

Background article: Expressions, The Muslim community

What is the *umma*?

The Arabic word *umma* is used many times in the Qur'an with various meanings: a community, a nation and a people. In its widest sense, it is used of the whole of humankind [Q. 10:19]; animals also form their own communities [Q. 6:38]. This idea of the oneness of humankind is a reminder that God is the God of all creation and has been sending guidance to all peoples through the human centuries; indeed the word *umma* is used for the community of prophets that God has sent [Q. 21:92]. The term *umma* can be used of a community of people who share a common religion [Q. 10:47]. It can also be used for an upright and godly group within a religious community; it is used of Christians and Jews [Q. 3:113; 5:66] and also of a group amongst Muslims [Q. 3:104]. In the later chapters of the Qur'an it comes to be used explicitly as a reference to the Muslim community [Q. 3:102], who are referred to as the best nation because of their faith in God [Q. 3:110], and indeed as a justly-balanced community that can serve as a beacon to others [Q. 2:143].

The underlying principle is important to note here: one God, one humanity, one community of prophets, one essential revelation, one destiny in Paradise for those who live a truly human life. The final and universal book of guidance that is applicable to all humankind, the Qur'an, is the last edition of the perennial guidance that God has sent to the human *umma*. The Prophet Muhammad stands as the last and the seal of the *umma* of prophets, who all brought and implemented essentially the same message. As the *umma* of the final message and the final messenger, the Muslims have a role to play on earth as a beacon community pointing the way to human fulfilment in this life and Paradise in the life hereafter.

This unity of the Muslim *umma* is exemplified in the practice of standing shoulder to shoulder in prayer in concentric circles, with the ka'ba in Makka standing at the centre. The concentric circles widen until the whole earth is encompassed. Everyone is facing in the direction (*qibla*) of the ka'ba, united in one common purpose. At one level, the identity of being a member of this *umma*, a Muslim following the Qur'an and Muhammad, is established and reinforced every time that a Muslim turns towards the ka'ba in prayer. At a deeper level, the Muslim facing the ka'ba is identifying with the *umma* of all humankind, because to every *umma* on earth prophets and revelations have been sent; this stresses the *muslim* identity by uniting with those communities who followed earlier prophets going back to Prophet Adam and the start of human life. Muslim tradition speaks of a ka'ba not only on earth, but also in heaven, where the angels go around it singing the praises of God, and so there is a deeper level still, where the believer is identified with the *umma* of all created things. All that exists throughout the creation, that is not God, was created by God and so is united in the *umma* of creaturehood. This deeper level of *umma* can be seen in the Muslim tradition that on the Day of Judgment every *umma* will line up behind their prophet, who they will ask to intercede for them. Each prophet will defer to the prophet who

came later than they did. Ultimately, Muhammad, as the last prophet, will be asked and will accept the responsibility of interceding on behalf of all.

Many Muslims are not aware on a day-to-day basis of these deeper identities, but rather identify themselves only with the Muslim *umma*, which follows the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. In this sense then, *umma* is defined as the worldwide community of Muslims. The term is often used this way in the Hadith, where we are told that “my community will never agree upon an error”, which is the basis for the assurance of consensus (*ijma*) within the Sunni understanding of Islam. Similarly, identifying with this *umma* and its way of life is seen as sticking to the Straight Path laid out by Muhammad, who is reported to have said: “Everyone of my *umma* will enter the Garden (Paradise) except one who rejects me”.

Interestingly, the term *umma* was used in the Constitution of Madina, which is reported to have been drawn up by Muhammad to govern the plural society that had called him to become its leader. The people of Madina at this stage contained many different clans, or tribes, and people of different religious communities. The Constitution declares them all to belong to one *umma* and to share equally in the rights of membership. It also expressly grants the right of freedom of worship to the Jews of Madina, who are to form an *umma* of their own alongside the Muslim *umma*. The Muslims of Madina at this time were a small minority of the total population of the city. All groups were to defend one another in the case of an attack.

When a child is born to a Muslim family, there is no initiation rite that makes the child a Muslim; rather the call to prayer (*adhan*) is whispered into the child's ear as a sign that all children are born *muslim* and this spiritual identity is awoken. In this sense, the *muslim* child is called to identify with the Muslim *umma*. {See the section on ‘Setting the Scene’ – the article: “What is *islam*?” for a discussion on the difference between the generic sense of *muslim* and the specific Muslim.}

In recent decades, there has been much talk of Muslim identity in the West. The reality is, of course, that, like all of us, Muslims have multiple identities. One might say: first, I am a creature of God; second, I am a human being; third I positively identify with the worship of God; fourth, I follow the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad; fifth, I am a British citizen; sixth, I am a Brummie because I was born in Birmingham; seventh, I am an Asian because that is the area of the world from which my ancestors came; eighth, I am a Punjabi because that is my culture and the cuisine with which I grew up; ninth, I am a boy because that is my gender; tenth, I am a student because that is what I do; eleventh, I am an Aston Villa supporter because I follow that team... and so it goes on. Everyone has multiple identities.

The Qur'an never speaks of itself as ‘guidance for a group of people called Muslims’ but rather as ‘guidance for all humankind’. Similarly, Muhammad is not spoken of as ‘a blessing for a group of people called Muslims’ but rather as ‘a blessing for all the worlds’. If a way of life is truly Islamic, based on the Qur'an and Muhammad, then it is the way of life that would help all human beings to flourish. Therefore, to identify

oneself as Muslim is to stress one's essential human nature and not one's membership of a club, a group or a religion. Muslims should not be identified with sin and sinful practices, but if something is truly godly and belongs to an upright way of human living, then Muslims should be identified with it. To limit Muslim identity to a particular culture, cuisine, style of dress or ethnicity, is to distort the true meaning of Islam. There is always the temptation to use religion as the badge of a club, for example some people speak of women wearing a headscarf as a sign of their Muslim identity, but that is to misunderstand the Islamic principle of modesty, which speaks of ennobling the dignity of all human beings and not as a badge for one small group. If a certain Muslim practice, for example not making one's living by exploiting other human beings, is ungodly, then it is not just 'bad for Muslims', but rather 'bad for all humankind'. If something like 'bearing the burdens of other human beings' (*sadaqa*) is godly, then it is a good thing for all human beings to do and not just Muslims. Great care needs to be taken in discussing 'Muslim identity' so that it does not become a means of segregation between 'us and them'.