

CHRISTIANS IN SEARCH
OF A NAME FOR GOD:
THE RIGHT TO *ALLAH*



MOHAMED AJMAL BIN ABDUL RAZAK AL-AJDRUS

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Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC),
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)



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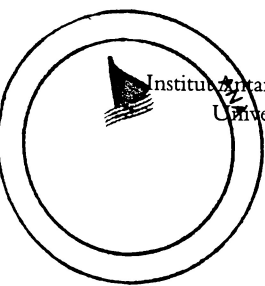
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Few incidents in recent times have elicited more caustic responses in the electronic media from the dissenting public as the controversial Allah issue. The heated debate on the permissibility of non-Muslims to use the word *Allah* has brought about strong reactions from informed and uninformed individuals, scholars and laymen. An issue that should have been handled with more tact has now exploded on to the public scene where little concern is shown for the sensitivity of the majority.^{1,2,3} On the part of the Christians, their argument has mainly centered on their use of the word in the Arab world, its use in this region for close to 400 years,⁴ and its present usage in Sabah and Sarawak. The proponents of this position have also argued that their insistence on using the word is purely academic and not motivated by thoughts of proselytizing. Moreover, they

¹ It must be emphasized here that Muslim objection to the usage is to Christians and not the Sikhs since Sikhism has its ties to Islam and hence have naturally common terms and concepts with it. The reaction of the Sikhs to the decree of HRH, the Sultan of Selangor, that the word cannot be used by non-Muslims, was less than gracious. Instead of explaining why they, too, used the word *Allah*, they opted to question the decree in a less than amicable manner.

² (Jan. 8, 2013). "'Allah' decree prevents Sikhs from reading holy book." *Malaysiakini*. (Jan. 10, 2013.) "'Your highness, God has many names but...". *Malaysiakini*.

³ Abdul Rahim Sabri. (Jan. 11, 2013). "NGOs protest use of 'Allah' in Malay Bible...again. *Malaysiakini*. (Jan.10, 2013). "Sultan embroils himself in 'Allah' controversy." *Malaysiakini*.

⁴ Debra Chong. (2 March, 2012). "Christians mark 400 years of Malay Bible as 'Allah' case drags on." *The Malaysian Insider*.

state that no evidence has yet been presented to show Christians are involved in converting or wanting to convert Muslims in this country.

On the other hand, the Muslim argument has been that Allah is a proper name,⁵ and hence cannot be used by Christians since their concept of God is diametrically opposed to that of Islam. More importantly for Muslims, Christian use of the word *Allah* would surely cause confusion in society. If allowed, one would not be able to discern easily whether a message was from the Bible or Quran or Christianity or Islam. We have pointed out that *Tuhan*, a truly Malay word, is at their disposal; however, they insist on wanting to use the word *Allah*. Muslims view the aggressive and confrontational position of Christians in addressing this issue, expressed through individuals representing various religious organizations and associations, with suspicion.

Of the articles that have been written on the subject and the statements made by Muslim scholars and clergymen, almost all, if not all, have concentrated on the argument that Allah is a proper name. This answer appears to satisfy Muslims, but not Christians, liberal Muslims and some adherents of other religions. Furthermore, on the part of Muslims, no attempt has been made, thus far, to show

⁵ (Jan.12, 2013). “‘Allah’ yes-men may be deemed apostates.” *Malaysiakini*. “Johore Islamic Affairs Council adviser, Nooh Gadut, today said those who allow the abuse of the word ‘Allah’ can be considered as apostates and should repent immediately.” (1). Nooh said the Quran clearly explains in Surah Al Taha, Verse 14... “Verily, I am Allah. There is no god except Me. So worship Me and establish prayers for My remembrance.”

whether Christians are or have ever been engaged in the proselytization of Malays or Muslims in this region. Neither has there been any effort made to address this issue from a linguistic or historical point of view. In other words, Muslims have not answered the arguments from the context of the advent of Christianity to this part of the world or explained how the usage of the word *Allah* came about in Sabah and Sarawak and why the objection of Muslims is valid and reasonable and cannot be dismissed and ignored.

The subject at hand, which has produced this disturbing and alarming rhetoric in the media and the public, was sparked by the controversial ruling made by the High Court judge, Datuk Lee Bau Lan,⁶ a Malacca-born, purportedly staunch Christian, who ruled in favor of the Roman Catholic Church's use of the word *Allah* in its publication, the *Herald*, in a lawsuit filed by the Archbishop against the government. (The Jill Ireland Lawrence Bill case is about the seizure of CDs and other paraphernalia containing the word *Allah* in Christian literature in Sarawak.⁷) In the aftermath of the decision, the Christians in West Malaysia saw it as a victory and a sign of changing times while Malays felt that their domain had been invaded

⁶ It is interesting to note that the judicial system allowed such a sensitive issue to be heard by a non-Muslim judge who may not have been able to completely understand the length and breath of the arguments from an Islamic perspective, especially since the matter pertains to Allah as a proper name.

⁷ Hafiz Yatim. (Jan.10, 2013). "Allah ban defies court ruling and PM's circular." *Malaysiakini*. "The May 2009 order by the court, according to Annou [Xavier, counsel for the defense], stated that the Court ruled that, 'the applicant be given a declaration that it is within her legitimate expectation to use the word Allah and have ownership, to obtain, use, and import such materials including printing items with the word for her own practice.'"(1).

and trampled by a ruling that did not take into consideration their position or sensitivities. Much of the discussion on this, especially on *Malaysiakini*, has been political in nature rather than religious. Many of the harsh and provocative comments have been from Bishop Dr. Paul Tan Chee Ing, the Roman Catholic prelate of the Malacca-Johore diocese, whose stand is variously represented by the journalist, Terrence Netto, and supported by Church elders.

In the past few years, the issue has been made to appear in the media by Christians as an infringement on their right to practice religion. Invariably, Article 11 has been invoked to emphasize this. In the centuries that Christians have been in this country, they have never ever been denied the right to practice their religion.⁸ The disputes that have arisen in recent decades have been, amongst other things, on zoning, building and other housekeeping details in the nation. We are not living in a violent environment marred by religious conflict. We are not faced with the kind of tragedy witnessed in Myanmar, where Buddhists are slaughtering Rohingyas and Burmese Muslims indiscriminately. We are neither dealing with the extermination or the genocide of an ethnic group like the one carried out on Bosnian Muslims by Catholic Croatians and Orthodox Christian Serbians nor witnessing the devastating results of Christian-Muslim conflicts like that in Timur Leste. If anything, the hype surrounding this Allah issue has made us more wary of the costs of thoughtless

Article 11 3 has been quoted by Christians as though they have been denied the right to practice their religion because of this Allah issue, a clear distortion of the situation. BS Poh. (Jan. 25, 2013). "An appeal to the Christian community, drop 'Allah.' *Malaysiakini*.

provocations and the fragile nature of multireligious and multiracial societies. Already the desecration of churches and mosques has taken place here. We do not want it to escalate to greater heights. However, history shows that when discussions and talks breakdown, emotions will take over and people may resort to violence and vent their anger in uncivilized ways. Therefore, religious authorities cannot mark the situation with statements that adherents will readily read or misread as a license or encouragement to act aggressively. (We praise Allah for the peace we enjoy in our country, and we must not assume that playing up the sentiments of the public on a religious issue will not have dire consequences.^{9,10})

Even with all the discussion that has hit the media, it is clear that Christians and Muslims alike from among the learned or laymen have not adequately or completely grasped the whole issue, at least this is evident from the arguments that have been presented thus far. Even ordinary Muslims who hold that Christians should not use the word *Allah*, do not quite realize that their position has been secured by faith rather than facts. For them this may be enough. As for the educated Muslim sympathizers of the Christian point of view, they have been swayed too soon by their conscience to acquiesce and sometimes rush to treacherous and traitorous concessions. Recently, even the learned Professor Emeritus Shad Saleem Faruqi, “a legal adviser, during a question-and-answer session in Kuching”

⁹ (Jan. 11, 2013). “Group: M’sia only country to restrain use of ‘Allah’ word.” *Malaysiakini*.

¹⁰ (Jan. 28, 2013). “So Harussani, are Muslims in other countries all infidels?” *Malaysiakini*.

concluded that “communally Sabahans and Sarawakians are far ahead of the Peninsula Malaysians. Intellectually speaking, it is quite funny for someone to prescribe to someone else how God should be addressed...Many so-called religious experts argue that the word ‘Allah’ is unique to Islam and that it must not be used by others. With all due respect, this argument hasn’t a leg to stand on.”¹¹ However, Faruqi must concede that the situation is no more hilarious and absurd than for him to allow Hindus and Buddhists to call their objects of worship Allah. This free-for-all generosity of the likes of Faruqi spells a kind of compromise that reduces religion to generalities and robs it of its identity and particulars. His dismissive conclusion is erroneous because of a faulty assumption---that Muslims object to the use of the word *Allah* by Christians because it is unique to Islam. On the contrary, it is because it has always been unique in this country in that it was used as a proper noun. Malay Muslims are saying that if it is used in the manner that Christians desire, it can lead to confusion amongst ill-informed Muslims. It would be challenging for people to tell whether they were listening to or reading about a message from Islam or Christianity. This position is sound and irrefutable. Faruqi continues by saying that “Muslims are not gullible or unintelligent,” implying that all Muslims are knowledgeable about Islam, and he believes that those who make this claim “had a very weak knowledge of Islamic teachings and its history.”¹² It is interesting that to assume all Muslims are informed about Islam is probably the

¹ Dukou Papau 2013 . “Professor: Learn from East M’sia on Use of Allah.” *Malaysiakini* .

² Ibid. 2.

more gullible stand and to think those who do not agree with his position are ignorant about history or weak religiously is even more regrettable¹³.

One of the points that has been repeated often in the arguments presented by Christians, including the learned Bishop Dr. Paul Tan Chee Ing and their supporters, is that the word *Allah* was used 400 years ago in the Malay Bible. The date 1612 is often quoted.

In order to address this issue, let us look at the history of the translation of the Malay Bible, the first non-European Bible ever produced.¹⁴ Rev. Albert Cornelius Ruyl did translate the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (not the whole Bible) into Malay in 1612, but these two books did not see the light of day until 1629 in Enkhuisen and in 1638 in Amsterdam. In 1646, Rev. M. Van Hassel, one of the directors of the East India Company, completed the Gospels of Luke and John. Hence, in 1651 the four gospels and the Acts of Apostles were published together. The whole New Testament appeared only in 1668. The first complete Malay Bible, consisting of the Old Testament and New Testament, appeared only in 1731 and 1733. These used the Roman characters, and the first Arabic character (Jawi) Malay Bible was published in Calcutta in 1822, a work that was produced by Rev. R. S. Hutchings. These are the facts, and they have been presented here to place the argument in context. It is true that the word *Allah* was seen in public for the first time in Christian scriptures 384 years ago and in the

¹³ This write-up will present a part of history that most are ignorant about.

¹⁴ One may conjecture why this was so. It may be because of the perception of the preachers of the Malays as has been quoted in various places in this study.

first completed Malay Bible 272 years ago. However, the so-called 400-year argument gives no credence to those who make it because they are extolling the acts of oppressors and colonizers who did as they pleased. No consent was given by the Muslims or sought by the colonizers to use the word. They took as they desired and gave as they saw fit.

Hence, the Christians, including Bishop Paul Tan, in quoting the past are in essence ignoring the atrocities and violence and harm that was done to the Malays and this land throughout the history of Christianity in this country, which saw the raping of women and the pillaging of our national treasures, both in the form of literary works and artifacts. Hence, they should not advance this argument with glee and pomp since it is wrought with the blood of locals and the plunder of our land.

In another statement made by the Bishop, he states “The historical evidence is [incontrovertible] that the term [Allah] was used by the Christians in pre-Islamic times.”¹⁵

The Bishop is right in saying that the term was used by Arab Christians ‘in pre-Islamic times.’ In fact, it was used by pagans and also Arab Jews. This in itself makes the case for the continuity of the religion of Islam from the beginning, though Muslims believe that distortions took place through time that subsequent revelations corrected.

Terece Netto. (Jan. 5, 2013). “Bishop relieved by Mat Sabu’s reassurance on ‘Allah’. *Malaysiakini*.

Hence, to Muslims, it is no surprise that the word *Allah* exists even in the Vedas.

As for the Malay language itself, we know from its rich vocabulary that the Malays have adopted words from other languages from the beginning of its civilization.¹⁶ They have made some of these words their own and used them in their own context. For example, the word *ulama* in Arabic is a plural denoting learned men. The singular is *alim*. Yet, in Malay the plural is used as a singular. Malays say *mashaAllah* as an exclamation for bad news, Arabs for good. The usage in Malay determined it to be so. No Arab can make the argument that it is wrong. Similarly, Allah always meant the singular, one God. “Ya Allah, Ya Tuhanku” is a common expression in the Malay Muslim prayer. The first part calling on God by name and the second to affirm that He is God. Translated into English, this would be, “Oh Allah, Oh my God.” Having said this, we are starting from the premise that Allah is not a Malay word and defies translation because it is a proper noun. If it could have been substituted in Malay, Tuhan would have sufficed. Furthermore, “Ya Tuhan, Ya Allahku” does not exist in Malay for this very reason. Even when Malay Muslims

In the 1918 Volume VIII issue of *The Moslem World*, under the title “Malay, a Leading Vernacular of the World,” the writer states, “[Malay] is a leading member of a vast family of languages, commonly styled the Austronesian, or Malayo Polynesian, or Oceanic family, which is of Asiatic origin, but has an almost entirely insular domain...The chief difficulties in learning Malay consist in remembering a large number of words, for it has a large vocabulary; in the structure of its morphological system of affixes, i.e., unextended words which otherwise suffers no change; and in a thorough grasp of the syntactical structure of the language.” 186-7.

mention His name when speaking in English, it is not translated.

However, Christians argue that they have chosen to translate in the Bible Allah to mean God and Tuhan to mean Lord. This argument has no precedent in the Malay language. There is no equivalent for the word Lord in the divine sense in Malay. *Lord* is *Tuan* in the human context. *Tuhan* is never used to mean *Lord* in Malay. In order to explain its meaning, and not provide a substitute for it, the dictionary defines Lord and God as Tuhan. Lord can be Tuan, if the Christians choose to use it. In fact, in the 1677 Oxford Malay Bible, the word *Tuan* is used for Lord, *Allah* for God, and the word *Jesus* retained. In Shellabear's 1912 modern Malay Bible, he used the word *Allah* for God, *Isa* for *Jesus*, and the word *Allah Tuhan* for *Lord God*. However, this is even more confusing because the translation for the latter should have read *Tuhan Allah*¹⁷ and not *Allah Tuhan* in Malay. Hence, even in Malay Christian literature there was no consistency in usage or spelling as employed by the priests.

The adamancy of the Christians to use Allah continues to baffle Muslims and has courted justified suspicion. The Christians must agree that using the word as intended by them in this part of Malaysia can cause confusion. "Allah berkata dalam Al-Kitab" will surely cause problems to unsuspecting Muslims, especially those who may not know better. In a related discussion, Bishop Tan

¹⁷ This is the expression used by Hindus in Malaysia when they are speaking to Malays and referring to Allah.

could not resist the temptation to jump into the fray and ask seemingly innocently, “Why if the word has meaning exclusive to Quranic [precepts] about God, how come, then, [have] Christian Arabs and Indonesians [] been using the term for centuries in prayer and in discourse to mean the one God?”¹⁸ Already the Bishop is asking a question that shows that the word can cause confusion. He is not making a case to use the word to mean one God! For the Bishop to make it appear that Muslim objection to the Christian use of the word is in its reference to one God is mischievous and misleading. Moreover, to imply that Arab Christians and Muslims use this word in the same context is deceptive. To say that it is an Arabic word and is used by the Arab Christians is a seemingly strong argument; however, this is not so. In order to make a distinction between themselves, the Christian Arabs and the Muslims use the word differently: since the word *Allah* does not mean One God to the Arab Christians, they say *Allah al-Ab* (God, the Father), and *Allah al-Ibn* (God, the Son) and *Allah al-Ruhul al-Quddus* (God, the Holy Spirit) accordingly. When Christian Arabs use the word *Allah*, it is to mean the word *God* in general, but Muslims, as we have mentioned earlier, use the word *Allah* to call upon Him by name. Amongst Arabs, each side is aware of the denotation and connotation and implications of its use and misuse.

Hence, the context in which Malays use it would be different from the way it is used by the Christian Arabs, so this cannot be weighed into the argument. Using a word

¹ Terence Netto (Jan 15, 2013). “Bishop painfully puzzled by PAS flip-flop.” *Malaysiakini*.

does not explain how it is used or its use. Arguing the Christian Arabs use it is no argument at all. It is their language, and hence, it is a word they have the right to use. The Malaysian Christians want to use the word *Allah* not because the Arabs use it. They want to use it because the Malays do. The Christian Arab argument is invalid because the Arab word for God has no more place in a Malay translation than does the Finnish term *Jumala*, if it were not a proper name. The choice of wanting to use the word is not centered around the argument that they like the sound of the word *God* in Arabic and hence would like to use it, too. It is not centered on the argument that it depicts the exact meaning of what they conceptualize as God in their religion or that there is no possibility this word can confuse. It is centered on the argument that it is used by the Malays to address God, hence, they would like to use the same word, too, even though they know that the concepts differ. Bishop Tan does not have a congregation that consists of Arabs. However, the fervor with which he is fighting to use the word *Allah* would make one think that he did.¹⁹ The

¹⁹ (Jan. 9, 2013). “We’ll continue to use ‘Allah’ declares churches council.” *Malaysiakini*. In this article Rev. Hermen Shastri, the General-Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) defiantly announces that, “We wish to reiterate our stand that Malaysian Christians have been using the word ‘Allah’ in their Malay Bible and devotional life for centuries...That being the case, we shall continue this practice—a right guaranteed to us in our federal constitution (Article 11) and call on all parties to respect this fundamental right.” In the same article, the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) Chairperson, Bishop Datuk Ng Moon Hing, makes the same stand. This was in the aftermath of HRH the Sultan of Selangor barring non Muslims its use. (Jan. 16, 2013). “PAS don’t force your views on us, says group.” *Malaysiakini*. “The National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF), a national body representing the evangelical Christian community, has criticized PAS for interfering with how other religions should call their gods.” This united stand is a clear indication that Christians will not readily back down from this issue. Article 11 has been quoted

fact is the word *Tuhan* is at their disposal, a word that conveys whatever meaning the Christians intend and is used widely in the context they desire. One could argue that the word *Tuhan* is more accurate in the Christian context since it allows the depiction of more than one God. Islam believes in the sanctity of the Oneness of God. It is the concept of *Tawhid* (Oneness of God) and *Trinity* that separates both religions.

In this country, the word *Allah* was neither introduced by the Christians nor the Jews. It was a word that was brought to the Malay vocabulary by the Indian Muslims and the Arab Muslims. Hence, the word was used to refer to the one God, Allah, by name, from the beginning. The Christians use it, as we have shown earlier, in reference to all three entities of Trinity or disambiguation. The concept of “Oneness” in Christianity and Islam is markedly different. This issue forks the two religions. To allow Christians to use the word *Allah* would be to assent to its unnatural conception in the region through its introduction by colonizers and oppressors in the 1600s.

The Christians, if they wish, can consider more amicable options. They should think about introducing into the Malay vocabulary the Aramaic word of address for God that Christ himself purportedly used: *Eloi, Eli, Eloah, Elohim, Yahweh* or *Jehovah*²⁰ (*Ya Huwa*). If they are sincere

as a “free for all” law that should give all religions the right to do as they please, even in violating the sanctity of other religions, in this case, Islam.

² There are those amongst Christians who postulate that they should use only the divine name since it would be impossible to draw close to God without

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