

## 16 *Shahada* — Bearing Witness

Traditionally, to become a Muslim you go to a gathering where you bear witness there exists only the One God. This bearing witness, known in Arabic as “*Shahada*”, usually happens in a ceremony often called declaring or taking your *Shahada*.

Every book I ever read about Islam talks about this as the first of five Pillars of Islam. Where this concept of pillars comes from I don’t know. However for me this experience ended up more as an example of inequity rather than a pillar of my faith.

When the date came for me to take my *Shahada*, of course I started menstruating. And because of the irregularity of my periods at that time I spotted on and off a great deal. Trying to find a time I could “become a Muslim” seemed almost impossible. At last my hormones cooperated and I “officially” became a Muslim.

The ceremony proved simple but not so the preparation. My friend and guide through the process had given me book after book of Islamic materials to study. Most of them came from Pakistan. Written by people whose first language was not English and printed on paper that often bled from one side of the page to the other, I found them almost impossible to make out. I did not really learn much from them. However, now I think that ended up as a blessing. If I had really read and understood them, they probably would have frightened me away from becoming Muslim. The Islam they taught contained loads of complex rules and regulations, especially for women. I don’t know if a single one of those books quoted anything from the Quran.

As I said, the ceremony proved simple. My friend said the required words in Arabic and I struggled to repeat them. Afterwards we shared a wonderful dinner he and some of his Afghani friends prepared. Everyone congratulated me.

My friend went to a great deal of trouble to try to educate me properly about Islam and to make my becoming a Muslim a special occasion. I still think it very kind of him, and I am grateful. However, my understanding changed as I read the Quran. I came to realize only God guides us and I concluded becoming a Muslim is a matter between you and Him alone. It requires no ceremony, rather it happens in your heart.

We kept postponing my taking of the *Shahada* because of my spotting. However having God guide your heart does not require your body to conform to any particular state. What if you wanted to become Muslim and ended up always spotting? Would God refuse you because your body did what He designed it to do?

If you had an infected, oozing wound, it would be no impediment to going through the *Shahada* ceremony, though it is certainly as “impure” as a woman’s menstrual period. If a true physical impurity does not make you unacceptable as a new Muslim why should a completely natural process?

Most Muslims believe as part of the *Shahada*, they must also declare Muhammad as God’s messenger. Clearly all Muslims believe Muhammad was God’s messenger. However more and more Muslims now recognize the Quran forbids making any

distinction among His prophets and messengers (those through whom God delivers His message).

The following verses demonstrate this (along with several more verses I did not quote). Adding just Muhammad's name in the Shahada and not the names of all those sent by God makes a distinction:

*Say, "We believe in God, and in what was sent down to us, and in what was sent down to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the Patriarchs; and in what was given to Moses and Jesus, and all the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them. To Him alone we are submitters."*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 2:136)

*...Each one (of them) believeth  
In God, His angels,  
His books, and His apostles.  
"We make no distinction (they say)  
Between one and another  
Of His apostles."...*  
(The Holy Quran II:285 [2:285])

Yusuf Ali uses "apostles" in his translation of 2:285. Rashad Khalifa translates it as "messengers". In either case we should not make a distinction among those sent by God.

God tells us He decreed the same religion for all messengers and prophets:

*He decreed for you the same religion decreed for Noah, and what we inspired to you, and what we decreed for Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: "You shall uphold this one religion, and do not divide it."...*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 42:13)

So God decreed just one religion, submission to Him alone. I believe all of those who submit to God alone form one congregation no matter what they call themselves.

With just one congregation among those of different religions then surely there should be just one congregation among those following the Quran. The verse immediately following the one above condemns breaking up into sects. What I quote here states this even more clearly:

*Those who divide themselves into sects do not belong with you....*  
(Quran: The Final Testament 6:159)

Muslims should not divide themselves into Sunni or Shia or any other sects. We form one congregation with all other Submitters to God alone.

In that ceremony long ago my friend told me I became a Sunni Muslim. I did not know enough then to object. I also added Muhammad's name as I repeated the Shahada but I would not do so now. I would not want to displease God by making a distinction among His messengers.

In fact nothing in the Quran indicates such a ceremony should take place. The Quran does speak of a Shahada in the following verse:

*God bears witness that there is no god except He, and so do the angels and those who possess knowledge. Truthfully and equitably, He is the absolute god; there is no god but He, the Almighty, Most Wise.*

*(Quran: The Final Testament 3:18)*

Thus the Shahada of God, the angels and those who possess knowledge states no god exists except God. No other being merits such mention. God alone suffices. Surely we should use God's own Shahada.

This Shahada matches the Jewish *Shema*, the first portion of which states:

*"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."*

*(Deuteronomy 6:4-5 — The Torah: The Five Books of Moses)*

Jesus called this the first and great commandment (Please see Matthew 22:36-38).

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*We have already heard part of Lory's story at the end of Chapter 7. How she became a Muslim follows.*

### **Becoming Muslim in Traditional Islam**

God Most Gracious, Most Merciful, blessed me to read the Quran in December, 1978. I had been raised as a Roman Catholic and knew almost nothing about Islam. By God's mercy, I recognized the Quran and His divine truth. I realized I had been a Muslim (submitter) much of my life without knowing it. I was eager to begin the worship practices God had decreed in the Quran. I had been given an instruction booklet on the Muslim contact prayers from an acquaintance and had learned how to pray, but I didn't know where to go for the Friday Prayer.

I looked in the San Francisco telephone directory under "Islam." After a humorous conversation with a kindly secretary from the Shriners organization, I made contact with a gentleman from the San Francisco Islamic Center. When he recovered from his shock that an American woman had accepted Islam because she had read the Quran and not because a husband or fiancé had required her to do so, he explained that I must take the *Shahada* (a ceremonial witnessing that only God is God). Within a few days I met him at the Islamic Center and proceeded to take the *Shahada*. When I asked about attending the Friday Prayer, he and the other brother who had witnessed my *Shahada* began to discourage me. They told me that attending the Friday Prayer was not mandatory for women. This confused me because I had just read Chapter 62 [62:9] in the Quran enjoining those who believe to attend the Friday Prayer. It did not say only believing men were to attend. I was told that there was a *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) which said that because women's work was holy she was exempt from leaving her home to go to the mosque. I had never heard the word "*Hadith*" before. It was the first time, but unfortunately, it was not to be the last.

—Lory, U.S.A.

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*When a sister first begins learning about Islam she will probably encounter a number of Arabic words that are unfamiliar. She will hear the word “Shahada” and may wonder exactly what it means. The following story explains it.*

### **What Does “Shahada” Mean?**

When I first became interested in Islam, or Submission in English, the gentleman I spoke with said that I would have to “make my Shahada”. I did not have access to the Internet, so I started asking people I knew what the term meant. Not many of them had any idea, but one fellow explained that it meant to bear witness that there is no God except Allah and that the prophet Muhammad was his messenger. Well, this helped quite a bit. I knew that Allah is the Arabic word meaning God, the Creator of everything. But what did it mean, “to bear witness”? Wasn’t that self-evident? And who was I bearing witness to?

Later, after I had begun studying the Quran, more questions came to me. Since the words for the Shahada are contained in the Salat, the Muslim prayer, wasn’t I “bearing witness” every time I prayed? And if so, why was a ceremony necessary?

As you can see, I had a lot of questions. And I’m sure that many of them were not very welcome to my Muslim friends, especially since their answers did not really satisfy me. It wasn’t until I encountered a group of people who followed only the scripture as the source of their religious guidance that I really got answers to my questions—and a much deeper understanding of not just the Shahada, but also of my faith and all of its practices.

Actually, only Verse 3:18 in the Quran deals with the Shahada (taken here from *The Noble Quran* at Quran.com):

*Allah witnesses that there is no deity except Him, and [so do] the angels and those of knowledge — [that He is] maintaining [creation] in justice. There is no deity except Him, the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*

As you can see, there is nothing here about any prophet or messenger. Nor is there anything about a ceremony. So where did this understanding and ceremony come from?

I still don’t know the answer to these questions. But from *Wikipedia*, I learned that the Sunni sect of Islam thinks of the Shahada as having two parts, or perhaps they see the two as two Shahadas. The first deals with the oneness of God and the second with Muhammad being His messenger. The Shias add one more part, or Shahada, which says Ali—Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law—was God’s *wali* or friend.

None of this makes sense to me since in the Quran there is only the first Shahada given and as far as I know, God only called Abraham His friend.

All I can think is that humans invented the rest. I don’t mean that to be irreverent of the beliefs of others, but just a statement of fact.

I am very thankful that God guided me to study just the Quran, which always makes sense once I delve deeply enough into a subject. And I know He can always increase my understanding and knowledge.

—*Anonymous, U.S.A.*

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At the end of Chapter 14, I wrote of the way that we all bore witness that God is our Lord. To me, the essence of the Shahada resides in that witnessing. Once we came into our lives on this earth we no longer remember that witnessing before God. That lack of remembering may have started the formal “Shahada ceremonies”.

To me, as I have said in this chapter, such a ceremony need not be performed because God knows our hearts no matter what outward witnessing takes place. I know individuals who went through the ceremony of declaring their Shahada and then decided after a bit that Islam really did not meet their needs.

What we say with our lips may run contrary to our hearts but God knows the hearts better than we do. So, of course, He knows the degree of our sincerity when we worship Him whether or not we declare anything publicly. I would rather concentrate my efforts on growing my soul enough to be able to joyfully return to God’s awesome physical presence than worrying about any ceremony.