the powers that be, will greatly be reduced. But the most immediate and the highest goal is to remove the obstacles to unity within ourselves and to live constantly in the awareness of the reality of God who is the source of all unity. In removing these inner obstacles we also make the greatest contribution to the removal of those external obstacles which prevent the world-wide Islamic community from realizing more fully on the

outward plane that unity whose realization at all levels is the very *raison d'être* of the Islamic revelation.