CHAPTER 2

The Political Usage of Religious and Non-religious Terms for Community in Medieval South Arabia: A Comparative Response to Gerda Heydemann’s Chapter

Johann Heiss and Eirik Hovden

Introduction

This comparative response, or perhaps rather “reflection”, will provide comparative cases to be seen in relation to Gerda Heydemann’s article “People(s) of God? Biblical Exegesis and the Language of Community in Late Antique and Early Medieval Europe” in this volume. It will focus on several comparable community-related terms.

However, some fundamental epistemological considerations have first to be introduced in order to establish further comparability. A comparison of terms only, used in different regions, languages, and periods would not lead very far, since their meaning, potential, and significance are very much related to the way in which they are used by actors in specific contexts. An analysis based on one or more written “texts” certainly has some merits as a starting point and an orientation. However, it makes sense to take account of a wider range of primary and secondary context-related data, especially (but not only) considering community-related terms. The basic object of comparison must contain ideal and literal contents, in addition to a more or less “real”, graspable historical context. Agency has to be included in the analysis, even though some of the terms used seem at the first glance to be remarkably stable across time and space, as if existing in their own right. A term itself has no agency, but the usage and belief in the term does. For us, the various community-related terms indicate the ability of people to (re)present, claim or resist visions of community, reflecting political aims, social realities or political-religious hierarchies. We do not intend to take an extreme instrumentalist position and claim that our study objects (people with agency and a particular usage of terms) did not “believe” in their community-related terms. Most of those using these terms may even have taken them for granted. However, most of our sources were written by highly educated individuals who chose to use specific terms deliberately and in specific ways, employing advanced conceptual apparatuses to
describe the social and ideal world around them, influenced by their particular interests or the interests of their patrons.

In the following, selected community-related terms will be analysed without taking extensive account of the usual modern political/religious divide. The separation between “religious” and “political” terms of communities is problematic on a theoretical/analytical level. However, there are certainly terms that are more frequently used in religious/theological discourse, while others refer to peoples and groups not directly involved in religious hierarchies, or not primarily related to religious discourse. In Arabic as in Latin and Greek, terms denoting groups (and many others) are taken from existing pre-Christian or pre-Islamic, often non-religious contexts (such as pre-Islamic poetry) and used in, and adapted to religious and other settings.

As is to be expected, our comparative cases are only apparently similar, at first glance resembling the European cases, which are used as a starting point for our response. The similarities but also the differences will be elaborated upon.

The Term Umma/Umam

Many meanings are ascribed to this word, among them one that many researchers would at first rightly refer to, which is “the Islamic community”. But there are other usages. In its most basic sense, its plural \textit{umam} means “categories” or “peoples” as found in the Quran. The 10th-century South-Arabian author al-Hamdānī uses the term this way. In the first part of his geographical work “Description of the Arab Peninsula” (\textit{Ṣifat jazīrat al-ʿArab}), he gives a thorough description of the inhabited world, where he uses, comments on and cites an Arabic translation of Ptolemy’s (between ca. 100 and 150) \textit{Tetrabiblos}. The word

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} The research for this article was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): F42 Visions of Community. The concept of “ethnicity” used by Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann is partly different from its usage(s) in present day anthropology. We cannot go into the theoretical debates in depth here, but refer to the introduction to this volume.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Lewis, “Umma”.
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Quran 46:18: “It is [such as] these upon whom the sentence [of doom] will fall due, together with the [other sinful] communities [\textit{umam}] of invisible beings and humans that have passed away before their time. Verily, they will be lost”. This and the following quotations from the Quran are modified renderings of Asad’s translation. See also the contribution by Lohlker in this volume.
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Nowhere does al-Hamdānī give an indication that he read Greek, so he presumably used an Arabic translation of Ptolemy’s work.
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