The Idea of Al Ummah (the Kingdom of Allah) and its application in parts of the Muslim World

Al Ummah – the Muslim community – is a fundamental concept in Islam. It expresses the essential unity and therefore equality of all Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings. In the Quran it designates people to whom God has sent a prophet and who are objects of a divine plan of salvation.

The word "Ummah" is a borrowed word from the Hebrew 'Ommar'. In the Quran Al Ummah has several meanings as does its plural. It is used in a variety of ways and this makes an exact definition difficult.

Even as an individual Abraham was called "Ummah". In this case the word was probably used in the sense of an "Imam" (one who stands in front – a role model for the Muslim community in all its spiritual and secular undertakings). It may have been used in the sense of his capacity as the head of the community founded by him. The word 'Imam' is often used interchangeably with the word Khalifah for the political head of the Sunni Muslim State.

"Ummah" is also often used of a whole group or at least groups of Muslims in large communities. Sometimes the phrase is used of a group of people who have a 'messenger' to lead them into the right path – "Ummah al Nabi". It is used for individuals within the Ummah who listened to and obeyed the prophet's call. The word "Ummah" is also used for the companies of the righteous among the Al Kitab (The People of the Book – Jews and Christians).

Muhammad regarded Arabs in general and especially his Meccan countrymen as a closed "Ummah". In other words, they were a nation/people among whom there had never been a 'warner' or a prophet sent to guide them. After Muhammad's Hijrah to Medina, he broke all ties with the pagan Meccans and a new community was slowly created in Medina in which all the citizens were included. Initially this also included the Jews. All were combined into one group – the "Al Ummah".

As time went on, this Medinan community began to consist almost entirely of Muhammad's followers – i.e. the Muslims. This was in contrast to the Al Kitab with whom he had previously been in alliance. The word "Muslim" at that time was used in quite a wide sense, *"Allah is the master of everything in heaven and on earth and all are subject to him".* Sura 3:83 It is also used for the person who believed and worshipped the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, *"And Abraham enjoined his sons to do so, as did Jacob, 'Oh my sons, God has chosen religion for you so you should not die without being acquiescent'."* Sura 2:133. It is in this sense that all followers of the Lord Jesus are called 'Muslims' – *"Then when Jesus perceived atheism among them, he said, 'Who will be my allies in the way of God?' The disciples said, 'We are the allies of God. We believe in God. Bear witness that we surrender to God'."* Sura 3:52 [see also Suras 22:34 and 3:22]

Al Ummah also includes those who believe in the signs of God, *"And you cannot guide the blind out of their wandering astray. The only ones you can get to hear are those who believe in our signs and who acquiesce."* Sura 30:53 *"Who is more eloquent than one who invites God and acts with integrity saying, 'I am one of those who acquiesce to God'?"*

So Muslims are those who surrender themselves completely to God. *"Whoever submits his intention to God and is a doer of good has taken hold of the most trustworthy support as the outcome of all affairs is up to God."* Sura 31:22 Muslims never associate other deities with God. They should be faithful until death – Sura 3:102. They include all those who believe in all of the prophets and in their books, *"So if they believe, as you believe, they have already been guided; but if they turn away, then it is they alone who are separatists. God will suffice you against them and God is all hearing, all knowing."* Sura 2:137

Muhammad started to describe his Muslim followers as the Ummah laying stress on their religious pluralities. At this period he turned more and more to Mecca and the Arab centre of worship – the

Kaaba. This helped to build an Arab community and Muhammad quickly realised that there would have to be a religious foundation for this new community.

The next stage was that of the Ummah of the Arab tribes in the west and central part of Arabia. These tribes were to be the Ummah of all Muslims – not based on ethnic or tribal affiliation, but exclusively on the religious foundation that Muhammad was a prophet sent by God. After the death of Muhammad, this new Ummah spread far beyond the boundaries of Arabia and in the course of time brought together many different tribes, languages and peoples to form a much larger Ummah based purely on a common religious foundation.

Over the next several centuries of the Islamic era, an individual Muslim's rights and obligations were defined in terms of the community interest. Muhammad conceived of the Muslim community as a single "land" surrounded by a "wall" of war and combat with the "bricks" of the wall supporting each other. In the Quran it is often referred to as a distinct nation, a brotherhood bound by common obligations to a superior divine authority – Allah. *"And let it be a people among you who invite what is good and enjoin what is fair and forbid what is repugnant. It is they who thrive."* Sura 3:104

It is then declared that, *"You are the best community that has been raised from mankind. You enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency. You believe in Allah and if the people of the Scriptures had believed it would have been better for them. Some of them are believers, but most of them are evil doers and evil livers."* Sura 3:110

In this way Muhammad tried to introduce the concept of *maruf* (the known – the good) and *ihsen* (doing good). The concept of justice was hotly debated later in Islamic legal and theological schools. Muhammad also introduced the concept of *taklif* (a legal charge or obligation that is entrusted to a person or a group whatever its size). For example, prayer is a *taklif* imposed on all those who reach the age of discernment (*bulgh*). A person who meets the legal prerequisites becomes a *mukallaf*.

The basis of a Muslim community is what constitutes the Ummah – values of the community – what is right and what is wrong and through which Muslim believers gain *falah* – worldly prosperity and success in this world and the next.

In his pact with the people in Medina, Muhammad defined clearly his Ummah in distinction to the rest of the people in which all loyalties, family, tribal etc. were superseded by loyalty to the Muslim brotherhood. No social distinction was given to the brotherhood among them all except on the basis of piety and being God-fearing. *"Oh humankind, we created you from male and female and we made you into races and tribes, for you to get to know each other. The most noble of you in the sight of God are those of you who are most conscientious. And God is omniscient, fully aware."* Sura 49:13

Obviously Muhammad's intention was to form his community as a single community with the Sharia as the common rule of faith both for individuals and for their collective life together. In the early decades of Islam this sort of idea of a state prevailed. The idea of a political state – i.e. France – isn't found in the Quran nor was it common in Muhammad's time in Arabia. The Quran refers to organised authority as "belonging to God" so religion **is** politics in Islam. From Muhammad's time, Muslims believed that legal, political, military and spiritual power should be united. Citizenship was determined by religious commitment. The State was to embody that religious commitment to Islam. So Muslim constitutional law devised the word "Dar al-Islam" – the territory of Islam – the region of Muslim sovereignty, where Islamic Law prevails. "Dar al-Harb" (the house of war) were the territories bordering on "Dar al-Islam" that should be called upon to convert to Islam.

Jurists trace this concept to Muhammad who sent envoys to the Persian, Abyssinian and Byzantine emperors that they should choose between conversion (joining "Dar al-Islam") and war.

Now much of the Muslim World is divided into numerous states. The concept of the two houses of war and peace is still there, but perhaps as a future aspiration.

There is a third entity – "Dar al-Sulh" (territory of the treaty). This is a non-Muslim territory that has concluded an armistice with a Muslim government agreeing to protect Muslims in their territory. It is

something like agreements with non-Muslim friendly nations agreeing to protect Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

In some Muslim states, Jews, Zoroastrians and Christians were given 'dhimmi' status – non-Muslims, but under the protection of Muslim Law. Adult male 'dhimmis' were required to pay tax on their income and on their land. There were restrictions and regulations on their dress, their occupation and their houses, but with a small degree of self-government. Idolaters like Hindus, Buddhists and tribal/animistic religions were excluded. The areas described as "Dar al-Harb" should be conquered by Muslim States and the idolaters forced to become Muslims or be killed. Usually such areas/states quickly became Muslim states, but retained some of their former religious beliefs and practices and incorporated them into what is called 'Folk Islam'. So theoretically an Islamic State is in a constant state of war with the non-Muslim world.

This concept of the Ummah also implies the idea of the state based on religious ties since an individual by himself counted for little. Later on it was Al Farabi (died 950 A.D.) who founded an Islamic political philosophy. He addressed the question of what are the qualities of a 'virtuous state' and how to protect all the good things among the people as well as the need for control to balance the mutual duties of the rulers and the ruled. It is necessary for the 'state' to provide spiritual and moral guidance to its people. This cannot be attained without state intervention.

This concept of the "Ummah" presupposes a set of divine commands by a supreme legislator who develops its constitution. This is needed because we, as people, although we are a society, are in fact poorly behaving animals and we quickly become enemies of each other. We read in Sura 10:21 where the context is God speaking to Adam and Eve in 'the garden', *"The couple ate from it, whereupon their private parts became conspicuous to them and they began to sew together leaves from the garden to wear. Thus Adam disobeyed his Lord and went astray."*

The divine policy in the Quran is explained in this way: if God does not cause any restraints on man by the means of another, man soon becomes corrupted. In Sura 2:252 God is speaking, *"So remember me and I will remember you. And be grateful to me and do not deny me."* With this concept of society, the form of an Ummah – an Islamic state – is seen as an essential prerequisite, because the state has a reason to exert control in light of the aggressive and evil propensities of man. So the early Islamic views on sovereignty were identical with the generally known view of Islam on this issue: that God is the true sovereign and that the Prophet Muhammad was to be obeyed because he was accredited by God as his agent. The Sharia – the law of God and his prophets – is the supreme law to which all must submit without any hesitation or reservation.

After Muhammad's death an Imam/Caliph as his successor was seen as being urgently necessary. Later this became the normal practice and the appointment rested on the Muslim community. The first four successors to the title of Caliph were chosen by consensus of the Muslim community elders and they were well-known as leaders of the believers. After that time the Caliphate became hereditary – the Umayyads and then the Abbasids dominated the Caliphate until 1258 A.D.

In theory a Caliph can only be chosen by God-fearing Muslims. There should be freedom of speech, the encouragement of doing all things right and a history of forbidding all things wrong in the Muslim society and in the Islamic State. The independence of the judiciary should be upheld. If God-fearing people are absent and there is no consultative council or rightly-guided Caliph – conditions fulfilled by people like Abu Hanifa a native of Kufa in Iraq (died 767 A.D.). Abu Hanifa used reason and logic in applying rules to practical questions of life and he broadened those rules through the use of analogy and preference. He used personal reasoning and free judgement in legal interpretation. The result was respect for personal freedom. This school of law is still the most widespread in the Muslim World.

Every thinking Muslim is concerned for the Islamic State that has extended its boundaries and absorbed into itself people with various cultures, customs, rights and habits of their own. But this is the purpose of the institute of *Shura* – consultation between Muslim leaders about how each of them conducts their affairs. Essentially there are two views: the conservatives think that *Shura* must

be based on the ultimate sovereignty of God and geared towards the implication of traditional Islamic Law. Other Muslim scholars consider *Shura* to be the basis of democracy – the sovereignty of the people electing representative leaders to democratic institutions designed to act in the public interest.

Within the history of Islam there is no proper body of decision-makers such as the various Christian Councils in which trusted scholars, jurists and lawyers are brought together to deliberate and devise authentic solutions to all outstanding issues. There is no such body accredited to form a uniform law in the whole of the Muslim World. In fact no one in the Muslim World wants to see a "Caliph" of the Islamic World.

The immense wealth and power acquired by the early successors of Muhammad through the conquest of what was originally the remnants of the Roman Empire – Syria, Egypt, North Africa, the Iberian peninsula and the Persian Empire (never part of the Roman Empire) – raised the status of the Caliph to a status of great power and dignity. Such a person was often called 'The Commander of the Faithful' or the Imam.

So in Medina the foundations of Muslim theology and the systematisation of the Sharia were made. In Baghdad the Caliphate took on a new form and character. The Ulema were the formulators of Islamic theology and law in the early stages and were seen as the protectors of Islam. But as time went by, the Caliph didn't so much emphasise the religious aspects of his office by wearing the 'mantle of the prophet'. From the 9th century onwards, the direct control of the Muslim Caliphs was weakened administratively with declining power, the slow breaking up of the original spread of the Caliphate and the rise of independent kingdoms/principalities. This considerably weakened the Caliphate administratively. This weakened the Caliph as Imam of the faithful. From 946 - 1180 A.D. the Caliph was a puppet in the hands of the Seljuks, the Saffarids in eastern Iran (867- 1495 A.D.), the Samanids in Khurasan (819-1005 A.D.), the Tulunids (who ruled Egypt) and the Aghlabid dynasty in North Africa in the 9th and 10th centuries whose capital was Qiyrawan.

In 945 A.D. one family of military leaders from the area of the Caspian Sea took power in Baghdad itself – the Buwayid dynasty – a Shia Persian family. Shia festivals were celebrated – especially the 10th of Muharram. The Caliphate passed into a period of deep humiliation and Baghdad was no longer the hub of the Muslim World. So by 946-1180 A.D. the Caliph was just a puppet and the gap between the Sunni and the Shia widened. The Fatimids built Cairo as a symbol of their power and independence. The Muslim state in Spain had its capital in Cordoba. There was also a Turkish ruler in North India.

The last Caliph was put to death by the Mongols from the Steppes of Central Asia in 1258 A.D. In contrast to the Caliphate of Baghdad, the other two caliphates – in Spain and the Fatimids in Egypt based in Cairo – thrived for a period. Baghdad was captured in 1258 A.D. and the Caliph was murdered. After this there were several leaders east of Baghdad towards India who took the title 'Amir' and 'the Caliph of the Muslims'. But by the 16th century there were only two Caliphs left – the Ottoman Sultan and the Mughul Empire based largely in North India. With the fall of the Mughul Empire under the British in 1857 A.D., the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul became the greatest figure in the Muslim World. In a political sense "Christian Europe" looked on the Caliph as the true head of all Muslims – something like the Pope to Catholics.

The thoughtful Muslim – especially those who were really disturbed by the growth of European power and its influence on the Muslim World – saw Turkey and the Ottoman Empire as the only really independent power left that was of any account in the rest of the world. In 1909 A.D. the Caliph was deposed in Istanbul and Turkey passed under the control of men who had little sympathy with a radical Islamic spirit. They realised the impossibility of reconciling an autocracy with the claim of an Islamic state that it was based on divine revelation with modern constitutional government. In November 1922 Turkey left Sharia and became a Republic and in 1924 the concept of a Caliphate was abolished altogether.

With the events of World War I, the Caliphate Movement in India put their hope in the policies of Mustapha Kamal Ataturk (died 1938). After the end of World War I many Muslims began to look to Abdul al-Aziz Ibn al-Rahman al Saud (died 1953) as a possible candidate for the office of Caliph, but without any success.

In Egypt, the Salafi movement was derived from "Salaf" (pious ancestors). The movement had as its emphasis the restoration of Islamic doctrines to their original pure form as well as authentic strict adherence to the Quran and the Sunnah together with the rejection of all innovative interpretation that had accumulated over the centuries which they believed had led to stagnation. It was essentially intellectual and modern in outlook. They believed that political reform was an essential requirement for the revitalisation of the Muslim communities worldwide.

In Egypt this movement was the Muslim Brotherhood. In Pakistan the Jamaat-i-Islami began to revitalise their Muslim community. But many Muslims in India/Pakistan and in the Arab World and elsewhere were also reading various Muslim writers who advocated Islam modernising itself. It was recognised by many Muslims around the world that unless they worked together at once to re-establish the Caliphate again, Islam would fail to have the impact that it should have in the world.

The Shia also attempted to develop a position of power. This is evidenced by the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, the rise of the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Alawi in Syria, the Houthi in Yemen and many other places like southern Iraq. This was tried by the Fatimids in Egypt and the Saffavids in Iran who adopted the idea of the 'hidden Imam' that has since become a central doctrine of the Shia.

But in general, Muslims are frustrated by their current sense of powerlessness. They are waiting for help/power from above in the form of the coming 'Mahdi' from heaven. Others have tried to form their own ideal form of an Islamic state. This was recently tried by Baghdadi in the Syria/Iraq area. Thousands of Muslims went to help him – especially the more educated Muslims who hoped that this was the fulfilment of their dreams for the World of Islam and that God was really intervening to bring about their hopes and aspirations of a new Caliphate. But it collapsed recently leaving many frustrated and disillusioned.

But in all this time – from the 7th to the 21st century – there has been confusion in the combination of Islam and politics. Since the abolition of the Caliphate after World War I, different patterns have been tried. Some have prevailed and others have failed. Some Muslim states have suggested that there should be a separation between political administration and religion. This was the view of Ataturk. Now President Erdogan wants to combine them together again and form an Islamic Republic in Turkey. Others have suggested the Pakistani model. (Pakistan means 'the holy land' with its capital Islamabad 'the city of Islam'.) Many Pakistanis are trying to revive the Muslim theocracy. This has severely threatened Pakistani believers in the Lord Jesus.

In Muslim countries religious activities of any kind are seen as being political in nature. Most politicians in Muslim countries use religious words in order to gain votes. They promise to advance the idea of a theocracy. Islam is increasingly trying to persuade all its citizens in a Muslim country that Islam is the national religion and all must adhere to it or as a minimum that Islam must have a privileged position in all Muslim countries.

In contrast to their Muslim Ulema (men of knowledge – Islam) and the Kingdom of Allah, the company of believers in the Lord Jesus are a company of redeemed people where the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit together with God the Father is present and active. The company of redeemed people in the Muslim World have been purchased by the blood of the Lord Jesus on the Cross. Where two or three believers meet in His name, there His promised presence is experienced. The Kingdom of Heaven was established at His birth in Bethlehem. The Lord Jesus said, ***"The Kingdom of God is within you"***. (Lk. 17:21)

The Lord Jesus preached about the nature of the Kingdom, ***"From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near'."*** (Mt. 4:17) ***"Jesus went through all the towns***

and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the Good News of the Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness." (Mt. 9:35) This was also what the disciples did. Jesus told them, ***"As you go, preach this message: 'the Kingdom of Heaven is near'."*** (Mt. 10:7) Jesus also told them, ***"When you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe it off against you. Yet be sure of this: the Kingdom of God is near.' "*** (Lk. 10:10-11)

So the community of believers in the Lord Jesus is living between His two comings – His birth in Bethlehem together with His ministry and the demonstration of the Kingdom of God and His second coming – His glorious return to complete the establishment of the Kingdom of His Father since the Garden of Eden – the Kingdom of God in its fullest sense.

This is what Muslims the world over have been longing for and hoping to see ever since the flight to Medina! To belong to the Kingdom of God with all its aims has been the aspiration of millions of Muslims down through the centuries. Read Revelation 21:1-7 with its description of 'the Holy City' as well as Revelation 22:1-21. Is not this the vision and expectation that all believers from a Muslim background and a Christian background or any other background long to see?