Religious Harmony

What the world needs today—perhaps more than anything else—is an acceptable formula for the attainment of religious harmony. This being currently one of the most important topics under discussion, I shall attempt to present here, in brief, the Islamic viewpoint.

Let us begin with a verse of the Qur'an which reads:

وَمَن يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ ٱلْإِسْلَٰمِ دِينًا فَلَن يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ مِنَ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾

He that chooses a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and in the world to come he will be one of the lost (3:85).

In the opinion of certain interpreters, this verse implies that salvation according to Islam is destined exclusively for Muslims. Islam thus appears to uphold the superiority of the Muslim community. But this is an out-of-context interpretation and is certainly not correct.

Let us take another verse of the Qur'an which serves as an explanation of the above-quoted verse. It states that:

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَٱلَّذِينَ هَادُوا۟ وَٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ وَٱلصَّٰبِـِٔينَ مَنْ ءَامَنَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabeans—whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right—shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret (2:62).

This verse rules out the concept of community superiority for any given group: even Muslims have been bracketed here along with other religious groups. The content of this verse makes it very clear that salvation, by Islamic standards, depends upon the individual's own actions, and that it is not the prerogative of any group. No man or woman can earn his or her salvation by the mere fact of associating with a particular group. Salvation will be achievable only by a person who truly believes in God and the world hereafter, and who has given genuine proof in this life of having lived a life of right action.

Another important aspect of Islam is that it does not advocate belief in the manyness of reality; on the contrary, it stresses reality's oneness. That is, according to Islam, reality is one, not many. That is why, in describing monotheism, the Qur'an states:

فَذَلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمُ الْحَقُّ فَمَاذَا بَعْدَ الْحَقِّ إِلَّا الضَّلَالُ فَأَنَّى تُصْرَفُونَ

﴿٣٢﴾

Such is God, your rightful Lord. That which is not true must need be false. How then can you turn away from Him? (10:32)

This verse makes it clear that monotheism (i.e. one Lord being the Creator, Sustainer and object of worship) is the only truth. All other paths lead one away from, rather than towards the truth. The fact that certain religious thinkers believe in the manyness of reality is of no concern to Islam. With oneness as its ideal, it cannot accept manyness even as a hypothesis.

Both of the above points—(a) the oneness of Absolute Reality, and (b) Salvation as the prerogative of the true believer in this oneness—form a major part of Islamic ideal. Just being born into a certain group or community, or associating oneself with others of similar persuasions, does not entitle one to salvation, be one a Muslim or a non-Muslim.

Now let us deal with the fact that; in practice, different kinds of religious groups do exist. Then, given the various kinds of differences separating them, let us consider, how to bring about harmony between them.

One solution commonly advocated is to spread the conviction that all religions are essentially one: that they are simply diverse paths leading to a common destination. Islam, however, does not accept this view and, in any case, experience has shown that repeated attempts to bring about harmony on this basis have been a failure. The Emperor Akbar attempted to achieve harmony by state enforcement of his newly formed religion, *'Din-e-Ilahi;'* Dr Bhagwan Das spent the best part of his life producing a one-thousand page book titled Essential Unity of All Religions; Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) attempted to spread this ideal at the national level by a countrywide movement whose slogan was *'Ram Rahim ek hai,'* meaning Ram and Rahim were one and the same. But events have shown us that all failed in their attempts to achieve the goal of religious harmony.

Islam's approach to the entire problem is much more realistic in that it accepts ideological differences. Once having accepted these differences, it then advocates the policy of tolerance and respect for one another in everyday dealings. This is on a parallel with the principle expressed in the English saying. *'Let's agree to disagree.'*

In this connection, one of the commands of the Qur'an is that, in principle,

لَآ إِكْرَاهَ فِى ٱلدِّينِ قَد تَّبَيَّنَ ٱلرُّشْدُ مِنَ ٱلْغَيِّ فَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِٱلطَّـٰغُوتِ

وَيُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ فَقَدِ ٱسْتَمْسَكَ بِٱلْعُرْوَةِ ٱلْوُثْقَىٰ لَا ٱنفِصَامَ لَهَا ۗ وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ

عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٥١﴾

'there shall be no compulsion in religion' (2:256). At another place it declares that

لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِىَ دِينِ ﴿٦﴾

you have your religion and I have mine' (109:6). It was as a result of this commandment that, when the Prophet Muhammad migrated to Medina, he issued a declaration reaffirming his acceptance of the religion of Muslims for the Muslims and the religion of Jews for the Jews.' In order to perpetuate the atmosphere of mutual harmony, the Qur'an commands the Muslims in their dealings with unbelievers not to 'revile (the idols) which they invoke besides Allah, lest in their ignorance they should spitefully revile Allah.'

This principle formulated by Islam is best described not as religious harmony, but as harmony among religious people. This is a principle whose utility is a matter of historical record. It is evident that in the past as well as in the present, wherever religious harmony has existed, it has been based on unity despite differences, rather than on unity without differences. It is not based on agreeing to agree, but on agreeing to disagree.

One extremely revolutionary example of this principle is to be found in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. It concerns the conference of three religions which was held in the Prophet's own mosque in Medina. This conference is described by Muhammad Husain Haykal in his book, The Life of Muhammad: The three scriptural religions thus confronted one another in Madinah. The delegation entered with the Prophet into public debate and these were soon joined by the Jews, thus resulting in a tripartite dialogue between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This was a truly great congress which the city of Yathrib had witnessed. In it, the three religions which today dominate the world and determine its destiny had met, and they did so for the greatest idea and the noblest purpose. Although Islam believes, in the oneness of reality it lays equal stress on the practice of tolerance in everyday dealings, even if it means going to the extent of permitting non-Muslims to come to an Islamic place of worship for religious discussion, and if it is time for their prayers letting them feel free to perform their worship according to their own ways in the mosque itself.

Tolerance has been the rule throughout the history of Islam. It has, in fact, been one of the main underlying causes of its successful dissemination. Here I quote from the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

Islam achieved astonishing success in its first phase. Within a century after the Prophet's death in 632 a.d.(the early generations of Muslims) it had brought a large part of the globe—from Spain across central Asia to India—under a new Arab Muslim empire.

And this is the part which I wish particularly to stress:

Despite these astonishing achievements other religious groups enjoyed full religious autonomy (9/912).

Now the complicating factor is that when any religion having reached this stage of antiquity has secured a sacred place in the hearts of its believers, it becomes impossible to bring about any changes in it. Efforts to bring about a change can produce a new religion, but they can never succeed in changing the old religion. There are many examples of such failures in the past.

A very important point from the practical point of view is that although the necessity to bring about harmony among the different religions is not a newly-felt imperative, endeavors towards that end are still only in the formative stages. If progress towards that goal has been slow of attainment, it is because of the established positions which ancient religions have secured in the hearts of their followers, simply by virtue of their antiquity. Trying to bring about changes in these religions per se has never brought about harmony, because instead of old religions being brought closer together by this process, they have developed rather into new religions, a process which has either left the problem of disharmony unsolved or has further aggravated it. There are many examples of such abortive efforts in the past.

In view of this historical reality, it is clear that the suggestions made by Islam as to how to produce harmony among the different religions is the only viable solution. Any alternative suggestion, however attractive it might appear, would be either impracticable or counter-productive.

Once, when discussing this point with me, a religious scholar said, *'We have been attempting to bring about inter-religious harmony for the last one hundred years, but the results have been quite dismal. It would seem that there are insurmountable obstacles in the way.'*

I replied that the goal we want to attain is certainly a proper one; it is simply that the strategy we employ is impracticable. Religious harmony is without doubt a desirable objective. But it cannot be achieved by attempting to alter people's beliefs—a policy advocated by more than one scholar in this field. The only way to tackle the problem is to encourage people to show respect for others' beliefs and to be humanitarian at all times in their dealings with adherents of other religions. It is vital to realize that it is quite possible

to inculcate this attitude without in any way tampering with long-cherished credos. It should never be conceded that the goal of religious harmony is unattainable simply because people's beliefs differ from each other. It is certainly a possibility provided that it is seen as a matter of practical strategy and not as a pretext for making ideological changes.

'*Practical strategy*' is something which people regularly resort to in matters of their daily existence. As such, it is a known and acceptable method of solving the problem. Since no new ground has to be broken, either for the religious scholar or for the common man, it should be a very simple matter for people to extend their everyday activity, within their own sphere of existence, to include an honest and sincere effort towards global religious harmony. It is simply a question of having the will and the foresight to do so.