

## *Shahādah*

### (The Confession of Faith)

THE Muslim confesses that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God. This confession is called *shahādah* or “witness.” It is not only his legal passport into the Muslim community; it is the quintessence of his faith and expression of his identity, which he recites many times a day on many different occasions. Besides the principles its first half implies (justification by works, humility and submission to God, defiance of tyrants and other gods, vicegerency of man on earth, and self-fulfillment, which we discussed in chapter 2), the *shahādah* asserts the prophethood of Muhammad. This means that the witness accepts what Muhammad has conveyed from heaven as truly what God has sent down. These revelations collected together in the order the Prophet himself has directed them to be recited, constitute the Holy Qur’an, the scripture of Islam. To witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of God is tantamount to witnessing that the Qur’an is the holy word of God, complete, *verbatim* and in the order it has been collected; that its commandments and directives are normative, incumbent on the Muslim as God’s ever-present pronouncement.

The Prophet enjoys a second kind of authority, beside that of conveying the holy word of God *verbatim*. That is the authority of actualizing the revelation in his own life. His life, with its deeds and

decisions, approbations and condemnations, constitutes the perfect embodiment of the Islamic message. The Prophet's Sunnah ("trodden path," or "example") is therefore normative to the Muslim and constitutes the exemplary "how" for the "what" of revelation. From it, the Muslim derives all his liturgy as well as a fair measure of the precepts of Islamic law and ethics. The Sunnah has come down to us as reports carried by the Prophet's companions and passed to the generations after them. These reports are called hadith(s).

The authenticity and integrity of the text of the Qur'an stand beyond question. The Qur'anic revelations came in the full light of history, were both written down and memorized by the thousands among a people with the most developed memory in the world. Ever since they were revealed, they were continuously recited in public, in front of people who were perfectly familiar with them throughout the Muslim World. Believing that he is reciting the *ipissima verba* of God, the Muslim gave his recitation and his copying of the Qur'anic text absolutely the greatest care. Even the very act of worship, the formal prayer, which may not be interrupted for any reason – not even by a threat to the worshipper's security – because in prayer the Muslim is supposed to stand in the presence of God, may be interrupted and the worship leader corrected aloud by anyone listening, whenever a fault occurs in the recitation of the Holy Qur'an. Finally, at the very time the Caliph 'Uthmān (644-656 CE) was collecting and promulgating the present text of the Qur'an as a book, internal strife and contest for power split the community asunder. For decades and centuries since, the factions continued their bloody strife, each justifying its case with arguments and quotations from the Holy Book. Never has anyone claimed or accused the other of tampering with the text. This was a final test of fire which the Qur'anic text has passed with flying colors. That is why Sir William Muir reported von Hammer's scholarly judgment approvingly that, "we [scholars] are as certain that the Qur'an is the historical word of Muhammad as the Muslim is certain it is the word of God."

The texts of the Sunnah do not enjoy such unquestionable authority. Muslims are perfectly aware that the Sunnah has been tampered with as it was transmitted between the first four generations. Hence,

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they are careful always to qualify the Sunnah with the word *al-ṣaḥīḥah* (i.e., “veritable” or “verified”). To sift the veritable from the weak or spurious hadiths, Muslims have perfected the sciences of textual criticism and elaborated the most sophisticated disciplines to criticize and ascertain the historical veritability of the chains of narrators, of every hadith, of the form or language, of the redaction of the text, of the coherence and rationality of the content of the text and its correspondence with the Holy Qur’an, with otherwise known historical reality and the accumulated wisdom of mankind. Their love and respect for the hadiths of the Prophet knew no bounds. Hence, they preserved all the materials claimed to come from the Prophet, but they classified them into a long series of categories of ascending or descending levels of authenticity.

The Prophethood of Muhammad, restricting itself to the *verbatim* conveyance of the word of God, presents us with a perfection of the whole phenomenon of prophecy in Semitic culture. Certainly Moses represented another apex in that history, after which prophecy degenerated in Israel to the point of there being hundreds of pseudo-prophets running in the market places without any being able to prove his prophethood conclusively. Islam restituted prophecy to its place of high honor. The change in times however prescribed that prophets no longer justify themselves with miracles which boggle the mind, or reason, of man. Hence, Islam believes in no miracles and Muslims claim none for Muhammad. In their view, what proves Muhammad’s prophethood is the sublime beauty and greatness of the revelation itself, the Holy Qur’an, not any inexplicable breaches of natural law which confound man’s reason or pass his powers of understanding. The Qur’anic revelation is a presentation to man’s mind, to reason. It makes its claim critically. It is not a “scandalon” or “stumbling block.” Instead of commanding blind belief, it invites man to consider the evidence, to compare and contrast the claims and the data, and to judge only in certainty and conviction of the truth.

This is why Islam never had a religious synod or council or church empowered with the right of *magisterium*, the right to make *ex cathedra* pronouncements about Islam. In Islam, religious truth is a matter of argument and conviction, a cause in which everybody is entitled to

contend and everybody is entitled to convince and be convinced. To witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of God means in final analysis that one is convinced of the truth and viability of the claim that religious truth is critical, arguable and self-convincing. This categorically affects the first part of the *shahādah*, namely, “There is no god but God.” It tells us that this is a rational claim; and we can convince ourselves of its truth neither by authority nor coercion. We have to reason, to think and consider all the evidence, in seriousness and responsibility. Even if we were tentatively to deny it, we can do so only under the proviso that truth is possible to know, that it is, like God, one and not many. But isn’t God the truth?