



CONTROVERSY OVER THE TERM
“ALLAH” IN MALAYSIA

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Azhar Wan Ahmad



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CONTROVERSY OVER THE TERM “ALLAH” IN MALAYSIA

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Editor

Wan Azhar Wan Ahmad



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Preface

When the controversy over the usage of the word ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims erupted towards the end of 2007, IKIM came forward with a series of intelligent explanation why non-Muslims, particularly in Malaysia, should not use the term ‘Allah’ in their holy book and other related materials. This position was first deliberated in an article, “Kemelut Pemikiran Agama”, by the then Director-General of IKIM, published by *Utusan Malaysia* on 6 January 2008.

The chaos persisted and turned viral. To reduce the resulting confusion, IKIM took further efforts to hold a number of programmes, among others: a special lecture on “Who’s ‘God’ in Christianity” (16 March 2009); and a closed door discourse on ‘Penerangan Kes Kalimah Allah: Implikasi Perundangan dan Perlembagaan’ (1 April 2009).

This was followed by a Muzakarah Pakar (Experts’ Discussion) on ‘Terjemahan ‘God’ sebagai ‘Allah’: Mengenalpasti Punca Permasalahan dan Penyelesaiannya’ (21 January 2010). Nine speakers deliberated their papers, including two able Senior Fellows from IKIM.

One of the IKIM papers presented in the Muzakarah, prepared by Md Asham Ahmad, was later published as a monograph, *Antara Nama dan Hakikat: Kemelut Kalimah Allah* (2010). It is a must-read ‘hand-out’ to all interested and concerned parties.

IKIM has also published a special edition of its bimonthly magazine, *VISI* (Bil. 109, 2010) where selected articles on ‘Allah’ written by its academic researchers were reproduced.

The public debate on the ‘Allah’ issue continues. The disputing non-Malays and Christians are more inclined to put forth their points and arguments in English. In fact, the middle class Malays/Muslims are equally comfortable to follow the dispute in that language. Therefore, there is a need for credible explanations or counter arguments to be made available in the same language as well. Reiterating and consolidating its position, IKIM steps forward again

to meet the scarcity of English materials on the subject matter—hence, this work.

I express my deepest appreciation to all paper writers, Dr Wan Azhar as the editor who also prepared the Introduction and Concluding Remarks, and all parties involved, directly or indirectly, in the publication of this small but important compilation of English articles.

Datuk Nik Mustapha Haji Nik Hassan
IKIM Director-General

Introduction*

Dr Wan Azhar Wan Ahmad*

It is a fairly common knowledge that the prolonged dispute about the usage—or rather misuse—of the term ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims in Malaysia, particularly the Christians, was triggered by the application of the word as a translation for ‘God’ in *The Herald*, a Catholic weekly, in 2007. They claimed that it is their right to do so.

The Christians, and amazingly certain quarters of non-Christians, in championing the so-called right of the Christians to employ the word ‘Allah’ in the above manner, argued, among others, that ‘Allah’ has been used in the Bible for centuries; that Allah has been used by the Arab-Christians even before the coming of Islam; that at the international level, Christians in various parts of the world have been using ‘Allah’¹ without problems to Muslims; that at the national level, Christians in Sabah and Sarawak have been using the term for decades without offending the Muslims. They appear to insist that there is no *mala fide* involved in all the aforementioned situations.

Shell-shocked by this claim, Muslims roared to counter argue, among others, based on the decree of the Federal Government dated 16 May 1986 that certain terms namely ‘Allah’, ‘Solat’, ‘Baitullah’ and ‘Kaabah’ exclusively belong to Islam, thus literally disallowing non-Muslims from using them in their religious scriptures, rituals, practices and related publications.

* This Introduction is an improved version of the writer’s article, “The ‘Allah’ issue re-articulated”, published in *The Star*, 19 February 2013.

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¹ For smooth reading, the term ‘Allah’ and its purported translations/renderings (like God, Tuhan, Yahweh, etc.) are not placed in quotation mark each time each of them appears in this work.

Some sections of Muslims have reasons to believe that the insistence by the Christians and their sympathisers to use the term Allah is for the subtle purpose of propagating Christianity to the Muslim community. In this regard, Muslims resort to the Federal Constitution and other statutes/enactments as 'shields', citing articles and provisions that seem to protect them from any such missionary attack.

Many are not aware that all the above arguments by the Christians are not intelligently sound, or at least questionable. Some quarters are exploiting, manipulating and manouevering over the issue for political gains or respective group interests. Whatever the situations and challenges are, Muslims are not supposed to seek protection or legal redress by *merely* resorting to the Cabinet's decree, or even to the Federal and/or State constitutions or the various other statutes. To safeguard the sanctity of Islam in particular, Muslims at times and, more importantly, need to look for reasons, argumentations or justifications far beyond these legal instruments, something that is deeply rooted in knowledge and the real truth.

The Allah controversy seems to enter into a more tranquil domain with the ruling of the Kuala Lumpur High Court (December 2009), arguably allowing the Christians to use the term Allah in their scripture and other ecclesiastical materials. Of course, this judgment pleases one camp but dissatisfies another. The latter has appealed against the decision and the case is now pending at the Court of Appeal.

Obviously the tension between the two groups persists, and any 'ultimate' amicable solution is yet to be seen on the horizon. There is no guarantee that the much awaited decision of the Appellate Court, if any, would effectively extinguish the fire and settle the dust down. It is likely that this case may be further brought up to the Federal Court, the highest court of the land, by the aggrieved party.

When the controversy and its ugly consequences resurfaced due to a statement by a political leader over the Christmas Day off

2012, there is a need to revisit the issue and rearticulate certain points raised by some academics at IKIM which, if sensibly heeded to by all disputing parties, could reduce the resulting chaos and confusion.

From the very beginning, when the controversy broke out at the end of 2007, IKIM was the earliest—if not the first—to put forward a chain of successive most powerful intellectual and rational arguments in rebutting the claims made by the Christians. It centres on proper translation or rendering that relates to the correct use of language.

IKIM's views and explanations on this have been shared with the masses via deliberation in various open and closed programmes (seminars, experts' discussions, etc), IKIM radio channel (IKIMfm), and publications of monographs, books as well as articles in magazines, newspapers and websites. Definitely all the above do not negate similar efforts carried out by other government agencies at both federal and state levels, NGOs, other independent bodies and concerned individuals.

About this Monograph

This work compiles some selected English writings on the controversy. The reasons for undertaking such a task are: (i) Most of the arguments by Christians have been put forth in English; (ii) A considerable number of either Muslims or otherwise are more comfortable to follow the ongoing debate in that language; and (iii) The scarcity of credible Muslim responses in the same medium.

The first article included here comes from the Institute's Director-General himself, Datuk Dr Syed Ali Tawfik al-Attas, as he then was. In this article, "A Corruption of Religious Thought," Syed Ali logically and intelligently applies theological, historical, social, linguistic and legal arguments to question and refute the claims by the Christians.

One of his most important key points lies in the fact that the Christians are wrong in their comprehension and application of the

Malay language for the translation. He emphasizes that 'Allah' is the proper name for God in Islam. Therefore, it cannot and should not be translated into any language. This explains why Muslims all over the globe are using the same term to refer to their God, not simply any alternative translation that might be available in their respective languages.

The entire issue somehow drove other able researchers at IKIM to do their own studies on the subject matter and came up with other reliable writings. Inevitably, their opinions and findings overlap on certain points but they have been explained from different angles with additional inputs complementary to each other, and thus, enriching the discourse.

The second article by Dr Mohd Sani Badron, "Heresy Arises from Words Wrongly Used," reinforces the first one. Supported by quotations from certain leading Christian priests and theologians, he shows that even the religion itself disapproves of any attempt to paint its trinity concept with any Islamically-inclined contents.

Citing scholars and sources from Islamic tradition, Sani further proves that indeed Allah is a proper name or noun, and it is a non-derivative word. He stresses that 'God' is a common noun whereby the only correct Malay translation for it is 'Tuhan.'

This linguistic dimension was further expanded by the third article by Dr Mohd Zaidi Ismail, "Understanding the 'Allah' Controversy." To him the controversy pertains to the problem of correct translation related to the correct usage of language.

Consolidating the two earlier writers, Zaidi reemphasizes that 'Allah' is the proper name for the Absolute one God of Islam. As such, it cannot be translated and must be basically maintained as it is.

The last article is another interesting writing from two young Muslims, Imran Mustafa and Wan Mohd Aimran Wan Mohd Kamil, ¹¹, "Side-stepping the 'Allah' Row: Questions on Translations." They ¹²ey

are not IKIM academic members but their line of argumentations substantively bodes well with the position of the Institute, thus their inclusion in this small work. They provide more examples and illustrations on most of the points explained by earlier contributors. This piece perhaps drives the last nail into the contentious encounter.

On the one hand, ‘side-stepping’ is used to signify the exploits by the Christians to confuse the real characteristics of the issue by incorporating other matters that pertain to rights, law and politics. On the other hand, it represents or implies efforts by the Muslims to circumvent the confusion convoluting the issue by returning the discussion back to the very crux of the problem, that is, the accuracy and propriety of translating ‘God’ as ‘Allah’. In other words, the former attempts to avoid from analyzing the actual root of the problem whereas the latter tries to free people from the confusion caused by the Christians.

While the second and third articles are more straight-forward for comprehension, the first and last pieces relatively require more attention and careful reading from readers. Nevertheless, one notable common feature in all those articles is that they highlight, focus and give emphasis on the fact that claims by the Christians can be sufficiently refuted based on the linguistic aspect alone, without necessarily having to go to theology or other legal, ethical and philosophical realms.

A Corruption of Religious Thought*

Dr Syed Ali Tawfik al-Attas*

Reporting from Petaling Jaya, Joseph Masilamany reflected an opinion that “the use of the word ‘Allah’ to refer to God among Christians has been widely practiced for generations in many countries and it is not meant to offend or confuse Muslims”;¹ this of course according to Christian leaders. The aforementioned reporter had interviewed the editor of the local Catholic weekly, Father Lawrence Andrew, and had also presumably spoken to the General-Secretary of the Council of Churches Malaysia, Reverend Herman Shastri. The former reportedly claimed that “the term ‘Allah’ used by Christians or in Christian literature was not intended to offend Muslims or create confusion. We follow the Bible. The Malay language Bible uses ‘Allah’ for God and Tuhan for Lord.” He went on to claim that “since the early 19th century, Catholics in Malaya had prayer books in the Malay language and ‘Allah’ was used to refer to God.” In addition, he alleged that “the Maltese Catholics also use the term ‘Allah’ to refer to God and so do Christians in Indonesia, Pakistan and the Middle East.”

According to Rev. Herman, “Christians living in Muslim-majority countries are using the term ‘Allah’ in reference to God during their liturgical celebrations. *Even if the authorities disallow the use of certain words, the churches will continue to use them because it has to do with our sacred scriptures.*” (italics mine). Similar sentiments were also indicated in a report published by *The Star* on the 28th of December, 2007. In that report, Father Lawrence went so far as to claim, “we are of the view that we have the right to use the word ‘Allah’.” To wit he adds, “We have decided to have our legal position to use the word to be *determined by the courts.*” (italics mine).

* This article was translated into Malay by Dr Mohd Sani Badron, “Kemelut Pemikiran Agama”, published in *Utusan Malaysia*, 6 January 2008; and reproduced in *VISI* (Bil. 109, 2010), 3-7.

*The writer was IKIM Director-General from 2005 - 9.

¹ *The Sun*, 24 December 2007.



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