

The Real and the Witness

The Metaphysics of the Shahadah

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EACH OF THE ABRAHAMIC MONOTHEISMS – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – bears at its creedal heart the assertion of the unity of God. For Judaism, it is the Shema: *Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad*: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is One.” For Christianity, it is the opening of the Credo: *Credo in unum Deum*: “I believe in one God.” For Islam, it is the Shahadah: *lâ ilâha illâ 'Llâh*: “There is no god but God.” So also does each tradition particularize this understanding in its own respective context. For Judaism, it is the Jewish community itself: *Shema Yisrael*: “Hear, O Israel!” For Christianity, it is the Savior: *Et in unum Dóminum Iesum Christum*: “And in one Lord Jesus Christ.” For Islam, it is the Messenger: *Muhammadun rasûlu 'Llâh*: “Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

For the Muslim, these two fundamental statements, or two Shahadahs – *lâ ilâha illâ 'Llâh, Muhammadun rasûlu 'Llâh* – form the Islamic testification of faith. As such, they give quintessential expression to the two great Islamic themes of Unity and Mercy that form the central truths of the Quranic revelation. The first Shahadah describes the nature of reality as such, dominated by an essential Unity, by God as the sole deity. The Arabic word for God, *Allâh*, does not signify a deity with particular characteristics or for a particular people, but rather etymologically simply means “the God.” The name *Allâh* is particular to Arabic, but not to Islam; Yemeni Jews and Syriac Christians – who speak Arabic as their native tongue – have prayed to God as *Allâh* for centuries. The second Shahadah illustrates God’s essential Mercy, identifying Muhammad as the bearer of Divine guidance for the Islamic community. Here, there is no implication that Muhammad is the sole prophet, or messenger of God; rather, the Quran insists upon the universality of prophethood and upon the essential equivalence between prophets.

THE CONTENT OF THE FIRST SHAHADAH – “no god but God” – is termed the doctrine of *tawhîd*, or the unity of God. To say that “there is no god but God” may be understood on several levels. Most immediately, *tawhîd* signifies a straightforward assertion of monotheism and refutation of polytheism. In addition, other levels of meaning may be brought out by a consideration of what might constitute a “god.” The Quran addresses this issue with particular clarity in two passages: “And We never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, ‘There is no god but I, so worship Me,’” (21:25) and “Have you seen him who has taken his own caprice to be his god?” (25:43) Here, a “god” is identified as what one worships, and such a “god” is not necessarily an external deity or idol, but may be something as internalized as one’s own caprice.

Ultimately, the term “god” in the declaration of *tawhîd* may be taken to apply to anything claiming independent existence or qualities. Just as the Prophet asserted that, “There is no power and no strength but in God,” so the Quran states, “Oh people, you are the dependent upon God, and God – He is the Independent, the Praiseworthy” (35:15). In short, everything in the cosmos, in so much as it is inherently perceived through the veil of multiplicity as self-existent and

independent, is a “god” that is denied by *tawhîd*, which asserts the vision of unity, of God as the source of all qualities and the sole Existent and Real. Thus, “there is no god but God” was modified by some members of the Islamic intellectual tradition to read “there is nothing existent but God” (*lâ maujûda illâ 'Llâh*). In this sense, the phrase “no god” (*lâ ilâha*) indicates the annihilation of all phenomena as self-existent, while the phrase “but God” (*illâ 'Llâh*) indicates the subsistence of all phenomena through God.

We ourselves, as phenomena in the domain of multiplicity, are subject to the truth of *tawhîd*. The surprising consequence of this situation is that we cannot affirm *tawhîd* without embracing inherent contradiction, since the very act of affirmation implies the duality of subject and object. As the Sufi Ansârî of Herat pointedly remarks, “None has affirmed the Unity of the One, since all who affirm it deny it.”¹ To say “I bear witness that there is no god but God” (*ashhadu an lâ ilâha illâ 'Llâh*) is to arrogate to oneself the capacity to truly say “I”; but ultimately, God is the only “I,” just as God is the sole Existent. As the Quran states, “God bears witness that there is no god but He” (3:16). In other words, *tawhîd* necessarily embraces both the objective and subjective poles of existence – both unity of being (*wahdat al-wujûd*) and unity of witnessing (*wahdat al-shuhûd*).²

The declaration that “Muhammad is the messenger of God” carries a number of distinct connotations. Most immediately, the second Shahadah acknowledges the reality of Divine guidance for man, guidance that has been historically embodied – as taught in the Quran and as evident in history – in the Divinely appointed messengers sent to different human communities. Muhammad, as messenger, is the bearer of guidance for his community most immediately through his being the recipient of the Quranic guidance itself. In addition, he is recognized by the tradition as the embodiment, in his inner nature and lived example, of that guidance; as his wife ‘Â’ishah stated, “His character was the Quran,” while the Quran asserts, “You have a beautiful example in the messenger of God for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day, and remembers God often.” (33:21) The Prophet, in his embodiment of the Quranic guidance, is, for Muslims, the foremost exemplar of the normative human state.

TAKEN TOGETHER, THE TWO SHAHADAHS comprise an essential summary and resolution of our human situation. Immersed within the domain of multiplicity with its diverse qualitative possibilities, we often take the things of this world, including ourselves, as self-existent and ultimately real, while also tending to wander in the space of possibilities open to us. The first Shahadah reminds us that the reality of the world is fundamentally contingent upon God, the one and absolute Reality; the second Shahadah reminds us of those human possibilities that lead both to God and to human felicity. The first Shahadah is essentially static and ontological, whereas the second Shahadah is essentially dynamic and soteriological. The first Shahadah, in its claim to absoluteness and unicity, vertically pierces through the veil of multiplicity, whereas the second Shahadah, through its evocation of the Prophetic function, horizontally guides the soul within the very domain of multiplicity. The first Shahadah is like a lightning flash that illumines a dark plain; the second Shahadah is like a narrow road that is thereby made visible.

Another means of approaching the conjoined meaning of the two Shahadahs is through the traditional metaphor of existence as an image in a mirror,³ in which the object reflected is real whereas the image, in comparison, is unreal; in this sense, “there is no god but God.” However, the image, while possessing only an illusory and contingent reality, is nevertheless a true image of the object reflected; in this sense, “Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Here, we must consider not only the messenger (*rasûl*), but also the message (*risâlah*), which is not only the

Quran but also the cosmos itself, for the verses (*âyat*) of the Book have their direct counterparts in the signs (*âyat*) of the manifest world. In this sense, *Muhammad* refers not only to the Prophet, but more generally to the plenary disclosure of the Real.

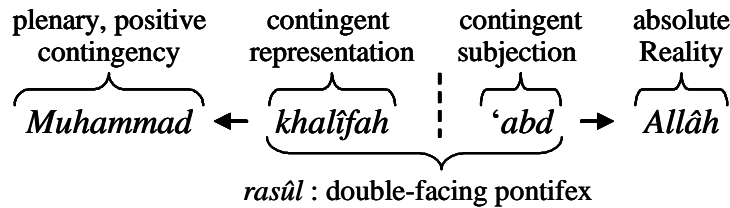
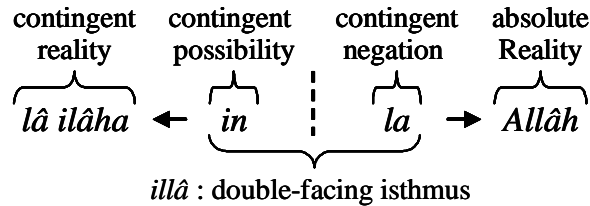
The first Shahadah thus denotes the provisional reality of the image; the second Shahadah denotes the perfection of the image as a symbol of the reality that it reflects. In this respect, according to a *hadîth*, or Prophetic saying, “No one sees God who has not first seen his Prophet.” The metaphysical understanding of created existence – suspended between relative unreality and symbolic transparency, between negation and perfection – is only complete when both Shahadahs are considered. The Quran further clarifies this understanding in two key verses: “Everything upon the earth is undergoing annihilation, but there subsists the Face of your Lord,” (55:26) which witnesses to the provisional reality of existence denoted by the first Shahadah, and “We shall show them our signs on the horizons and in themselves until it is clear to them that He is the Real,” (41:53) which points to the symbolic perfection of existence denoted by the second Shahadah.

IN ONE SENSE, THE SECOND SHAHADAH, which points to the manifestation of created existence from the Divine absolute, may be seen to be implicit in the *illâ* (“but,” “if not”) of the first Shahadah, which, as it were, opens the conditional possibility for this manifestation.⁴ In another sense, the *illâ* of the first Shahadah and the *rasûl* (“messenger”) of the second Shahadah form a complementary pairing: taken in their most evident sense, the function of *illâ* ascends from created existence upwards toward God, whereas the function of *rasûl* descends from God downwards toward created existence.

The *illâ* of the first Shahadah is grammatically constructed from a conditional,⁵ *in* (“if”), and a negation, *lâ* (“not”), in which the conditional faces relative reality (*lâ ilâha*) and the negation faces absolute Reality (*Allâh*).⁶ The *illâ* stands between the two realities and is a *barzakh* – an isthmus – that at once separates and conjoins them. Viewed from the side of absolute Reality, the negation *lâ* of the *illâ* denotes the ultimate unreality of created existence in the Face of the Absolute; viewed from the side of relative reality, the conditional *in* denotes the absolute Reality as prefiguring the conditional possibility of created existence. The *rasûl* of the second Shahadah evokes the two complementary relationships that stand at its heart: that of vicegerent (*khalîfah*) and servant (*‘abd*). With respect to absolute Reality, the *rasûl* is the perfected servant and is, in a sense, effaced in the Face of the Absolute; with respect to creation, the *rasûl* is the perfected vicegerent and is the representative of the Absolute in creation. Thus, *lâ* finds its parallel in *‘abd*, *in* finds its parallel in *khalîfah*; the *illâ* is the *barzakh* between realities, the *rasûl* is the *pontifex* between them.

illâ (“if not”) { *in* (if)
lâ (not)

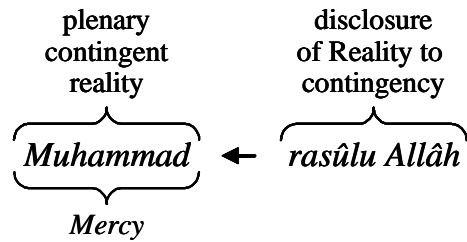
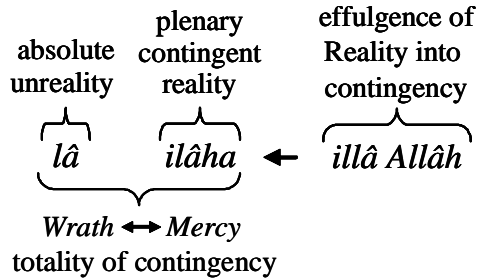
rasûl (messenger) { *khalîfah* (vicegerent)
‘abd (servant)



THIS CONSIDERATION may also be extended to the *lâ ilâha* of the first Shahadah and the *Muhammad* of the second Shahadah. Here, *Muhammad* – in reference to the Prophet, who is viewed traditionally as a “beautiful example” (33:21) and a “mercy for the worlds” (21:107) – may be understood as a plenary symbol of all that is positive in creation. In contrast, *lâ ilâha* refers to the whole of creation, both positive and negative; the *lâ* (“no”) is absolute negation and the absence of God, whereas the *ilâha* (“god”) is the symbolic reflection of the Divine in the created order. Here, *ilâha* may be reinterpreted positively, not as an independent and necessarily false divinity but rather as an adequate “sign of God,” or *âyât Allâh*.

ilâha (god) : either { false self-subsistence
human perspective
symbolic transparency
Divine perspective

Creation, understood traditionally as hierarchically stratified into degrees of reality, is bounded between these two limits, recognized respectively as the domains of Wrath and Mercy, of separation from and nearness to God. According to a *hadîth qudsî*, or Divine saying, “My Mercy has precedence over My Wrath.” In this sense, *Muhammad* finds its parallel in *ilâha*:⁷ both pertain to the Divine Mercy, for Mercy (*Rahmah*) is the nearest attribute to God. Muhammad, as Messenger, at once clarifies the domains of Mercy and Wrath for man while being himself necessitated by that very ontological Mercy that he demarcates in human terms.



Just as Unity encompasses both transcendence and immanence, both absoluteness and infinitude, so Mercy is inherent both in the cosmogonic act – since existence is itself a mercy – as well as in the return to God. Mercy is like the breathing of Unity, the outbreath of infinitude giving existence to the creation, the inbreath of absoluteness drawing all things back to God. From the human perspective, the outbreath is the creation of man in the comprehensive potentiality of the Divine qualities, the inbreath is the Divine guidance given to man to assist the appropriate actualization of those qualities, which is precisely the journey of return for man; put another way, with respect to man – the microcosmic theater of the Divine qualities – the outbreath is indeterminateness and possibility, the inbreath is integration and conformation. The conjoining of these two poles of Mercy is reflected in the *hadîth qudsî*, “If it were not for you [Muhammad], I would not have created the worlds.” Here, the full breath of Mercy is present, both the inbreath of Prophetic necessity and the outbreath of Divine creation.⁸

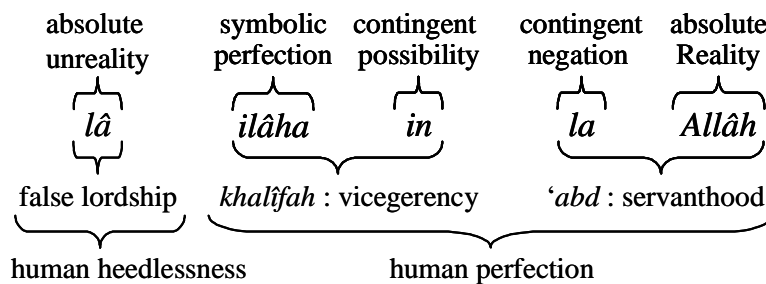
THE PARALLEL BETWEEN *Muhammad* and *ilâha* bears specifically human ramifications, given the traditional understanding of the central state of man in creation. According to a *hadîth*, “God created Adam upon His own form (*sûrah*)”; the Quran, expressing the same truth mythopoetically, affirms “He taught Adam the names, all of them.” (2:31) The specific task of man, one inherent in his role as Divine servant (*‘abd*), is to actualize that which he bears potentially, and in so doing become perfected as a vicegerent (*khalîfah*), as a representative – or representation – of God in the creation. The symbolic representation of the Divine form in creation is precisely the positive meaning of *ilâha* with respect to man, and it is this that Muhammad, as the paradigm of human perfection, represents. The role of man is to transform himself – with the grace of God and the example of the Prophet – from an admixture of *lâ* and *ilâha*, of negation and plenary representation, into an *ilâha* – a plenary sign or *âyât Allâh* – thereby fulfilling the form of his creation.

We have denoted above that both *in* (“if”) and *ilâha* (“god”) may be interpreted as indicative of the function of vicegerency. Both, in fact, must be taken together if this function is to be properly understood: the *in* denotes the contingent possibility, with respect to God, of the Divine

representation; the *ilâha* denotes the perfection of the represented form. Similarly, both the *lâ* (“not”) of the *illâ* and *Allâh* must be taken together if the function of servanthood is to be properly understood: the *lâ* denotes the negation or effacement of one’s being and qualities; the *Allâh* denotes the Absolute, the source of all being and qualities, to which servanthood is oriented. The *lâ* must be taken together with *Allâh* since servanthood is only conceivable with respect to Lordship; taken in its ultimate sense, in the mystery of the *lâ* ‘*Llâh* there is at once absence from self and presence with God. In this dual sense, man as at once perfected vicegerent and servant might be said to be transparent to God, the opacity of self polished clear, revealing only the Divine qualities.

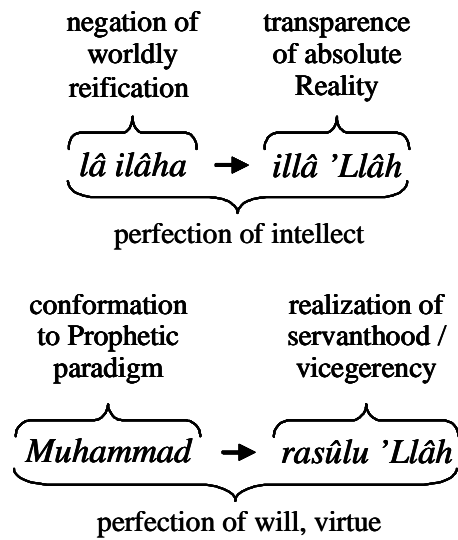
There remains the initial *lâ*, which stands alone as a singular negation: whereas both vicegerency and servanthood stand in relation to the Absolute, the initial *lâ* is outside of such relation. This initial *lâ* is placed in diametric opposition to the final *Allâh*, while also standing in contrast to the second *lâ* of the *illa*; if *Allâh* indicates true Lordship and the second *lâ* indicates true servanthood, then the initial *lâ* might be said to indicate “false lordship.” Both false lordship and true servanthood – indicated by *lâ* – are negations, but the negation of the second *lâ*, through its association with *Allâh*, is paradoxically full, while the negation of the first *lâ* is simply empty. The negation of the initial *lâ* stands maximally distant from the plenitude of the final *Allâh*, and is, in a sense, its inverse. This false lordship is at once an arrogation and reification of the self in respect of God, and is the natural concomitant of human heedlessness and forgetfulness. It is the all too common human state, although certainly not the normative one; it could be said that the existential fact of the initial *lâ* necessitates the revelation of the entirety of *lâ ilâha illâ* ‘*Llâh*.

In the false lordship of the *lâ*, the vicegerency of the *ilâha in*, and the servanthood of the *lâ* ‘*Llâh* we find in summary the entirety of human possibilities. Further, these are ordered by the first Shahadah with respect to rank and contingency: vicegerency is only possible through servanthood, which stands as the highest human possibility, whereas false lordship, the lowest possibility, is contingent upon the inherent function of vicegerency and is, in a sense, its radical misappropriation.



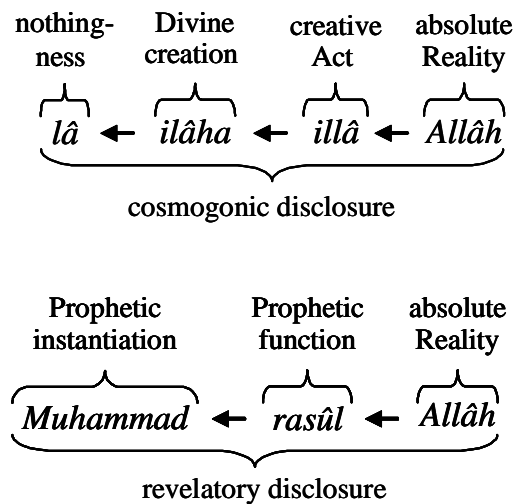
ALTHOUGH THE FIRST SHAHADAH primarily addresses metaphysics, while the second Shahadah primary addresses soteriology, viewed from another angle, both Shahadahs deal at once with both domains. Taken from left to right,⁹ the two Shahadahs denote the soteriological movement from man to God. Thus, in the first Shahadah, the saving act of the intellect is to negate the naïve conception of the world as opaque and self-subsistent (*lâ ilâha*) and affirm the truth of the overwhelming reality of God in the Face of which the world is at once transparent and contingent (*illâ* ‘*Llâh*); in the second Shahadah, the saving act of the will and virtue is to assimilate oneself to the Muhammadan paradigm (*Muhammad*) and in so doing, realize one’s nature *in potentia* as both servant and vicegerent (*rasûl*) in respect of God (*Allâh*).

Human Perfection



Taken from right to left, the two Shahadahs denote the cosmogonic and revelatory movements, respectively, from God to man. Thus, in the first Shahadah, the creative act of God (*Allâh*), which, paradoxically, is necessary for the very comprehensiveness of His Unity, is the essential and eternally renewed cosmogonic act (*illâ*) of creation (*ilâha*) from nothingness (*lâ*); in the second Shahadah, the revelatory act of God (*Allâh*), which is necessary for the primacy of His Mercy, is through the function of message and messenger (*rasûl*), instantiated in the Prophet (*Muhammad*).

Divine Self-Disclosure



This dual movement, at once from man to God and from God to man, recalls the *hadîth qudsî*, "...And if he takes one step towards Me, I take ten steps towards him. And if he comes to Me walking, I go towards him running." It is here, in the meeting between man and God, that the two Shahadahs find at once their sufficient purpose and consummation, and thus also the consummation of Unity and Mercy.

1. Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p.49.
2. For a fuller account of these interwoven themes, see Victor Danner, "Shahadah," *Parabola* 11:1 (1987).
3. On the metaphor of existence as an image in a mirror, see William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p.25.
4. Here, see Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1994), p.152.
5. Termed an *istiithna*, or "exception".
6. Here, see Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p.360.
7. Needless to say, this does *not* imply that Muhammad is "a god": there is no divinization of the Prophet.
8. This description, while somewhat poetical, is reflected in Islamic metaphysics, where the same ontological reality is termed at once the "Breath of the All-Merciful" and the "Muhammadan Reality". See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 139.
9. As read in English, Arabic being the reverse of this.

Excerpted and expanded from "The Shahadah as Truth and as Way",
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