

## **Background article: Practices, The declaration of faith**

### **The *shahada***

“I bear witness that there is no god but God Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”

The word *shahada*, which gives its name to ‘the declaration of faith’, is so called on account of the first words: “I bear witness”. The word for witness in Arabic, *shahid*, has the same root and is also the word used for a martyr, that is, someone who bears the ultimate witness by surrendering their life to death in the path of God rather than give way to injustice, tyranny and falsehood.

The opening phrase is followed by the twofold declaration, which is sometimes referred to just as the *kalima*. “There is no god but God”, is the first part of the declaration, and there is no punctuation between it and the second part, “Muhammad is the Messenger of God”, thus showing that the two parts cannot be separated.

### **There is no god but God**

We should notice here the careful use of capitals. The ‘small g god’ is used to signify anything that people worship and to which they attribute divinity; all such are unworthy of any worship at all. To write ‘there is no God but God’ would not make grammatical sense because the use of a capital G for God means by definition ‘the one and only God’. To write ‘there is no God but Allah’ would not make linguistic sense because the word Allah in Arabic means ‘the one and only God’. There is nothing in existence that is worthy of worship except God, in whatever language that is expressed. The Qur'an, revealed in Arabic, naturally uses the word Allah for ‘the one and only God’, therefore this is the term used universally by Muslims.

It should be noted, however, that ‘Allah’ is not a word for God used exclusively by Muslims. The Arabic term Allah is used for God by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians as well as by Muslims. It is important to remember that there are today perhaps two million Jews, normally referred to as the Sephardic (literally: Spanish-speaking) Jews, who are the descendants of those who were driven out of southern Europe at the time of the Christian Reconquista and settled in the Muslim lands from Turkey, through Syria, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt and along the coast of North Africa as far as Morocco. Arabic became their mother-tongue, their language of culture, literature and discourse; and, of course, when speaking Arabic, they used the word Allah for God. They still used Hebrew in their scriptures and worship. Similarly, there are some fourteen million Arabic mother-tongue Christians in the world today, who also speak of God as Allah. Various forms of Christianity were established in what is today ‘the Arabic-speaking world’ in the six centuries between Jesus and Muhammad.

This first part of the *shahada* is a timeless statement: there has never been anything worthy of worship except God and there never will be anything worthy of worship except God. This statement has thus been used by all the prophets sent by God to the earth, from the time of Adam and Eve onwards, expressed in whatever language they used.

This statement is absolute. Nothing else is worthy of worship instead of God, or in addition to God, or in partnership with God. This obviously rules out the worship of idols, multiple or local gods, semi-divine people, wholly-divine people, partly-divine people, the forces of nature, and things that were worshipped by our ancestors. It also rules out modern-day idols, such as money, power, ideology, racial superiority or military might.

The worship of God (*ibada*) is a wide term in Islamic thought. We can speak of worship as turning to God in obedience, service and love, through actions, words, thoughts and feelings. In other words, to worship God is to bring the whole of human life in all its facets and actions under the sovereignty of God in conformity with the revealed ethical divine will. Two key virtues are linked with this: *taqwa* and *sabr*. The whole of life, all our religious practices, are a training ground in *taqwa*, which we can translate as ‘God-consciousness’: that I may be aware in every element of my life, words, actions and thoughts, that I am the creature of God, that God has given me a high vocation to serve, love, obey and worship God, that I am accountable to God and that, even though I cannot see God, God sees me all the time. The modern Arabic word for vaccination is drawn from the same root as *taqwa*. We can see that part of the meaning is about protection; protection from falsely attributing divinity to anything else other than God. If we were able to live fully God-conscious all the time, then we would be protected from sin. There would be no room for the devil to enter in. To live constantly fully conscious of God is *ihsan* – “to live as though you see God, for even though you cannot now see God, God sees you.” This is the goal of human life but it is not necessarily an easy or smooth path, therefore the struggle needs patience (*sabr*) and perseverance.

This is not just a one-off declaration. Muslims need to consider whether their work serves God or something else. Do our financial or political practices serve God? Am I serving God in my family relations or are there other values at work? What about my service of the creation, of humanity, of the community and the society in which we live? Every aspect of human life should come under the phrase: ‘There is nothing worthy of worship except God’.

The first part of the *shahada* is a negative statement: ‘there is no god but God’, but it does not tell us anything about the God who alone is worthy of worship except that there is no god but God. This is why we need the second part of the *shahada*, the positive statement that ‘Muhammad is the Messenger of God’, for it is the messenger who brings the revelation of what this one and only God is like and how God should be worshipped, obeyed, served, and loved. This is why the two parts are inseparable.

## **Muhammad is the Messenger of God**

The term 'Messenger' here is a translation of *rasul*, that is, a prophet sent by God with a scripture. It is only through the messenger, who bears the revealed message, that human beings can give content to the first statement about the one God, who alone is worthy of worship. Muhammad is not only the bearer of the message, the Qur'an, but he is also the embodiment of that message, the 'Living Qur'an', as he is sometimes called. The Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad give Muslims the most complete and protected guidance on the nature of God, the revealed ethical will of God, and thus how human life should be lived in accordance to God's will, that is, the way in which the whole of human life should be transformed into a constant act of worship (*ibada*).

Islam, the way of life based on the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad, is not a new way of life revealed in the seventh century. Rather it is the last, definitive, universal deposit of the perennial guidance that God has revealed to all prophets and in all scriptures throughout the human centuries and amongst all peoples of the earth. This means that the *shahada* before the time of Muhammad ran: 'There is no god but God Jesus is the Messenger of God'. And before Jesus: 'Moses is the Messenger of God', and before Moses: 'Abraham is the Messenger of God' and so on through all the centuries and all peoples back to the ultimate: 'There is no god but God Adam is the Messenger of God'. Thus both parts of the *shahada*, thus understood, are timeless.

## **The *shahada* in the life of Muslims**

The *shahada* accompanies a Muslim from birth to death, and even beyond. When a baby is born to a Muslim family the call to prayer (*adhan*) is whispered into the newborn's ear: it contains the *shahada*. It is recited in the hearing of a Muslim as death approaches. It is recited over the dead Muslim as she or he is laid finally in the grave. It will be the response of a Muslim when the angels of the interrogation come to pose the questions in 'life in the grave' (*barzakh*).

Throughout life it will be on the lips of Muslims. The *shahada* will be amongst the first things that a child will learn and speak once he or she has attained the power of speech. It is recited in every formal prayer (*salat*). It is the most common text to be found in Muslim homes and in mosques and other public places. Often it will be written in various styles of calligraphy, so that the writing will enhance the beauty and importance of the text.

When someone wishes to convert to become a Muslim, this is done by reciting the *shahada* with full intention. Of course, in Muslim understanding, every baby that is born is *muslim*, thus many converts would prefer to call themselves 'reverts'; they are reverting to that God-given natural state of the worship of God and following the way of life laid out by the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad.

The whole of human life should be brought under the sovereignty of God, every thought, intention, word and action should thus be an act of worship, obedience, service and love of God – or, we can say, brought under the *shahada*.