

## The Muslim Community (al-Ummah) as the Regulator of Renewal and Ijtihad

### [THEME I]

#### *Varied Uses and Meanings of the Term Ummah*

THE WORD *ummah* is used in the Qur'an in four primary senses: (1) Community, as in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:128, where Abraham and Ishmael pray saying, "O our Sustainer! Make us surrender ourselves unto Thee, and make out of our offspring a community that shall surrender itself unto You, (*ummatan muslimatan laka*)!..." This sense is also found in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:213, which reads, "All humankind were once one single community (*ummatan wāḥidah*); [then they began to differ – ] whereupon God raised up the prophets as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, and through them bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, so that it might decide between people with regard to all on which they had come to hold divergent views..." (See also *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:103; *Sūrah Hūd*, 11:118; and *Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:8.) (2) An age or period of time. This sense is found in *Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12:45, where we are told that a man who had been imprisoned with Joseph, then freed from prison, "...remembered Joseph after a time... (*ba'da ummatin*)." (3) A religious leader. This sense of the word *ummah* is found in *Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:120, which tells us that "Abraham was a man who combined within himself all virtues... (*ummatan qānitan*)." (4) Species or genus. This sense of the word is found in *Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:38, where we are told that "there is no beast that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its two wings

which is not [God's] creature (a member of a living species) like yourselves (*umamun amthālukum*):..." (5) A set of beliefs and practices. This sense is found in *Sūrah al-Zukhruf*, 43:22, which reports that those to whom the message of Islam came said, "Behold, We found our forefathers agreed on what to believe (*alā ummatin*)..."

The word *ummah* as used in the first sense listed above – that of community – is an entity that consists of peoples, clans, tribes and so on in regions all over the globe who are united not by nationality but by shared doctrinal beliefs and a commitment to the Islamic law and Islamic practices, customs and values. This community is one that has a shared history, complete with victories and defeats, joys and sorrows, hopes and frustrations. Consequently, there is only one Muslim Ummah, or worldwide community, although there may be multiple Muslim peoples or local communities. This use of the term *ummah* occurs clearly in *Sūrah al-Mu'minūn*, 23:52, where God declares, "Verily, this community of yours (*hādhīhi ummatukum*) is one single community, since I am the Sustainer of you all: remain, then, conscious of Me!" It is a single community in terms of direction and purpose, ideas and concepts, feelings and perceptions. The Prophet likened the unity of the worldwide Muslim community to the physical body, which, when one part or organ suffers, causes the rest of the body to suffer as well. As Majid Ursan al-Kilani (1932-2015) noted, this unity is not diminished by the variety that marks the many peoples, tribes and local communities who make up the worldwide Muslim Ummah; nor is it diminished by the wide range of locations, races, professions and livelihoods of its members as long as their loyalties remain centered around a single message, and not around particular individuals or personalities. As al-Kilani observed, "The principle element of the concept of *ummah* is that of its message, that is, what a group of people offers to other human collectivities."

Given that the Qur'an views the human situation in the seventh century CE as ripe for correction and evolution in the direction of an Ummah that encompasses the peoples and the tribes of the world, then the Prophet himself, the bearer of the Qur'anic message, could only have understood himself and his call in the same light. He saw himself as the standard bearer of a specifically Arab collectivity that aspired to

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be joined to its surrounding context in the form of an all-inclusive Islamic Ummah. The unity of the Muslim Ummah has not been visible on the political level throughout history. It has, nevertheless, retained its consistency on the levels of culture, sentiment, point of view, and a sense of belonging to a civilization which, during an important phase of its history, was a leader among nations.

The Qur'an identifies a number of features that characterize the Muslim Ummah. Of these, the three principle ones have been identified by some as: moderation, chosenness, and affliction or testing. Moderation is spoken of in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:143, where God declares, "And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind,..." Chosenness is referred to in *Sūrah al-Hajj*, 22:78, in which Muslims are told that God "...has elected you [to carry His message], and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion, [and made you follow] the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you – in bygone times as well as in this [divine writ] – 'those who have surrendered themselves to God,' so that the Apostle might bear witness to the truth before you, and that you might bear witness to it before all mankind..." The chosenness of the Muslim community is further affirmed in verses that speak of their role as God's representatives on Earth. Thus we read in *Sūrah al-Nūr*, 24:55: "Allah has promised, to those among you who believe and work righteous deeds, that He will, of a surety, grant them in the land, inheritance (of power), as He granted it to those before them..." As for the matter of affliction and testing, it is spoken of in *Sūrah Āl Imrān*, 3:140, where God addresses the Muslim community with the words: "If misfortune touches you, [know that] similar misfortune has touched [other] people as well; for it is by turns that We apportion unto men such days [of fortune and misfortune]: and [this] to the end that God might mark out those who have attained to faith, and choose from among you such as [with their lives] bear witness to the truth..."

The European use of the term 'nation', which has generally been used to translate the Arabic word *ummah*, has been influenced by historical developments such as the formation of the political state (*dawlah*). Historically speaking, it is difficult to determine which of the

two – nation (*ummah*), or state (*dawlah*) – preceded the other. This debate surfaced most notably at the turn of the eighteenth century CE in response to the French Revolution and its repercussions throughout Europe, as well as the increasing centralization of the state on that continent. However, the term ‘nation’ had not previously been associated with a state, that is, with an institutional entity whose relationship to its subjects was defined and regulated within an ideological, political and legal framework to which legists and constitutional theorists have referred as a ‘nationality’, that is, the state of belonging to a land, a state, and a nation considered as a single entity.

As for the growing use of the term *ummah* in Western civilization, it came about during a period in which national identities were being built atop the ruins of the erstwhile all-encompassing ecclesiastical edifice. The term *ummah* was thus being employed in Western writings in a manner that reflected semantic overlap with the term *dawlah*, or political state. Hence, despite the various types of geographical, political and economic boundary lines and criteria which helped in the process of drawing internal distinctions and establishing differences and particularities, the term *ummah* was gradually taken up into the ideology of the expanding state.

The Arab-Muslim Ummah was formed through a historical process in which language and the propagation of the Islamic message played the most prominent role, with geographical factors being secondary in importance. This society, which was always prepared to expand beyond its geographical borders through the spread of the Islamic message rather than military conquest, accommodated non-Muslims by granting them the status of *dhimmīs*.

The Muslim Ummah has survived and thrived down the centuries despite the cultural variety and multiplicity of its members, as a result of which it is marked by a unique objective dimension that releases it from historical relativity. This ‘objective dimension’ consists in the universality and finality of the Islamic message, which came to assimilate and integrate the heritage of the past through revival and renewal, and out of this to shape a uniquely Islamic civilization with a global stamp which, rather than spurning and combating the cultural and national distinctions among its component human collectivities, works

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to alleviate the conflicts among them.

### [THEME 2]

#### *The Meaning and Importance of Consensus for the Muslim Community*

Scholars divide knowledge with respect to its bearer and its recipients into two categories: ‘lay knowledge’ (*‘ilm ‘āmmah*) and ‘scholarly (or elite) knowledge’ (*‘ilm khāṣṣah*). If the knowledge in question is in the form of a consensus, they divide it into ‘a lay consensus’ (*ijmā‘ ‘āmmah*) and ‘a scholarly consensus’ (*ijmā‘ khāṣṣah*). The first category according to al-Shāfi‘ī, is general knowledge in relation to which there are no erroneous reports or interpretations, nor is it subject to dispute. The power of consensus lies in the fact that it is based on a definitive text, well-attested transmission, irrefutable reasoning, and careful attention to the meaning of the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and analogies based thereon.

When a consensus is formed, scholars have an obligation to involve the entire Muslim community through explanation, instruction and concrete application, and by allowing each member of the community to take part in the process of discussing and implementing it, each according to his or her understanding and ability. According to al-Shāfi‘ī, “lay believers would not agree to violate the precedents set by the Messenger of God, or to any other sort of error for that matter, God willing...” As for al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, he divided consensus into two types: (1) a consensus of both the laity and the scholarly community, and (2) a consensus among scholars alone. Al-Juwaynī, by contrast, insisted that in order to be valid, a consensus has to be based on the views of all members of the Muslim community without exception, the laity and scholars alike.

In our present day and age, plagued as it is by atomization, compartmentalization, partisanship, backwardness, weakness, and top-down decision-making, there is a greater need than ever for the kind of broad-based consensus that reflects solidarity and affirmation of the divine unity in all areas. The current situation has prompted many to

call for renewed emphasis on the role of the Muslim community as a whole in the work of *ijtihād*, positive change, reform and modern reawakening. The principles of consensus (*ijmāʿ*) and consultation (*shūrā*) have always been intended to apply to all Muslims everywhere, and the only justification for restricting either of them to the scholarly community alone has been the practical necessity resulting from the growing numbers of Muslims from varied backgrounds and nationalities, and the difficulty involved in communication and travel from place to place.

Two of the most important means of regulating Muslim society and coping with these challenges are those of mutual consultation (*shūrā*) and state authority. Specifically, Muslims are called upon to consult together about matters of shared concern, and once their opinions and perspectives have been expressed, it is the state's responsibility to codify the outcomes of this consultation into specific rulings and laws within the context of its pre-existing structures.

Such practices, al-Turabi stresses, must be marked by a clear and passionate sense of Islamic identity, and by a commitment to preserve this identity by reviving its neglected aspects based on an informed realism and an awareness of what sound development requires.

As AbdulHamid AbuSulayman has observed, *ijtihād* thus understood is a systematic endeavor that requires ongoing effort and commitment. In a strong, mature Muslim community, *ijtihād* is the approach adopted by all sectors of scholars, researchers and thinkers. *Mujtahids* are part of the overall movement of the Muslim Ummah, in which role they embody the community's thought and agreed-upon methodology, while consensus is the outcome of a communal *ijtihād* involving numerous members of the Muslim community, each of them in keeping with his or her knowledge and understanding. Historical experience has shown that societal advancement requires, first and foremost, a willingness to gamble on people's spiritual strengths and to grant everyone a share of responsibility for shaping the future and defining the society's goals and aims. Such advancement also requires that political and social conduct be measured against clear shared moral values, including those of cooperation and solidarity. One of the most important means of guaranteeing a sound understanding of Islam

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is to adhere to the principles, beliefs and notions on which the Muslim community has agreed down the centuries, and which have served as the basis for its values, customs and traditions. Such realities go beyond a merely scholarly, and potentially contro-versial, consensus to the heart of people's day-to-day lives and the things they instinctively hold most dear.