

Community of Believers

Church and Churches

The devout followers of Jesus during his lifetime are referred to in the Gospels by two different terms denoting two different categories, namely "apostles" and "disciples." The Greek word *apostolos* means one who has been sent forth; an equivalent English word derived from Latin would be "emissary." In the Gospel narrative, this term is applied specifically to twelve men, whose names are cited with some variations. The term "disciple" derives from a Latin word meaning pupil or apprentice and is used to translate the Greek word *mathetes* having the same meaning. This term is applied to a large number of persons, both female and male, who eagerly attended to Jesus' teaching and embraced his message. The term "disciple" is used only by the Gospel writers, whereas "apostle" remains conspicuous in the writings of St. Paul and others.

After Jesus' death, his disciples were identified with those who believed in his resurrection and therefore in the permanent validity of his message including his promise to return. The apostles were presented as leaders of this community of believers. Two of their original number, Peter and James, enjoyed special prestige. So did the new convert, Paul, who claimed extraordinary status as an apostle personally authorized by miraculous revelation from Jesus.

Those who would later be called Christians originally called one another simply "sisters" and "brothers," to emphasize their sense of spiritual kinship secured by a bond of family love. They identified themselves as followers of "the Way," namely the spiritual path that leads to God's Kingdom. Initially they were concentrated in Jerusalem and Galilee, regarded (by both themselves and others) as a distinct variety of Jews. They held meetings, accompanied by ritual observances, mainly in private homes.

The social setting of early Christianity was transformed by two factors. First the Roman devastation of Jerusalem made surviving Jews of all kinds, including Christians, into refugees, seeking safety and livelihood in every part of the Mediterranean world. And second, the development of Christianity's belief and practice effectively dissolved its ties with Judaism, opening the way to Gentile converts who rapidly constituted the vast majority, while permanently alienating and deeply antagonizing Jews.

The scattering of Christian believers made two things indispensable. First local organization was needed by each community, and second, wider organization, with broader authority was required to ensure both mutual assistance and unanimous belief.

The issues involved often appear in the writings of St. Paul, which record both his wide travels and his efforts to develop a uniform theological orthodoxy in response to a variety of controversies. Paul's impressive achievements had the unintended effect of causing factions which opposed his views to go their separate ways, thus introducing that theological fragmentation of Christianity which would never cease, with its claims and

counter-claims of orthodoxy, heresy, and schism. Often, these theological rivalries formed political alliances and erupted in polemics and outright persecution.

The identity of a Christian community was expressed chiefly in worship and belief.

The most important religious ceremonies were Baptism, in which the ritual washing of a new member signified her or his participation in the salvation brought by Jesus Christ's

death and resurrection, and the Eucharist, a ritual meal, patterned on Jesus' last supper before he died, expressing thanksgiving, shared spiritual nourishment, and anticipation

of the fulfillment of salvation when Jesus would return. These religious meetings were accompanied by common prayer, professions of belief formulated as creeds, and readings from revered documents some of which would constitute the exclusively Christian part of the Bible, called the New Testament. More obscure are the beginnings of penitential ritual, seeking through the Church forgiveness of sins committed after baptism.

The world-wide organization of Christianity was facilitated by the political organization of the Roman Empire, which in the fourth century made Christianity its official religion. The geography of religious officialdom closely followed that of governmental officialdom, and the most influential religious leaders tended to be located in the Empire's most important cities. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that the city of Rome came to excel others in religious prestige, especially given the tradition that the first Christian to preside, and die as a martyr, in Rome was Peter.

As Christianity became better organized, it became customary to submit major issues to meetings, or "councils" of those who presided in major cities. Some of these gatherings were regional, but the fourth century saw the first church-wide or "ecumenical" councils, convened in Asia Minor, with imperial encouragement, to settle disputes that troubled the entire community. The main question concerned Jesus Christ's relationship to the God whom he called "the Father who sent" him. The conclusion, that Christ is of "the same nature" as God the Father, opened the way to many related questions, including that of the relationship of the Holy Spirit whom Christ sent. Decisions of subsequent councils which resolved these issues, are reflected in the dogma of three Divine Persons having one divine nature, which became part of the Creed. Although most traditional Christian churches still acknowledge the authority of the first four or seven of these councils, only Roman Catholics concede the same authority to twenty-one of them. Catholics maintain that they must be convened by a Pope and cannot be appealed to against a pope.

Certain terms for Christian religious officials already appear in the New Testament. Three categories are frequently mentioned. *Episkopoi* (literally supervisors), who would later be called bishops, presided over local communities. *Presbyteroi* (literally elders), who would later be (misleadingly) called priests, were respected counselors. And *diakonoi* (literally servants), called deacons, seem to have been entrusted with practical tasks and arrangements. The term translated as "church" was the Greek word *ekklesia*, which

means a convocation or assembly. It was applied primarily to the local community of Christians, but the term was also extended to the universal, trans-temporal membership of what was sometimes called the Body of Christ, to emphasize its vital organic unity.

Although the Middle Ages are often proposed as the time when Christian Church and social and civic society joined to constitute Christendom, under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome, not even that time saw anything like perfect unity. Indeed, the Middle Ages saw a permanent break between Eastern and Western Christianity. Earlier "heresies" sometimes found new homes in the theologies of Eastern churches. The persistence of dissent in the West is attested by such strenuous measures as Crusades and Inquisitions created to detect and eliminate it.\

But the most radical fragmentation of the Christian Church came with the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic reactions to it. Though many factors, including many perfectly secular ones, contributed to the Reformation, the principal ones were religious, theological, and by no means trivial. Some of the most important issues pertained directly to what the Church was and was not. For zealous Protestants, the contrast they perceived between the Church of the sixteenth century and that of the first Christian centuries was grotesque and scandalous. The Church they wished to reform seemed to them an arrogant theocracy, encrusted with superstition, detached from the message of the Gospel, cynically exploiting the gullibility of the laity. Accordingly, Protestant Church life typically sought simplicity of style, focused on unimpeded access to the Gospel. Clerical hierarchy was abolished. The family in their own home became the essential worshipping community. The Bible was the ultimate resort, available to all, its interpretation open to private judgment. "Salvation by faith" (rather than by meritorious works or ecclesiastical favors) became the central dogma.

In the centuries that followed, not only did the Catholic and Protestant communities remain apart, but Protestantism was fractured into mutually antagonistic communities. Religious differences were conscripted by political rivalries, and exploited in bloody wars. During the eighteenth century Enlightenment, this irrational violence alienated many thinkers from church membership, and encouraged political reforms intended, as in the U.S. Constitution, to detach government from the special interests of Churches.

In the twentieth century, liberalism made itself increasingly felt in Christian churches, which viewed their recent bloody history with moral revulsion, while becoming gradually aware that they had little to fear and much to learn from one another. These attitudes generated a world-wide Ecumenical Movement that fostered dialogue to advance shared values. Among Protestants, the World Council of Churches provided effective organization. In the Catholic Church, whereas the first Vatican Council in the nineteenth century had emphasized papal prerogatives and Protestant errors, in the next century the Second Vatican Council disowned the rationale for persecution and political privileges. Subsequently, theological collaboration thrived, mutual indebtedness was generously acknowledged, and inter-denominational encounters stimulated Christian piety.

At present, there are strongly contentious views among Christians concerning recent ecumenical developments. For some, they threaten to attenuate Christian belief into trivial religiosity, draining the Gospel of its severity, and reducing dogmas to symbolic approximations. For others, they promise to keep Christian faith in touch with Christian love, tempering conviction with humility, and enabling believers once again to think of one another and deal with one another as "sisters" and "brothers."

Umma - Sunni Muslim View

Dr. Adil Ozdemir

In Islam, the idea of *Umma*, or community of believers, has both sociological and spiritual aspects. It is both a political and a religious entity. More than anything, it is a shared identity for over a billion Muslims today from every continent. Over the centuries, this metaphysical and religious identity has inspired and attracted millions of Muslims, giving a sense of strength, meaning, direction and unity. The *umma* is unlike any narrow political party, spiritual faction, social club or esoteric grouping. Rather, it encompasses and goes beyond these inclinations, forming a broader community that is tolerant of diversity and variety. Philosophers, mystics, politicians, and scientists, as well as Sunnis, Shiites, Kharijites, and Mutezilites, have all found room within the *umma*.

In the Qur'an, the idea of *umma* recurs frequently as a covenantal community of faith. According to the Qur'an, God made a covenant with Adam, promising salvation, security, prosperity and survival to nations that keep their word of obedience to God and do His will. Over time, the prophets and their various communities have renewed this relationship by recognizing and serving God. The basic characteristic of a covenantal community is faith in God, who is good, loving, caring, just and reliable.

The Qur'an stresses that the prophet Muhammad believed his call was to all nations and cultures, regardless of race or ethnicity. The Qur'an clearly renounces any idea of chosenness, election, or privilege for a particular nation or community. If a community fails to observe its covenant with God, God is free to renounce a relationship and make a covenant with another community on terms that are fair, just, good and kind. Yet the Qur'an is also clear that God's mercy and love surpass His anger and that God is open to His creatures, desiring to forgive their sins if they turn to Him in repentance. In this relationship God acts out of nobility rather than revenge.

Although the Qur'an speaks mainly about a universal call to all of humanity, it also addresses a particular community of believers who respond to Muhammad's call and follow the message he received and recorded in the Qur'an. This community is also called the Community of Muhammad (*Ummat Muhammad*) and the community of submission and surrender onto God (*Islam*). It is characterized as a moderate community, freed from extremes in faith and action. According to the Qur'an, it is the most virtuous community created for humanity, one that loves God more than any other community.

The deep love between the *umma* and the prophet connects every member of the *umma* as a family of faith in God. The word *umma* itself is a noun derived from the root word *amma*, meaning to lead, which is also connected to the term *imam*, or leader. Thus, *umma* and *Ummat Muhammad* have connotations of love, affection and care between the prophet as leader and the members of the Muslim *umma*. Every Muslim, male or female, young or old, knows that the prophet sought more than anything else his *umma*, and Muslims believe that the soul of the prophet continues to live today to enlighten, guide and lead the *umma*.

Muslims also believe that every community will be resurrected with their prophets ahead of them to intercede for their mistakes and shortcomings. In Muslim imagery of the resurrection day, the prophet Muhammad is depicted as imploring Allah until the last member of his community is forgiven and taken to the mercy of God and to paradise. The prophet is pictured crying out to God "I want my community, 'Ummatee, Ummatee.'"

The prophet describes several characteristics of his *umma*:

- Only true believers are brothers and sisters.
- Individuals may not enter the faith until they desire for their brothers and sisters what they desire for themselves.
- Believers are like unto an edifice made of bricks, where each brick links to and supports the others.
- Believers are also likened unto members or organs of a body. When a member is hurt, the others feel it.

The relationship among the members of the *umma* can be described as a deep-rooted consciousness, essential to and also fruit of faith. The prophet stressed the strong ties between members of the *umma* so much that these ties became part of Muslim law (*shariah*) as a mutual right and responsibility of each member. The prophet said he was warned by God about responsibilities toward neighbors so often that he thought God would make it law for Muslims to make one another their heirs. He emphasized that those who cheat Muslims are not of the *umma*, nor are those who go to sleep with a full stomach while their neighbors go hungry. Essentially, the Qur'an and the prophet's words (*hadiths*) are about feeding the poor, helping the wronged, the needy, the weak, the sick, widows, orphans, guests, the homeless, and strangers.

Abu Bakr, the first Caliph (the official political leader of the *umma*) and the prophet's closest friend, expressed Islam's emphasis on justice with these words: "Those of you who are wronged are strong with me until your rights are guaranteed, while those of you who do wrong are weak with me until you return the rights of the wronged." Abu Bakr is also known for his famous statement, "I declare war against those who refuse to pay the due of the poor, the *zakat*, no matter how small of an amount it is." Omar, the second Caliph, asserted that justice is the foundation of sovereignty. He cared so much for the poor and the weak that he called himself responsible for the goat killed by the wolf on the shores of Tigris, and for babies who cry out of hunger.

Muslims believe that the office and spirituality of the prophet, while given by God and not acquired by human effort, is shared by all members of the *umma*. There is no privileged family or class among the *umma*, and the use of spiritual, mystical, legal and political authority given to the prophet is an inheritance of all Muslims. All Muslims have equal share in and access to this legacy and authority. Neither the *ulama* (Muslim legal scholars), nor Muslim spiritual leaders have priority or superiority in spirituality over the simplest Muslim. This is the predominant view particularly among the mainly Sunni Schools of Islam, although there are varying degrees of spiritual hierarchy for the imams of the various Shiite Schools of Islam.

The *Umma* – A Shi'i View

Dr. Liyakat Takim

Umma is seen as a spiritual, non-territorial community distinguished by the shared beliefs of its members. Referring to the notion of a community of believers, the term *umma* occurs sixty four times in the Qur'an. Most studies of the Qur'anic concept of *umma* assert that the term designates a people to whom God sends a prophet, or a people who are objects of a divine plan of salvation. In Qur'anic usage, however, the connotations of community and religion do not always converge, and the word has multiple and diverse meanings.

In several instances *umma* in the Qur'an refers to an unrestricted group of people (28.23). The term can also mean a specific religion or the beliefs of a certain group of people (43.22—23), or an exemplar or model of faith, as in the reference to Abraham as an "*umma*, obedient to God" (16.120). *Umma* also refers to the followers of prophets ("For every *umma* there is an apostle," 10.47); to a group of people adhering to a specific religion ("To each one of you We have appointed a law and a pattern of life. If God had pleased He could surely have made you all a single *umma*," 5.48); to a smaller group within the larger community of adherents (3.113); to the followers of Prophet Muhammad who are charged with a special responsibility ("And thus We have made you a medium *umma* that you may be the bearers of witness to the people and that the Apostle may be a bearer of witness to you," 2.143); or to a subgroup of these followers ("So let there be an *umma* among you who may call to good, enjoy what is right and forbid the wrong, and these it is that shall be successful," 3.104).

Given the centrality of the concept of the *umma* in the Qur'an, Shi'is believe that salvation is interwoven with the fulfillment of one's duties to the *umma*. In fact, Shi'i *hadith* literature is replete with traditions from the Prophet and Imams exhorting the believers to fulfill their social responsibilities to their Muslim brethren. However, given the fact that the Shi'is are in a minority within the larger Muslim *umma*, what is the duty of the Shi'is towards the *umma*? Shi'is are taught that the unity of the *umma* is more important than the interests of individual members. Thus, in order to preserve the unity of the *umma*, the first Shi'i Imam 'Ali b. Abu Talib (d. 661) chose not to fight for his rights when, the Shi'is believe, they were usurped by the first three caliphs. It was to preserve the unity of the *umma* that 'Ali, like the other Imams, cooperated with rather than defied the Caliphs.

The unity of the *umma* is important because the survival of the Muslim political entity is tied to it. Hence, preserving the unity of the *umma* has become a religious rather than political obligation. The notion of the *umma* as a legal rather than political entity is evident in Shi'i jurisprudence where a distinction is drawn between religious obligations that fall on individual shoulders (like the performance of daily prayers and fasting in Ramadhan) and those that the *umma* shoulders collectively. Thus, if any member of the *umma* dies, whether Shi'i or Sunni, Shi'is are obligated to bury the body unless someone else buries it.

Historically, living within an *umma* that was sometimes hostile posed challenges to the Shi'i community. The Shi'is recognized the power but not the authority of the Sunni caliphate. Since legitimate authority was confined to the Shi'i community under the leadership of the Shi'i Imams, the Shi'is gradually became autonomous and independent of the wider Sunni community. The Shi'i community was not to be associated with the actual political entity. As the Sunni state fell short of the Shi'i vision of the ideal, the tension between the two was resolved by the coexistence of the ideal Shi'i community within the real, that is, a distinct community which had its own ritual practices, accepted the authority of a separate leader, and transmitted its own distinct legal and theological traditions, existed in the midst of a hostile Sunni majority. Stated differently, as the ideal *umma* could not be actualized, it was to exist within the real.

Historically, the Shi'i community existed as a minority within the larger Islamic polity. In a sense, the Shi'is constituted a community within a community, preserving religious and communal independence from the political structure, and maintaining autonomy from the *de facto* regime.

Points of Agreement:

Both Muslims and Christians agree on the centrality of the community in their religious life. Christianity and Islam both exist as community religions, not as collections of individuals. While it is true that in each religion persons are saved (or not saved) individually, they are nonetheless saved within a community, not as separate individuals.

In each religion, the religious community—*Umma* in Islam, 'Church' in Christianity—overrides any other community of which the person is a member. So the allegiance owed to the religious community is greater than that owed to the family, to the tribe, or to the nation. Consequently Muslims call other members of the community "brothers" and sisters," as if the religious community has become the family. Christians also used to do this in the early church. Thus Jesus says: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3:35).

Both religions use the metaphor of the individual members being like organs or parts unified in one body. Paul writes: For by the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..." (I Corinthians 12:13).

Finally, in both religions what unites the community is a common faith in God, a common ethics, law, rituals, and a common worship.

Points of Disagreement:

A point of disagreement within each community is: who is excluded from the community? At what point is one not a Muslim or not a Christian? Some Muslims exclude Shi'is and/or Sufis from membership in Islam, others do not. Similarly, some Christians exclude Catholics, or other groups, from membership in Christianity. Another way of putting this same point is to ask: what constitutes membership in the religious community? Is one who is living a sinful life still a member?

Points for Discussion

The above point is also a point for further discussion. What constitutes membership in the community, and on what grounds can one be excluded from the community? To what extent are those whose lives are seriously sinful still members of the community? Both Christianity and Islam have had to confront these questions, and they are still divisive questions.