

## *Shahada* — Bearing Witness

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

Every book I have ever read about Islam talks about this as the first of five Pillars of Islam. Where this concept of pillars comes from, I am not certain. However, for me this experience was more of a “bull of inequity” than a pillar.

When I was supposed to take my *Shahada*, of course I started my period. And because my periods were irregular, I was spotting on and off a great deal. Trying to find a time that I could “become a Muslim” was almost impossible. At last, my hormones cooperated and I “officially” became a Muslim.

The ceremony was simple, but the preparations were horrendous. My friend who was guiding me through the process had given me book after book of Islamic materials to study. Most of them had been printed in Pakistan. They were clearly written by people whose first language was not English and they were printed on paper that often bled from one side of the page to the other. Needless to say, they were very difficult for me to make out, so I did not really get too much from them. However, now I think that was a blessing. I’m afraid that if I had really read and understood them, I probably would have been frightened away from becoming Muslim. The Islam they taught was full of complex rules and regulations, especially for women. I don’t know that there was a single thing from the Quran in any one of them.

As I said, the ceremony was simple, my friend said the required words in Arabic, and I tried to repeat them. Afterwards we had a wonderful dinner that he and some of his Afghani

friends had prepared. Everyone was very kind and complementary.

My friend had gone to a great deal of trouble to try to educate me properly about Islam, and to make my becoming a Muslim a special occasion. It was very kind of him, and I am grateful. However, my understanding has changed. As I have read the Quran and come to realize that God is the only one who guides us, I have come to the conclusion that being a Muslim is a matter between you and Him alone. Becoming a Muslim requires no ceremony, it is something that happens in your heart.

We had to keep postponing my taking of the *Shahada* because I was spotting. However, having God guide your heart does not require your body to be in any particular state. What if you wanted to become Muslim and were always spotting? Would God refuse you because your body was doing what He had designed it to do?

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

Most Muslims believe that as part of the *Shahada*, they must also declare that Muhammad was God’s messenger. Clearly, all Muslims believe that Muhammad was God’s messenger. However, there is a growing recognition that the Quran forbids making any distinction among the prophets and messengers. This is demonstrated in the following verse (and several other verses). Adding just Muhammad’s name in the *Shahada*, and not the names of all those sent by God, is making such a distinction:

*The Apostle believeth  
In what hath been revealed  
To him from his Lord,  
As do the men of faith.  
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." And they say:  
"We hear, and we obey:  
(We seek) Thy forgiveness,  
Our Lord, and to Thee  
Is the end of all journeys."  
(The Holy Quran II:285 [2:285])*

Yusuf Ali uses the word "apostle" in his translation of this verse. Rashad Khalifa translates it with the word "messenger." In either case, it is clear that we should not be making a distinction among those whom God sent.

In fact, not only should we not be making a distinction, God tells us that He decreed the same religion for all of the 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."  
The idol worshipers will greatly resent  
what you invite them to do.  
God redeems to Himself whomever He wills;  
He guides to Himself only those who totally submit.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 42:13)*

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

If there is just one congregation among those of different religions, then surely there should be just one congregation among those who follow the Quran. The verse immediately following the one above condemns breaking up into sects. However, there is a verse that is more straightforward and so I quote it here:

*Those who divide themselves into sects  
do not belong with you.  
Their judgment rests with God,  
then He will inform them of everything they had done.  
(Quran: The Final Testament 6:159)*

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

In that ceremony long ago, I was told I was becoming a Sunni Muslim. I did not know enough 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 take the chance that God would be displeased with me for making a distinction among His messengers.

In fact, there is nothing in the Quran indicating that such a ceremony should be performed. 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 is to bear witness that there is no god except God. There is no mention of any other being. God alone suffices. Surely if this is God's own *Shahada*, it is the only one we should be using!