

A Glance at the Qur'anic Term Milla and the Concept of an Islamic Ummah

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There are two Qur'anic terms that imply more or less the notion of a nation. One of these is milla, which is mentioned seventeen times in fifteen verses. In defining the concept of milla, Raghib Isfahani, in his dictionary of Qur'anic words and expressions, states that milla, imla and imla' are all of the same root.

The infinitive imla' meaning 'to dictate', contains the notion of something which is dictated from any divine or undivine, mighty or unmighty, holy or non-holy source. The word milla in its religious sense means a way, a path, or a cult which is dictated and presented by a divine¹ or perhaps undivine leader or group. Both cases have been exemplified in the Qur'an:

"Say, verily, my Lord has guided me to the straight way, a right and steadfast religion, the milla (religion-trod) of Ibrahim, the true in faith, and Ibrahim certainly joined not gods with Allah."²

This verse hints at Ibrahim's milla as a divine path and religion. On the other hand, we recite in the Qur'an:

"And the unbelievers said to their apostles, 'Be sure we shall derive you out of our land, or you shall return to our milla (religion).'"³

Since a divine religion like that of Ibrahim was revealed and dictated by Allah, it is called milla in the sense that it is a dictated path that should be followed by the adherents of that divine religion. Thus, milla in its most elementary concept is employed to mean path, rite or religion itself, as it may be applicable to people who follow that rite or religion.

In either case, milla in its divine sense is also attributed to the prophet or to the leader of a religion.⁴ According to the Qur'an, people are requested to recognize and practice the divine religion of the prophet Ibrahim:

"Say, Allah speaks the truth, thus, follow the religion of Ibrahim (millata Ibrahim), the sane in faith; he was not of the pagans."⁵

The milla of infidels, by contrast, is a satanic cult which is considered to contradict the divine paths of God's prophets.

Islam is an Abrahamic religion, and Muslims are to honour the milla of their father Ibrahim⁶ by following the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims then form an Abrahamic milla with especial qualifications, all of whose elements are based on divinity without taking any racial, territorial, linguistic, or other differences into consideration.

This is because, as we understand from the Qur'anic verses, there is an eternal togetherness between the nation of Islam and Islam itself. Hess Andrew C. mentions that the word millet [milla] though basically employed to mean "religion", later in Islamic history is extended to include "religious community", i.e., the community of Islam.⁷

The word 'ummah' is another Qur'anic term, referring to the religious nation of Islam. This word occurs more than forty times in the Qur'an as well as a number of other times in two other conjugations, i.e., ummatukum (your ummah) and umam (different ummahs).

The passages that contain the word ummah are so varied that its meaning cannot be rigidly defined." But is the term in its Qur'anic concept identified with what R. Paret deems as always referring to "ethical, linguistic or religious bodies of people who are the objects of the divine plan of salvation"?⁸

We may take this definition of ummah as applicable in the case of some other ethical religious nations in reality; nevertheless, it seems a problematic concept when we are concerned with the notion of a Muslim community referring to the Qur'anic passages that contain the term ummah.

Accordingly, there is no supposition of elements like language or ethnicity as playing a role in the formation of the Islamic ummah. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri says: In an Islamic state, Islam cannot be treated as a personal affair of an individual or a belief or faith of a particular group. ... It negates the idea of duality of religious and secular life as it practically exists in present-day Christianity in the form of incompatibility between church and state.⁹

Thus, an Islamic state and secular life contradict one another. In a secular state, religion has no obligatory role in providing the authority; rather, it is the people themselves who are the source of its authority. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri says: "But the authority of an Islamic state derives from the Almighty Allah ... and Islam is the basis in polity in an Islamic state; it regulates both individual and state affairs."¹⁰

Notes

1. Cf. Mutahhari, Khadamat, pp. 39-40.

2. The Qur'an, 6: 61.

3. Ibid., 15: 123.

4. Mutahhari, Khadamat, p. 40.

5. The Qur'an, 3: 95.

6. Ibid., 22: 78.

7. Hess Andrew C. The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, editor in chief John L. Esposito, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), v. 3, "MILLET", p. 107
8. R. Paret, First Encyclopaedia of Islam, "UMMA", (Leidoni: New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), v. 8, p. 1015.
9. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, Islam in Various Perspectives, (Lahore: Model Town, 1986), p. 153.
- .10. Ibid., p. 154