

## **Spiritual Unity** **Maulana Wahiduddin Khan**

It gives me great pleasure to participate in this Festival of Spiritual Unity. It will, indeed, be a memorable moment in my life. I thank the organizers for having given me the opportunity to be present on this occasion.

The Organizers of the festival deserve to be highly commended for having drawn up a program which stresses the most important need of our time. Man's greatest need today is to be shown the path of spiritual unity. There is no other way to eliminate the disharmony existing in present day society which has resulted in so many intractable problems. May God accept this initiative on the part of the Festival's organizers. May He crown their efforts with success so that people everywhere may benefit from them.

It is generally said that in present times, the world has assumed the form of a global village. But this is only half the truth. Modern technology and communications have, of course, greatly reduced distances across the world. But the closeness thus produced is of a purely physical nature. Modern technology may have bridged certain gaps, bringing the external world closer together, but the task of bringing unity into the internal world has yet to be accomplished. It would be no exaggeration to say that the present Festival of Spiritual Unity is a major step towards completing the remaining fifty percent of the task. Its aim is to turn the world into a global village, in the spiritual sense as it has already happened in the technical sense.

What is spiritual unity? Let us take a very simple example. When you live in a crowded settlement, the walls all around give you a sense of limitation. You experience the friction of living in close contact with others and you suffer from mental tension. Later, when you emerge from that dense human settlement into open, natural surroundings you immediately feel that your tension has evaporated and you have once again become serene. You feel that you have joined a limitless universality. The feeling of separateness is replaced by an all-pervasive feeling of unity. You immediately become part of a world where there are no boundaries. A sense of universality prevails.

We have all had this experience at one time or another. It shows us what spiritual unity is. It is, in fact, the raising of one's existence to a higher plane. The moment you achieve this, you feel you are emerging from a limited world to become a citizen of an unlimited world. Disunity now disappears, giving way to unity all around.

Although, physically, all human beings appear to be different, spiritually they are one. It is as if spiritual unity between human beings already exists, it does not have to be externally imposed. We have only to make people aware of its existence. Once the outer, artificial veils are removed, what remains will be pure spirituality.

In reality, the various sets of circumstances that confront man in this world lead to drawing of different veils over man's natural propensities. For instance, the veil of material greed produces self-centredness; the veil of jealousy causes him to see himself as being separate from others; the veil of prejudice causes him to discriminate between human beings, and so on. These veils, in fact, tend to block man's natural urge towards spiritual unity. What is required is to remove these artificial veils in order that the true, inner reality be brought into focus.

The aim of all religions, basically, is to encourage this spiritual unity within man and between man and man. No religion is at variance with another so far as this goal is concerned. The language in which this is set forth may vary from one religion to another, but, without doubt, the main concern of all religions is to produce spiritual unity within and between all human beings. Without spiritual unity, there is little hope of creating peace and harmony throughout the world. And where there is no peace and harmony, the dream of human progress will for ever remain elusive.

Now, what is Islam's contribution to spiritual unity? The subject is too vast for more than just a few basic points to be briefly touched on.

**The Unity of God**The most important factor in Islam's contribution is its concept of monotheism — of there being only one God (2:163). According to Islam, God, or the ultimate reality of this universe is only one — called Allah in Islam. It is implicit in the concept of the oneness of Godhead that differences and multiplicity would appear to exist in reality, yet there is an underlying unity.

In this way the concept of divine unity engenders spiritual unity. All human beings are one, because they are the servants of one God. All human beings are God's family. God is indeed the greatest reality of the universe. And when it is acknowledged that there is only one greatest reality, it is but natural that all other creation should acquire the character of unity.

**The Unity of Nature**The Qur'an states that **"There is no changing in God's creation."** (30:30) According to the Prophet of Islam **'every child is born with an upright nature.'** (Al-Bukhari) We learn from this that unity is found among all human beings at the level of nature and creation. Nature forms the common constituent in the creation of human beings, just as the atom forms the common constituent in all the varied objects of nature in the physical world. That is to say that the same unity which exists in the external world at the physical level, has existed among human beings at the spiritual level from the outset.

But man tends at times to be oblivious of his own nature. This is no less true in the sphere of unity. Today people are unaware of their spiritual potential. In such a situation, the easiest way to bring about spiritual unity is to make men aware of that potential. The moment they became aware of it, spiritual unity will come into existence of its own accord.

**The Unity of Mankind**The Qur'an says, **"O Men, have fear of your Lord, who created you from a single soul. From that soul He created its mate, and through them, He scattered the earth with countless men and women."** (4:1)

This shows that men and women have been created from the same substance. Their being physically one, of necessity, demands their spiritual oneness. Making a similar point, the Prophet Muhammad said that all human beings are brothers (Abu Dawud). This gives rise to the concept of a common brotherhood, and without doubt, it is this sense of brotherhood which generates the strongest feeling of oneness and togetherness among different people.

That is to say that when all human beings in this world are virtually blood brothers, they must, as this concept necessarily demands, live as brothers in spirit too. Any other way of living is a deviation from the reality. I should like to refer here to an incident which illustrates this point. In 1893, Swami Vivekananda went to Chicago to participate in the Parliament of Religions. As the Encyclopaedia Britannica puts it, his was a *'Sensational appearance.'* (15/623) On that occasion all the speakers at the conference followed the common practice of addressing the audience as *"Ladies and gentlemen."* But when Swami

Vivekananda took the stage, he addressed his hearers as "*Sisters and brothers of America.*" No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the hall resounded with a long burst of applause. Of all the delegates at the conference, Swamiji received the greatest ovation.

The reason for this was that the form of address, "*Ladies and gentlemen*" produces a sense of alienation and strangeness, whereas the phrase "*Sisters and Brothers*" introduces a note of closeness and familiarity. By using this phrase, Swami Vivekananda touched a cord in the hearts of those of different creeds and colors. Their natural feeling of unity was awakened, and then what ensued fulfilled the best of expectations. All of a sudden, the gaps between them were bridged. They all began to feel themselves what they really were, and for that moment, physical divisions disappeared and were replaced by a rare spiritual unity.

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