

THE SHAHĀDAH

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When discussing the first pillar (*rukn*) of Islām, scholars usually tend to pay all their attention to the concept of monotheism or *tawḥīd*. Tawḥīd is, no doubt, a very important principle of 'slām and the most supreme value in its religious structure. In this paper, however, we would like to discuss the notion of Shahādah or “bearing witness” as an element of faith in Islāmic life.

A famous Ḥadīth narrated in this connection by al Bukhārī says:

عن ابن عمر رضي الله عنه قال : قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم :
« بني الاسلام على خمس : شهادة أن لا اله الا الله وأن محمداً رسول الله ، وإقام الصلاة ،
وأيتاء الزكاة ، والحج ، وصوم رمضان » (البخاري كتاب الايمان ١)

“Ibn ‘Umar said, the Messenger of Allah — peace and blessings of Allah be upon him — said, ‘Islām is built on five things, the bearing of witness that there is no God but Allah and that, Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah, and the keeping up of prayer and the payment of zakāt and the pilgrimage and fasting in Ramaḍān.’”
(Al Bukhārī, Kitāb al Imān, 1)

It is on the basis of this and many other similar ḥadīths that the first statement of tawḥīd is known as *Kalimat al Shahādah* (the statement of witness) and thus a Muslim declares:

« أشهد أن لا إله إلا الله وأشهد أن محمداً رسول الله »

“I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and I bear witness that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah.”

In order to understand the full significance of the word “shahādah” we must turn to the Qur’ān, the source and inspiration of all Islāmic

knowledge, where the word “shahādah” occurred in its various forms no less than 160 times. Its basic meaning is “to see with one’s own eyes,” or “to be present when something happens or takes place.” Thus for example, in the Qur’ān, we read:

« فمن شهد منكم الشهر فليصمه » (١٨٥:٢)

“So whosoever of you see the month (of Ramaḍān) let him fast.” (2:185).

« فليشهد عذابهما طائفة من المؤمنين » (٢:٢٤)

“Let a group of believers see their (adulterers’) punishment.” (24:2)

« وهم على ما يفعلون بالمؤمنين شهود » (٧:٨٥)

“And they were watching whatever they were doing to the believers.” (85:7)

« أم كنتم شهداء إذ حضر يعقوب الموت » (١٣٣:٢)

“Were you present when Jacob was visited by death.” (2: 133)

Shahādah in its further active forms means to attest and to testify what one has seen. Hence it does not mean only personal knowledge and conviction but also denotes strength of one’s conviction in declaring what one knows. Thus we read:

« وما شهدنا إلا بما علمنا » (٨١:٢٢)

“And we did not testify except what we knew.” (22:81)

It is because of His supreme knowledge and omniscience that God is also called *Shahīd* in the Qur’ān. (see 3:98; 5:117; 6:19; 10:46; 22:17; 34:47; 41:53; 58:6; 85:9 etc.).

« شهد الله أنه لا إله إلا هو » (١٨:٣)

God attests to His own Oneness (3:18)

« لكن الله يشهد بما أنزل إليك أنزله بعلمه » (١٦٦:٤)

God attests to whatever He has revealed to His Prophet because He has revealed it with full knowledge (4:166).

« قل الله شهيد بيني وبينكم »

God attests that He has sent Muḥammad as His Messenger (6:19; 4:72; 48:28).

« وأرسلناك للناس رسولا وكفى بالله شهيدا »

« هو الذي أرسل رسوله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله وكفى بالله شهيدا »

On the Day of Judgement, the Qur'ān says, your ears, your eyes, your hands, your feet and your skin will bear witness against you because of whatever wrong or sinful deeds that you have committed deliberately and consciously (see 41:20; 6:130; 36:65). One who personifies in himself what he attests and calls others to this testimony is called *shahīd* and *shahīd* in the Qur'ān. Thus the role of the Prophet is that of the *shahīd*.

« يا أيها النبي إنا أرسلناك شاهداً ومبشراً ونذيراً » (٤٥:٣٣)

“O Prophet! verily We have sent thee as a witness, a bringer of glad tidings and a warner.”

(33:45; see also 48:8 and 73:15).

The Prophet is also a *shahīd* i.e. a continuous witness and so are also the believers charged to be witnesses.

« هو سماكم المسلمين من قبل وفي هذا ليكون الرسول شهيداً عليكم وتكونوا شهداء على

الناس » (٧٨:٢٢)

« وجئنا بك على هؤلاء شهيداً » (٤١:٤)

In its various usages in the Qur'ān, the *Shahādah* stands for:

1. Knowledge and conviction
2. Commitment
3. Declaration

Like Christianity, Islām does not lack detailed creeds. These detailed creeds were formulated by theologians often to combat heresies. *Kalimat al Shahādah* is, however, the shortest creed of Islām and also the simplest and the earliest. Wensinck, in vain, tried to prove that during the life of the Prophet Muḥammad this formula of faith did not exist in its present form. According to him, early Muslims only used *لا إله إلا الله* and « محمداً رسول الله » was added when Muslims later started preaching to Christians and Jews.¹

Wensinck's arguments are based primarily upon the assumption that the hadith material is unreliable. According to him, hadith at most can be taken to reflect the time in which it was composed and written and not the time of Muḥammad. We shall not discuss this claim in this paper. Much has already been written to expose the falsity of such Orientalistic generalization about hadith. Dr. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al

¹A.J. Wensinck, *Muslim Creed*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1932, Second impression, p. 17-35.

A'zamī gave a thorough refutation of them in his *Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1978). Wensinck, perhaps forgot to consider the call for prayer (adhān) where both phrases of shahadah occur side by side in their complete form. No one, to my knowledge, has questioned the historicity of Adhān which was called by Bilāl and many other Companions of the Prophet, five times a day in his mosque in Madīnah.

The two phrases of the shahādah convey fully the basic principles of Islām. It is, however, significant that they do not begin with *credo* or I believe, rather they start with *ashhadu* (I bear witness) which means not only that I have faith in God and I believe in Him but also that I see His presence before and around me, I am convinced about His unique existence and this is not my private conviction but I want to declare it to the world. Similarly, I do not only believe in the prophethood of Muḥammad but I *know* him as Prophet and I declare this conviction to the world.

Shahādah is one of the important religious experiences of a Muslim. It begins the day he is born and these words are whispered in both of his ears by father, grandfather or some other pious Muslim. And it continued through his growth in Muslim society where he hears the Adhān five times a day. It becomes his ultimate experience if he has the opportunity to give his life for his faith as a shahīd or martyr.