

Umma and Church of Christ

Translation from the German Original

Introduction

Wherever people live they develop some forms of community. The basis for the communal life of Muslims is the Islamic Umma. Christians understand themselves as members of the Body of Christ, the Church. Both forms of community are basic for the understanding of the respective religious communities. However, a comparison between these two forms brings to light significant differences between Islam and the Gospel. In this article these two important forms of community will be portrayed and the respective basic understandings, the various ways in which they express themselves, as well as some of their strengths and weaknesses will be compared.

1. The Islamic Umma

The Arabic word *umma* simply means ‘people’ or ‘community’.¹ But for Muslims this term describes specifically the worldwide community of all Muslims. If one travels to a Muslim country or has contacts with Muslims in the West, one quickly observes the community character of Islam. Whether it is the joined prayer in the mosque, the fasting during Ramadan, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims feel a strong unity.

a) *The basic understanding of the Islamic Umma*

Islam is influenced strongly by the idea of unity (*tawhid*). This is not only restricted to the understanding of God and human beings, but it also affects the understanding of the Islamic society, the community of all Muslims (in Arabic *umma*). Eberhard Troeger describes this relationship in an impressive way and shows the consequences that result for the Islamic Umma.² The understanding of the Umma is directly linked with the historical beginning of Islam. In his hometown of Mecca, Muhammad had only a small group of followers as a religious preacher. After his Hijra to Medina he succeeded, however, to develop a religious-political community. This community developed into the basic model of the Islamic Umma, the religious-political community of all Muslims. Religion and politics, mosque and government regulations are one in this community. The religious and ethical qualities of this community are praised highly in the Qur’an. Sura 3:110 for example commends the Umma: “You are the best of peoples ever raised up for mankind,” and in Sura 2:143 and 3:104 the model character of the Umma is being described.³ She is a model for a true and united community, in contrast to the many nations and communities. Sura 23:53 mentions critically these divisions: “But they have broken their religion among them into sects, each group rejoicing in what is with it (as its beliefs).”

In the development of the Islamic Umma at the time of Muhammad one can trace several variations and changes.⁴ In the beginning Muhammad regarded the Arabs in general

¹ Thomas Patrick Hughes. “Ummah.” Dictionary of Islam. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1978, p. 654. Reprint of the edition from 1885.

² Eberhard Troeger. Kreuz und Halbmond. Was Christen vom Islam wissen sollten. Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1996, p. 40ff.

³ Quotations from the Qur’an taken from Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Translation of the meanings of the noble Qur’an in the English language. Madinah: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur’an, 1404 Hijriya.

⁴ H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers. “Umma.” Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam. Ithaca (New York): Cornell University Press, 1953, p. 603f.

and his Meccan countrymen as a closed Umma. Just as the earlier messengers had been sent to the Ummas of the past, so he had now been given the task of transmitting the message of the one God to the Arab Umma, who had so far been neglected in regard to divine revelations. In the early phase in Medina Muhammad succeeded to incorporate all groups of the city in his Umma, Jews and Christians included. This first Umma was predominantly a political entity.

As soon as Muhammad was firmly established and had successfully attacked the pagan Meccans, he was able to exclude from his political-religious community those citizens of Medina who had not adopted his religion. It was mainly the Jews who were affected by this policy. As time progressed, the Umma was comprised more and more exclusively of adherents of the Islamic religion, of Muslims. Therefore the Umma of the Muslims developed in contrast to the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*). The community of all *Arabs*, which Muhammad had in mind originally, could only be accomplished later on as a community of all *Muslims*. After the death of Muhammad this Umma expanded geographically far beyond the borders of Arabia and in the course of history united many different people groups in order to build a higher unity.

b) The Question of the Leadership of the Umma

Because the Islamic Umma is held in high esteem among Muslims, Islam strives – at least in theory – for a worldwide political unity under the leadership of a single Caliph. The modern nation states are criticised because they are seen to be the result of the policy of Western colonial powers which should be overturned as soon as possible.⁵ But according to Oliver Roy, a well-known French Professor for political science and an authority on Islamism, Islamic groups that want to establish the political rule of a Caliph are far removed from the actual political reality. The interests of the different governments are too diverse. Therefore the newer Islamist groups emphasize the personal lifestyle of the individual Muslim even though one cannot hope for a single state under the leadership of a Caliph.⁶

How high the hurdles are on the way to a political unity of all Muslims can be seen in the example of the Arab World. The difficulty begins already with the definition of what exactly is to be understood as ‘Arab World,’ as Herbert Popp aptly shows.⁷ Is it mainly the Arabic language, the ethnic belonging or the religion of Islam which binds this geographical region together? Each one of these common denominators has its problems. Prepared by the movement of the *nahda* (rebirth) in the 19th century, of pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism, the birth of the Arab League in 1945 was the most prominent attempt to unite the interests of the Arab countries on a political level. But the Arab League acknowledges the national sovereignty of the individual states and does not make any attempt to introduce the rule of a Caliph. Popp describes the results of the League on the way towards an Arab unity as so far failed.⁸

In this connection it is interesting to note the possibilities which the internet opens for sharpening the identity of the worldwide Muslim community. For example, the title of the homepage of *islamicity.com*, an influential group of Islamic activists in California, is called ‘Islam and the global Muslim eCommunity.’⁹ A recent phenomenon is the many websites of individual Muslims who connect to the ‘virtual Umma’ through their discussion contributions about various Islamic subjects. This tendency towards individualisation is particularly strong

⁵ Mervyn Hiskett. *The course of Islam in Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994, p. 42f, 166.

⁶ Oliver Roy. *Globalised Islam – the search for a new Ummah*. London: Hurst and Company, 2004, p. 177, 237f.

⁷ Herbert Popp. *Die Arabische Welt – was ist das eigentlich?* In Günter Meyer (edt). *Die Arabische Welt im Spiegel der Kulturgeographie*. Mainz: Zentrum für Forschung zur Arabischen Welt (ZEFAW) und Geographisches Institut der Universität Mainz, 2004, p. 8-29.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 13.

⁹ Online in the Internet www.islamicity.com [27.9.2007].

in Islamist groups.¹⁰ One emphasizes the worldwide ‘virtual Umma’ in order to spread one’s own convictions as universally applicable, without accepting any official teaching authority that should be part of a worldwide Umma.

But it is not only the radical Muslims who are connected with each other worldwide through the internet. The official representatives of Islam also make use of this medium, as e.g. the Open Letter of 138 Islamic scholars shows which was sent via the internet to all Christian leaders worldwide.¹¹

In his study about the tension between the divine power, including those who represent it on earth, on the one side, and the cultural and social powers on the other side, Johan Christoph Bürgel describes a basic law that becomes apparent in Islam again and again.¹² It is the sharing in the power of God through submission. This is a brief interpretation of the word ‘Islam’ which can mean ‘submission’ as well as ‘obtaining salvation.’ And salvation in Islam always means to partake in the power that is administered by the community of God, the Umma. This shows that besides the religious aspect, the concept of the Umma is always interested in executing political and societal power.

c) The Islamic Umma - Hope for the World?

Muslims often present the Islamic Umma as the hope for the world. They emphasize that the primary and overriding identification of a Muslim is foremost with the Umma which is welded together by a common faith and ethics. This is e.g. the line of reasoning in the popular introduction to Islam by Abdul Wahid Hamid, an influential British Muslim from Trinidad.¹³ He claims that this identification is more important than all family, cultural or ethnic relationships. Through this the barriers of language, culture, social and ethnic belonging can be overcome. Hamid emphasizes that racism has no place in the Islamic Umma. With examples from the early times of Islam he proves how Muhammad had already accepted non-Arabs into his community, e.g. Salmaan from Persia, Suhayb who was considered to be a Greek, and Bilal who was an African.¹⁴

There are many testimonies of Muslims from all around the world, who returned from pilgrimage to Mecca, deeply impressed by the ethnic variety of the Muslims who gathered there.¹⁵ On the Internet Muslims enthusiastically share experiences in Mecca.¹⁶ The visible experience of community is not only felt during the pilgrimage, but also during the communal prayer and mainly through common fasting during the month of Ramadan. The British scholar Islam Montgomery Watt is convinced that one of the biggest strengths of the Islamic faith lies in the emphasis on racial harmony:

“Undoubtedly one of the outstanding successes of Islam has been its creation of a great community of many races, in which there has been a genuine sense of brotherhood. The brotherhood of different races may never have been perfect, for there are occasional traces of race consciousness in medieval writings; but there was

¹⁰ Roy, *ibid.*, p. 183f.

¹¹ A common word, online in the Internet www.acommonword.com [25.04.2008]; see also the discussions in regard to this letter, e.g. on the website www.barnabasfund.org/News/archives/text.php?ID_news_items=381 [25.04.2008].

¹² Johann Christoph Bürgel. *Allmacht und Mächtigkeit – Religion und Welt im Islam*. München: C.H. Beck, 1991, p. 6.

¹³ Abdul Wahid Hamid. *Islam the natural way*. Maraisburg (South Africa): Asmara Distributors, 1993, p. 108. Hamid was born in Trinidad and is a writer, editor, educationalist, teacher and community activist. He was influential in the founding of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 125.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 127-129.

¹⁶ E.g. Sister Aisha. *Aisha’s journey continues...Hajj 2005*. Online in the Internet <http://www.sisteraishah.com/myreturnfromhajj.html> [27.09.2007].

certainly never any of the racial animosity which is found in occidental countries in the present century.”¹⁷

Is it not obvious therefore that with the help of Islam many tensions of our world could be overcome? It would be nice to think so, but unfortunately this ideal is countered by a different reality. One problem is that even among Muslims there are severe tensions, some related to ethnic issues. The conflict in Darfur (Sudan), in which African Muslims are oppressed by Arab Muslims, is but one example of this. Migrant workers from the Sudan, Egypt and other countries complain about the rude treatment they receive from their brothers in faith in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. In some countries Muslims do not want to pray in the mosque under an Imam who comes from a despised ethnic group.¹⁸ In addition to these ethnic tensions there is the deep religious division between Shiites and Sunnis as well as between the modernists and the fundamentalists – tensions that are not only expressed verbally but also by using violence.

A different problem lays in the tendency towards a strict political and social uniformity which, especially in fundamentalist countries like Iran, is a result of the strong emphasis on the Umma. From the ideal of unity (*tawhid*) with the Creator the unity of the society is being deducted. An example for this can be seen in the statement of Sheikh Ragheb Harb, one of the founders of the Hizbollah (Party of Allah) in Lebanon, that the individual dissolves in the community and therefore loses his/her identity.¹⁹ In Shia fundamentalism this line of reasoning is continued to the extent that the individual is encouraged to put to death one's own self, to kill the 'You' in oneself – which is nothing else than Satan – and by doing so to save oneself. It is imperative to do everything according to the rules without asking questions.²⁰

The close interweaving of the Islamic community with Islam itself – in family, politics, and social relationships – makes it unthinkable for most Muslims to convert to another religion. This means that there is actually no real freedom of religion.²¹ Bassam Tibi, a German Muslim Professor of political science with Syrian background, describes the tension that exists between the right to freely choose one's religion and the Sharia law which does not allow a free and unhindered choice of one's faith. Non-Muslim minorities which live in Islamic countries often live under a permanent tension and are required to act with caution.²²

In his excellent comparison between the Muslim and the Christian community, Phil Parshall points out even more problematic areas of the Islamic Umma. The tendency to fanaticism is being fuelled by teaching about the rewards for martyrs and therefore Muslims are being encouraged to kill the enemies of Islam. The Islamic community tries to prevent internal criticism and therefore often closes the door for constructively dealing with important issues. Finally the Islamic Umma tends to care only for its own people, which to a certain extent fosters self-centeredness.²³

¹⁷ W. Montgomery Watt. *What is Islam?* New York: Longman Group, 1968, p. 233.

¹⁸ E.g. Arab Muslims in Northern Sudan who do not accept Muslims from the African ethnic groups in Southern Sudan as equals. This has been reported to me personally from Southern Sudanese.

¹⁹ Ragheb Harb. *Din al-Islam aqwa*. Beirut, 1983, p. 22; quoted in Amir Taheri. *Morden für Allah – Terrorismus im Auftrag der Mullahs*. München, 1993, p. 196. Sheikh Ragheb Harb initiated the resistance against the Israeli invasion in Lebanon as a young Shia cleric in 1982. He was killed in 1985 by the Israeli secret service.

²⁰ Harb, *ibid*, p. 97; quoted in Taheri, *ibid*, p. 196.

²¹ Martin Goldsmith. *Community and controversy: Key causes of Muslim resistance*. *Missiology* 4/1976, p. 317-323, 318.

²² Bassam Tibi. *Im Schatten Allahs: Der Islam und die Menschenrechte*. Düsseldorf: Ullstein, 1994, p. 134ff.

²³ Phil Parshall. *Beyond the mosque – Christians within Muslim community*. Grand Rapids: Baker, p. 133-136.

It becomes obvious, therefore, that there exists quite a rift between the claim of the Islamic Umma and reality, a rift that many Muslims are painfully aware of. Especially the younger Islamist movement relates to an imaginary Umma beyond ethnic identity, race, language, culture and geographical boundaries. But real life looks different. No country exists in which state and society are regulated *only* by the true basics of Islam.²⁴ The desire to present the Umma as the hope for the world therefore turns out to be Utopia which cannot really solve problems.

2. The Church of Jesus Christ

How does the situation appear in respect to the Church of Jesus Christ? What basic understanding determines the living together of its members and how does this work out in practical life?

a) The Basic Understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ

The foundation for any Christian community is found in the words of Jesus: “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:20). The Church of Jesus Christ “is a community of people gathered around Jesus, committed to him, worshipping him, and ready to serve his kingdom in the world.”²⁵ Wayne Grudem defines the Church of Christ as “the community of all true believers for all times.”²⁶

The dynamic unity of those who believe in Jesus Christ and who follow him is described in the Bible in various pictures. The most important one is the picture of a living organism, the ‘Body of Christ’ (1 Cor 12:27). This picture describes the living relationships between people who are influenced by mutual encouragement and building-up. These people are connected with Christ, the ‘Head’ of the Body.²⁷ Jesus himself spoke about the ‘Kingdom of God’ or the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ (Mk 4:26; Mt 5:19). The Greek word for the Church of Christ, *ekklesia* (congregation, assembly), makes it clear that the focus is on a group of people who live in community. In contrast to the people of God in the Old Testament, this community consists not only of Jews, but of people from different ethnic backgrounds.²⁸ This became immediately apparent on the Day of Pentecost when people from different countries and languages came to faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2). Important for the understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ is also that individual local congregations are not only seen as a part of the whole Church but as an expression of the whole Church.²⁹ Each small or big local church represents the worldwide universal Church and is fully ‘Church of Christ’.

b) The Relationship of the Church of Christ to Political Society

In contrast to Islam, the Church of Christ does not understand herself as a socio-political entity. According to the teaching of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is not from this world (John 18:36). It does not strive for political rule but rather works in secret. Through the principles of this kingdom God’s love and mercy are introduced into a hateful and vengeful world. The Church of Christ is not identical with the Kingdom of God – the rule of God comprises the whole world and is not restricted to the Church – but through the Church God transforms this

²⁴ Roy, *ibid.*, p. 272, 288.

²⁵ Howard A. Snyder. „The church as community: Subculture or counter-culture?“ In *Christianity Today*, 8. April 1983, 29; quoted in Parshall, *ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁶ Wayne Grudem. *Systematic theology: An introduction to biblical doctrine*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, p. 853.

²⁷ Millard J. Erickson. *Christian theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985, p. 853.

²⁸ Dean S. Gilliland. *Pauline theology and mission practice*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, p. 183f.

²⁹ Erickson, *ibid.*, p. 1033.

world and brings more and more people under his rule. “The church, then, in spite of its many weaknesses, is called to be a sign of the kingdom of God among non-believers. This kingdom transcends every cultural and ethnic boundary. It refuses to be owned by any religious or political system. It cannot be institutionally bound.”³⁰

The Church of Christ is called to act as salt and light into the society in which she lives (Mt 5:13-16). How the Church should engage in social and community issues and to what extent this includes political involvement is lively debated within the worldwide Christian community.³¹ However, despite different convictions regarding the involvement of Christians in politics, there is agreement that the kind of intertwined connection between ecclesial and political power, as it existed through long periods of church history, does not correspond to the nature of the Church of Christ and has therefore not been justified nor is it justified today. Christians have not always tried to work as salt and light into the world. The all too human tendency has been to move towards an institutionalisation of the Church and striving for political power.³² These kinds of developments cast a shadow over the nature of the Church of Christ as it is described in the Bible and as it corresponds with the will of Jesus Christ.

c) Challenges for the Church of Christ

The Church of Jesus Christ, particularly in the Western World, faces many challenges. One is the tendency to live as disciples individually. This is in contrast to the nature of the Church. Discipleship can only be lived in community with other Christians. The picture of the body and the individual parts (1 Cor 12) clearly shows this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has aptly stated this fact in his classic about discipleship: “Every one enters into discipleship alone, but no one remains alone.”³³ For some time now a worldwide movement has existed which emphasises this community aspect of the Church of Christ in a new way. In many countries Christians do not concentrate so much energy on meetings in official church buildings, but rather focus on living out the life of their congregation in small groups in private homes.³⁴ Such home churches are particularly relevant for Christians in Muslim countries where e.g. converts cannot meet publicly.

If Muslims observe the Christian Church and realize that the members live out their faith only individually, they will find that strange. Due to their understanding of the Islamic Umma, Muslims have a stronger awareness for the importance of community. For this reason the Christian Church is challenged to live out her faith in such a way, that it is seen as being relevant for society.

In his fascinating comparison of the spread of Islam and of the Christian faith, the Scottish church historian Andrew Walls makes an interesting statement. Both religious communities have made great geographical advances. But Islam has been more successful in retaining the allegiance of these areas and people groups. “It is as though there is some inherent fragility, some built-in vulnerability, in Christianity.”³⁵ In the history of church and

³⁰ Parshall, *ibid.*, p. 165f.

³¹ See e.g. the following titles: David Bosch. *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission.* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991. Erhard Berneburg. *Das Verhältnis von Verkündigung und sozialer Aktion in der evangelikalen Missionstheorie – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lausanner Bewegung für Weltevangalisation (1974-1989).* Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1997. Bryant L. Myers. *Walking with the poor – principles and practices of transformational development.* Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999.

³² Parshall, *ibid.*, p. 166.

³³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Werke: 4. Nachfolge.* Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008, p. 87, 95.

³⁴ William A. Beckham. *The second reformation: Reshaping the church for the 21st century.* Houston: Touch Publications, 1997. Wolfgang Simson. *Houses that change the world: The return of the house churches.* Waynesboro: Authentic, 1998.

³⁵ Andrew Walls. *The cross-cultural process in Christian history.* Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002, p. 29-32.

mission periods of advance take turns with periods of decline. Discipleship of Jesus Christ cannot be lived as an external following of religious traditions, but demands a personal spirituality and dedication again and again.

These brief thoughts make it obvious that both the Islamic Umma as well as the Church of Jesus Christ are facing huge challenges. Christians also have to fight against their weaknesses and many congregations are not seen as being attractive for the people around them. Both religious communities have realities that do not always do justice to ideals.

3. A Comparison between the Islamic Umma and the Church of Christ

After we have described the Islamic Umma and the Church of Christ according to each one's self understanding, in this last part we want to list some aspects of the communal and ritual life of each community and compare them with each other. This comparison is in the form of a table. From many details I just want to highlight a few.

Regarding communal life, the emphasis in the Islamic Umma is laid on the socio-political community and society (group, village, nation). The legal political dimension plays an important role, something that can be seen clearly e.g. in the movement of political Islam. Muslims who are influenced by fundamentalism want to introduce Sharia as the basis for the law of the country; they work towards legal regulations for a society that is shaped clearly by Islam. Muslim minorities (e.g. in Europe or Africa) are campaigning for more legal rights.

This focus on legal and political aspects is not emphasised so much, or even not at all, in the Church of Christ. Here the emphasis is on the life of the congregation, on attractive meetings and a stronger spiritual life of the individual Christian, perhaps enabled through small groups. Christian movements of renewal and revival usually do not have a political agenda, but call for a deeper dedication to Christ and a stronger missionary involvement. The question of course arises whether this approach is basically healthy and in line with biblical principles, or whether the Church of Christ should not be more involved in politics.

In regard to the ritual life (the religious meetings) it can be observed that in the Islamic Umma prayer is "performed" according to strict regulations, the individual believer has no personal contributions and participates only as part of the group. In a mosque no music is used (if one does not count the melodious call of the muezzin as music), no songs, and in the daily prayer times as well as in the meetings on Fridays no joy is expressed. Everything is performed in a sober atmosphere. To this the Church of Christ presents a stark contrast. The individual believers take part in the service, either through musical contributions, announcements or readings. In congregations that are less liturgical, church members are encouraged to give a brief report about a personal experience or to contribute in another way to the programme. There is a variety of worship styles which have developed in the different denominations. Church services are meant to encourage everybody and in many church services (unfortunately not in all) the joy about what God has given as a gift is freely expressed.

Aspect	Islamic Umma	Church of Christ
Start of membership	through birth, or conversion (reciting the Shahada in front of witnesses)	through voluntary decision, external sign is baptism
External perception	is visible, countable	churches can be counted, but the universal Body of Christ is an invisible entity
Relationship to politics	indispensable condition for the life of Umma, strives for Islamic government/state	can survive under any political system
Relationship to socio-political issues and problems	wants to influence and govern all areas of public life	is salt and light, wants to transform society, but not govern it
Government, leadership structures	based on fixed laws which are understood as divine authority, many practical regulations for every day life (e.g. about hygiene)	shaped by the basic values of the Kingdom of God, mainly spiritual principles, few detailed regulations about practical issues
Participation of the individual	active according to natural abilities, e.g. as politician, teacher or artisan	active according to natural and spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit, one is serving others
Participation in religious services / meetings	participation in strictly defined ritual prayers	believers participate in manifold ways, through readings, testimonies, singing, musical contributions, dramas, etc.
Celebration of religious festivals	festivals are being 'observed' through special prayers in the mosque, usually attended by men only; no expression of joy in the mosque; afterwards joyful social celebration within the extended family without further spiritual activities	religious festivals are remembrances of what God has done, special services for whole families; expression of joy and thankfulness
Membership	no formal membership in local mosque needed, except sometimes in special mosque societies; participation in prayer is expected, but it does not matter in which mosque; children are usually not taking part in the ritual life of the community, women only sometimes and then in separate areas	local congregations represent the worldwide Body of Christ, usually membership in a particular church/congregation; families and especially children are incorporated
Welfare activities	only members of the Umma benefit from the income of Zakat payments; Dawah activities aim at converting non-Muslims	deeds of love are exercised in regard to all people; in a missionary situation they are regarded as symbols of God's love, but not as a 'bait' for conversions
Emphasis	on external organisational unity of the Umma (political)	on spiritual unity, the Body of Christ exists in a diversity of churches and denominations
Objectives, efforts, tendencies	to come to the top of society and to achieve the highest level of political influence	that many people will come into a living relationship with God and live according to his principles

Reinhold Strähler (born 1959) is the leader of the international Team of Life Challenge Africa in Kenya. His desire is that Christians gain a better understanding of Muslims and are able to talk about their faith in an appropriate way. He has lived for 16 years in the Middle East and is sent out by Evangelical Middle East Ministries (EMO) in Wiesbaden.