

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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Should Christians Use The Word “Allah”? (Rom. 1:18-25)

by B. S. Poh

Who is “Allah”? Is he not the god of the Muslims? Or is He the God of the Christians as well? Are Christians and Muslims worshipping the same God when they use the same name, “Allah”? Or are they worshipping two different gods using the same name? Should Christians use “Allah” as the name of the living and true God? Have not the Christians in Arab countries been using “Allah” to refer to God long before the rise of Islam?

The question of whether Christians should use “Allah” to refer to God has been raised in Malaysia and Indonesia - two countries whose languages share the same root, and which remain similar to a great extent. However, the issue of whether or not “Allah” should be used by Christians to refer to God arose out of different circumstances in the two countries. These should be clearly understood so that the attempts to seek a common solution would not result in Christians from the two countries talking at cross-purposes.

Strenuous attempts have been made in each country to find a solution to the problem under the respective circumstances. To my knowledge, no over-arching attempt has been made to seek a solution to the common problem arising from the two different sets of circumstances. It is my purpose to attempt to answer the questions raised above. This I will do by giving a brief sketch of the background to the problem in each of the two countries, by considering the linguistic and theological issues involved, and by suggesting a solution.

I. The Different Circumstances.

Historically

It is generally agreed that the peoples of the Malay Archipelago, apart from recent migrants, share a common ancestry, although there is no complete agreement as to their origin. One common view is that these peoples originally migrated south from Central China, and were of Mongolian-Tibetan stock.

The Malay Archipelago also share a common history. Srivijaya was an ancient Malay kingdom based in Palembang on the island of Sumatra. Throughout its long period in power, from the 7th century to the 13th century, its rule extended over large areas of Sumatra, western Java, and much of the Malay Peninsula. It controlled the Malacca and Sunda straits, and therefore the spice trade. The Malay culture spread throughout Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, and western Borneo. The Srivijaya kingdom was a stronghold of Mahayana Buddhism.

The Majapahit empire, based in eastern Java, was in power from 1293 to around 1500. It was the last and most powerful of the Hindu kingdoms in Indonesia. Its influence extended to much of southern Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Sumatra, Bali, and the Philippines. The Majapahit navy took Palembang, the Srivijayan capital, in 1377, bringing the Srivijaya kingdom to an end. About the time Majapahit was founded, Muslim traders and missionaries began entering the area. The empire began to decline with a war of succession that started in 1401. It finally collapsed in 1478, with the rise of the Sultanate of Malacca.

The earliest evidence of significant conversion to Islam dates to the 13th century in northern Sumatra. Driven by trade links, Islam gradually spread throughout Indonesia. By the end of the 16th

century, Islam had become the dominant religion in Java and Sumatra. The Malacca Sultanate played a significant role in the spread of Islam throughout the Malay Archipelago. Other Malay sultanates - including the ones based in Aceh (1496-1903), Banten (1526-1813), and Mataram (1500s-1700s) - were overshadowed by that in Malacca.

The founder of the Malacca Sultanate was Parameswara, a Srivijayan prince of Palembang who fled Sumatra following the Majapahit attack in 1377. He made his base in Singapore, but had to flee following the attack of the Siamese. He settled in Malacca in 1394. In 1414 he converted to Islam and changed his name to Raja Iskandar Shah. He established Malacca as a major international port and the centre of the spread of Islam to the whole of the Malay Archipelago. The Malacca Sultanate forged relations with China in order to ward off Siamese attacks. During this period, corresponding with the maritime exploration of Admiral Zheng-he of the Ming Dynasty in China, mass settlement of Chinese people in Malacca occurred.

The Malacca Sultanate lasted from 1400-1511. The Portuguese colonised Malacca and most of Indonesia from 1512-1850. In Malacca, the Dutch defeated the Portuguese in 1641 and ruled over it until 1795. The Dutch, however, were more interested in developing Batavia (Jakarta) as their administrative centre. From 1602 to 1942, the Dutch ousted the Portuguese and ruled over what is now Indonesia. In 1824 Malacca was ceded to the British in the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in exchange for Bencoolen (Bengkulu) on southwestern Sumatra. The Netherlands finally recognised Indonesia's independence in 1945, after resisting the independence movement until 1949. In Malaysia, the British granted independence to the country in 1957. Both countries were briefly occupied by the Japanese from 1942-1945.

While Muslim missionary activities in these parts of the world started in the 13th century, Christian missionary activities started from the 16th century. Today, Indonesia has the most Muslims among the nations of the world. It has a population of nearly 240 million, of which 86% are Muslims while Christians constitute 9%. Malaysia has a population of over 25 million, of which 60% are Muslims and 9% are Christians. The other peoples are Hindus, Buddhists, animists, etc.

We summarise before proceeding farther. The original peoples of the Malay Archipelago shared the same ancestry. The languages of Indonesia and Malaysia share a common root. The history of both countries overlapped to a great extent. Both countries came under Islamic influence from the 13th century. Indonesia was under Dutch influence for three centuries before achieving independence. Malaysia was under British influence for one-and-a-half centuries before achieving independence. These factors have significant influence over the Indonesian and Malay languages of today. As we consider the use of religious words, and especially the name for God, these influences must be borne in mind.

In Malaysia

When Malaysia gained independence from the British, the three main ethnic groups - the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians - agreed to accept a Constitution that gave rise to the socio-political background relevant to our discussion on the use of religious terms. The Malays are Muslims by law. Islam is the official religion of the country while other religions may be freely practised. Malay is the official language of the nation. The sultans and governors are the heads of the Islamic faith in their respective states. The Constitution also provides for each state to pass laws to restrict the propagation of other faiths to the Muslims. No such laws were passed, however, until the 1980s. The Constitution also provides for the privileged status of the Malays, and the sultans, which may not be questioned. All these laws are subject to interpretation to some degrees, but their primary intents are clear.

The race riot of 1969 led to the formulation of a policy of affirmative actions to redress what was perceived to be an imbalance among the ethnic groups, so that the majority Malays can compete with the economically stronger non-Malays on an even playing field. To this day, this policy is a subject of great dissatisfaction with the non-Malays and one of embarrassment to not a few Malays. The non-Malays would not want to question the privileged status of the sultans, the national language, and the official religion. The affirmative actions to help the Malays, however, have gone beyond their intended purpose such that their implementation have given citizens and foreigners alike the clear impression

that this is a racist country. Many young people have gone overseas to study and refused to return, many middle-class families have emigrated, and many successful tycoons have moved their businesses overseas. Concern has been expressed over the great brain-drain to the country, but the actions taken to address the problem have amounted to mere lip-service.

In December 1981 the government of Malaysia published a law prohibiting “the printing, publication, sale, issue, circulation or possession of the Alkitab in Indonesian” as it was considered “prejudicial to the national interest and security of the Federation”.¹ As a result of protest from Christian leaders, amendments were made in March 1982 so that the prohibition would not apply to churches and Christians. It was also agreed that the *Alkitab* may be imported by ten authorised Christian centres in Malaysia.

In June 1980 and December 1981, respectively, the states of Terengganu and Kelantan passed laws prohibiting non-Muslims from proselytising the Muslims.² Those laws contained lists of religious words and expressions that were prohibited to non-Islamic religions. They included, among others, the words *Allah*, *firman*, *ibadah*, *ilahi*, and *wahyu*. In 1986, the Ministry of Home Affairs drew up a list of prohibited words as well. Protests from Christians leaders led to the trimming down of those words from sixteen to four. The four prohibited words were *Allah*, *Baitullah*, *Kaabah*, and *solat*. Of the four, Christians have been using only one, namely *Allah*. It is clear that of all the religious words used by Christians, *Allah* is the most objectional to the authorities.

In 1987, ethnic relations were stirred to red-heat by the politicians such that the police had to act. In the infamous police operation, code-named “Operasi Lalang” (*lalang* is a tough and undesirable weed), over 200 leaders of various organisations were arrested under the controversial law known as the Internal Security Act (1960). In Malaysia, race and religion are two issues regarded as “sensitive”, which the politicians exploited to their own advantage. During the period of tension in 1987, one politician claimed that some 70,000 Malays had been converted to the Christian faith. This was, of course, not true, for only a handful of Malays had converted, and faced tremendous difficulties as a result. A sultan of one of the states in Malaysia issued a statement that the three greatest threats to the nation were Christianity, communism, and drug addiction, in that order. Following “Operasi Lalang”, all the states in Malaysia, except for Sabah and Sarawak which each has a sizeable Christian population, passed laws to prohibit the proselytization of Muslims. Together with this prohibition is the ban on the use of certain words, including *Allah*, in non-Muslim contexts.

In Indonesia

Compared to Malaysia, which gained independence from the British in 1957, Indonesia declared itself independent from the Netherlands more than ten years earlier, on 17 August 1945. The fact that the Netherlands only acknowledged that date as the day of independence for Indonesia five years later does not make any material difference to our discussion. Unlike in Malaysia, Indonesia was not founded on a Constitution that had elements that would be regarded as discriminatory in race and religion. Western-style democracy was adopted from the beginning and was put into practice from 1950 to 1957, the year Malaya gained independence to form the new nation of Malaysia. However, democracy was stifled in the reign of Sukarno, from 1957 to 1965, when he adopted an anti-western posture and aligned himself with Russia and China, the two communist giants of the time.

Significant outbursts of racial and religious conflicts occurred from the time of the Dutch East Indies era, right through to the post-Independence era. The Austronesian peoples in Indonesia had always perceived the ethnic Chinese to be disproportionately wealthy and greedy. The sporadic conflicts galvanised into state-sponsored pogroms against the ethnic Chinese when Suharto seized power in 1965. The anti-communist hysteria of the time meant that the ethnic Chinese of Indonesia, due to their association with the People’s Republic of China, were looked upon as a communist fifth column. Several anti-Chinese laws were passed to curtail Chinese culture and civil rights, including laws mandating closure of Chinese language schools, the adoption of “Indonesian” sounding names, and severe limitations on the construction of Buddhist temples. A major anti-Chinese pogrom occurred in 1998.

Religious riots occurred during the same period in various parts of the sprawling country. In

Kalimantan, there were clashes between the Muslim Madurese transmigrants and the Christian Dayaks in December 1996, and again in March 2001. A radical Islamist group, the Laskar Jihad, attacked the Christians in Maluku and other parts of the country in 1998. The Jihardists also carried out fatal attacks on seminaries in Java, and churches in Sulawesi. (I happen to know some of those who survived these attacks.)

The Suharto era came to an end in 1998 as Indonesia ushered in the *Reformasi* era. A series of events gave impetus to the reintroduction of western-style democracy. Following the 11 September 2001 incident in the United States of America,³ the world began to focus attention on Indonesia, which was accused of harbouring Islamic militant groups. The initial denials by Indonesia crumbled when the Bali bombings took place in 2002.⁴ The tsunami of December 2004 that killed more than 160,000 people in Indonesia alone, followed by the series of severe earthquakes in 2005, meant that there was sustained attention upon the country. The process of reformation has been characterised by greater freedom of speech, more open political debates, the official renunciation of racial and religious discrimination, and the introduction of meritocracy.

The greater freedom of religion continues to be marred by the extremist actions of Muslims against the Christians. Reports of harassment against Christian preachers and the forcible closure of churches by the Muslim communities in Java are heard of often. There is resentment over the conversion of their own numbers to the Christian faith, and the presence of Christians and churches in their midst. However, there is no law favouring the Muslims over the followers of other religions. Unlike in Malaysia where Christians are non-Malays and Malays are Muslims, the Christians in Indonesia consist of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

II. The Different Issues Involved

Historically

We have seen that the Malay and Indonesian languages have a common root. In fact, most people in both countries would still regard the two as variants of one language, just as we have British and American English. Attempts have been made to standardize the two languages so that both countries would use one common language, called *Malindo*. Although attempts are still being made in this direction, it seems to be an exercise in futility because nationalism and political expediency seem to be driving the development of the two languages along divergent paths. There may come a time when the two languages are regarded as completely different, although sharing a common root. Until that day comes, those who use these languages have to grapple with the commonalities and differences between them. Our interest lies in the translation of the Bible into these languages.

Protestantism was introduced to Indonesia by the Dutch in the 16th century, resulting in the early influence of Calvinism and Lutheranism. Under the Portuguese, Roman Catholicism was introduced to the Maluku islands from 1534. Francis Xavier, a Roman Catholic missionary and co-founder of the Jesuit Order, worked in the Maluku islands from 1546 to 1547. Francis Xavier spent several months in Malacca in 1545, 1546 and 1549. Protestantism actively spread in Malaysia from the 19th century. The Christians form about 9 % of the population, with the majority living in Sabah and Sarawak.⁵ Of these, 2% are Protestants and the others Roman Catholics. About 9% of the population of Indonesia are Christians, of which 6% are Protestants and 3 % Catholics. Malaysia has a population of 25 million people (in 2008), while Indonesia has a population of about 240 million (in 2008).⁶ The professing Christians in Indonesia outnumber those in Malaysia by the ratio 10:1. There are about 15 million Protestants in Indonesia compared to 500,000 in Malaysia, a ratio of 30:1.

The Gospel of Mathew was translated first into Malay by the German missionary Albert Cornelisz Ruhl in 1612, a year after the English King James Version. It was published in 1629. In this translation, the word “Allah” was used for God. The same was the case in the translation of the Bible by Melchior Leijdekker in 1733, and so also in the second Malay Bible translated by Hillebrandus Cornelius Klinhert in 1879.⁷ When William Milne was based in Malacca in 1815, one of the students in the Bible class operating in his home was Munshi Abdullah. Munshi Abdullah’s sole purpose of attending the class was to learn English. Milne showed Abdullah a copy of an old Dutch translation of the Gospel in Malay. Abdullah was amazed that there was a book written in Malay, but felt that the

translation could have been better. Milne engaged Abdullah to help him translate the Bible into Malay in exchange for free lessons in English. Following the earlier translations, Abdullah used the word “Allah” for God.⁸

We have seen that the government of Malaysia passed a law prohibiting the publication, sale, and possession of the Alkitab from Indonesia in the 1980s. A ban was imposed on the use of certain terms, including “Allah”, in non-Muslim contexts. In recent days, religious issues came to the fore again. A number of converts to Islam died, without their wives knowing of their conversion. The bodies of the deceased were forcibly taken away by the religious authorities to be buried according to Muslim rites, much to the anguish of the family members. The wives were also deprived of their inheritance, since they were not Muslims. Another issue was that of converts to Islam who wanted to revert back to their previous religions, but have great difficulty doing so. Then, there are the few Muslims who have professed conversion to the Christian faith but are not permitted to renounce Islam. A current issue is the prohibition of the use of the word “Allah” by the Roman Catholic Church weekly, called *The Herald*. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur has taken the case to court to have it declared that *The Herald* is entitled to use the word “Allah” and that its use was not exclusive to Islam.

In Indonesia a series of tracts entitled, “*Siapakah Yang Bernama Allah Itu*” (“Who Is He Named Allah”) appeared in 1999. The author called himself Eliezer ben Abraham, and the publisher was Bet Yesua Hamasiah. The tracts strongly advocated that Christians should not be using the word “Allah” to refer to God and should use “YAHWE” instead. Note that the replacement word is spelled “YAHWE” instead of the usual “YAHWEH” or “JEHOVAH” for the Tetragrammaton, *YHWH*. Among the reasons put forward for not using “Allah” are:

- (i) *Allah* is the name of a pagan god of the Arabs.
- (ii) The name of God in the Bible is *YAHWE*, while *El*, *Eloim*, and *Eloah* are titles for God which must be revered.
- (iii) The Hebrew language was chosen by God to reveal His name and has remained unchanged since the days of Moses. The name of the Saviour should be “Yesua Hamasiah” as in Hebrew, and not “Yesus Kristus” which is a translation into Greek.
- (iv) The Arabic race is descended from Ham, and the Arabic language is therefore Hamitic and not Semetic, unlike Hebrew.

The movement that published these tracts capped the controversy that was stirred up in Christian circles in Indonesia with the publication of its own Bible called “*Kitab Suci Torat dan Injil*” (“Holy Book of the Law and Gospel”). That version of the Bible, published in the year 2000, used the terms “Eloim” for God, “Yahwe” for Lord, and “Yesua Hamasiah” for Jesus Christ. The controversy led to the publication of a number of scholarly responses from capable church leaders.⁹ Although the majority of the Christians in Indonesia continue to use the Alkitab published by the Bible Society of Indonesia, in which “Allah” is used for *God*, and “Tuhan” for *Lord*, many Christians have been left confused over the issue.

We can see now that in Malaysia, Christians are fighting for the right to use “Allah” to refer to God because the government is attempting to monopolize the use of the word for Islam, while in Indonesia some Christians are rejecting the use of the word, claiming that it is inappropriate, and even blasphemous, to do so. Christians in the two countries have the common problem of determining whether the word “Allah” should be used in the *Alkitab* (the Bible in Indonesian and Malay), but the problem arises out of different circumstances. A simplistic argument for Indonesian Christians would be that they should value the opportunity to use the word in their religious vocabulary in view of the problem faced by the Malaysian Christians over its usage. A simplistic argument for the Malaysian Christians would be that if Indonesian Christians are faced with the problem of using the word “Allah”, should we not cease using it altogether?

Linguistically

Now that problems have arisen over the word “Allah”, it seems good and necessary to re-examine the propriety of using the word. It should be mentioned at the outset that all Christians should be thankful for the labours of the early missionaries, and for the fruit that attended their labours over the centuries. We should appreciate the tremendous odds the early missionaries faced even in the choice of words, let alone the work of translation. Changes should not be made for no strong reasons. Suggestions for change must be reasoned out and supported by cogent arguments, and must not be based merely on opinions or untrue claims and misleading statements. Equally, any disagreement with suggestions for change must be supported by rational arguments and must not be mere outbursts of emotion and mud-slinging, or the casting of aspersions on those we disagree with.

We have seen that, historically, the first missionaries to Indonesia used “Allah” in their translation of the Bible into Malay and that practice had been followed until today. The more recent Bible versions produced in Indonesia and Malaysia continue to use “Allah” for God, and “Tuhan” for Lord. The word “Allah” is used to translate *Elohim*, which is the plural form of *El* and *Eloah*, which are generic names for deity, equivalent to “god” (spelled with lower case “g”). When the singular form *El* is combined with other words, it is used to refer to the one true God, e.g. *El Shaddai* (the Almighty God, Gen. 17:1), *El Olam* (the Everlasting God, Gen. 21:33), *El Bethel* (the God of Bethel, Gen. 31:13). In all such cases, the *Alkitab* also uses “Allah” as the translation. Furthermore, “Allah” is used to translate another Hebrew word for God, namely *Adonai*.

For the New Testament Greek word *Theos*, “Allah” is used when referring to the one true God. The word for “Lord” (*Kurios*) is translated as “Tuhan” when referring to Jesus Christ. The word “TUHAN” (spelled in upper case throughout), is used to translate the Tetragramaton *YHWH*. However, if *YHWH* occurs together with *Adonai*, as in Isaiah 50:4, the earlier would be rendered as “ALLAH” (in upper case letters throughout). This is because “Tuhan ALLAH” sounds better than the odd translation, “Tuhan TUHAN”. The Tetragramaton *YHWH*, therefore is translated as “TUHAN” most of the time, and as “ALLAH” when it seems more appropriate to do so.

Some linguistic problems, however, arise from the use of “Allah”, “ALLAH”, “Tuhan”, and “TUHAN” in the *Alkitab*. It should be understood that the word “Allah” is taken from the Arabic language which is a fusion of the word “ilaah” meaning “god” and the article, “al” so that literally, it means, “the god”, and therefore the one, true, living God. This may be compared with “Al-kitab”, meaning “The Book”, which is the Bible. In English, the word “god” is a generic word, and “God” is a proper noun. When adopted into the Malay language, “Allah” is no longer a proper noun derived from a generic word. Instead, it is the personal name for God, in the same way that *YHWH* is the personal name for God in Hebrew. A generic word can be made a proper noun, but not vice versa. For example, we would say, “*Father*, you are the best *father* in the world!” We would not say, “*John*, you are the best *john* in the world!”

In the Malay language, neither “allah” nor “ilaah” are generic words for “god”. The adjective “ilahi” is used, meaning divine, but not the noun “ilah”. One would not say, for example, “*Salah satu allah orang Hindu ialah Subramaniam*”, (“One of the gods of the Hindus is Subramaniam”). Neither do we say, “*Salah satu ilah orang Hindu ialah Subramaniam*”. What we can say is, “*Salah satu dewa orang Hindu ialah Subramaniam*”, (“One of the deities of the Hindus is Subramaniam,”). The word “dewa”, meaning “deity”, is not appropriate for use by Christians since it has connotation of visible representation, i.e. as an idol. By the way, “idol” in Malay is *berhala* or *patung*. Is there a generic word for “god” in Malay that may be used in reference to all “gods” and is at the same time suitable for use by the Christians? Yes, the word is “tuhan”. When used by Christians, it will have to be spelled “Tuhan” (with upper case “T”) since we are referring to the one true God.

However, in the *Alkitab*, the word “Tuhan” has been used to translate “Lord” (*kurios* in Greek), and “TUHAN” for “LORD” (*YHWH* in Hebrew). If we were to follow the English versions of the Bible, and the Arabic versions of the Bible, a suitable word meaning “Lord” (i.e. master, one who has power) would have to be used. In the Arabic Bible, the word for “God” is *Allaah* (and *ilaah* if used with a possessive pronoun), and the word for “Lord” is *rabb*. The translations for the following

verses in Arabic are:¹⁰

Matthew 4:10, the LORD your God --- *lir-rabbi ilaahika*

John 20:28, My Lord and my God! --- *rabbi wa-ilaahi*

Acts 2:34, The LORD said to my Lord - *qaala 'r-rabbu li-rabbi*

Acts 2:36, God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. --- *Allaaha ja`ala yasuu`a haadha 'l-ladhi Salabtumuuhu antum rabban wa-masiiHan*

Deut. 6:13 the LORD your God --- *ar-rabba ilaahaka*

Psalms 7:1, 3 O LORD my God --- *ya rabbu ilaahi*

We see, then, that the Arabic Bible uses “Allaah” for God and “rabb” for Lord. The word for “Lord” in the Arabic Bible should not be confused with the word “rabbi”, meaning “teacher” in Hebrew, as in John 1:38, for example. The Arabic Bible simply transliterates the word “rabbi” wherever it occurs. Since “Allaah” is derived from the generic word “ilaah” (the plural of which is “aaliha”), there is no problem when the generic words “god” or “gods” are encountered. This may be seen in the translation for the following verses in the Arabic Bible:

Deut. 6:14-15, You shall not go after other *gods*, the *gods* of the peoples who are all around you (for the LORD your God is a jealous God among you), lest the anger of the LORD your God be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth.

Laa tasiiru waraa'a aalihatin ukhratin min aalihati 'l-umami 'l-lati Hawlakum li'anna 'r-rabba ilaahakum ilaahun ghayuurun fii waStikum li'alla yaHma ghaDabu 'r-rabbi ilaahikum `alaykum fayubiidakum `an wajhi 'l-arDi.

2 Cor. 4:4

...whose minds the *god* of this age has blinded... ...Christ, who is the image of *God*...

Alladhiina fiihim ilaahu haadha 'd-dahri qad a`ma adhhaana ghayri 'l-mu'miniina... ..al-masiiHi 'l-ladhi huwa Suuratu 'l-laahi.

The *Alkitab* uses the word “allah” as the translation for “gods” in Deuteronomy 6:14, and “ilah” for “god” in 2 Corinthians 4:4. There is an obvious inconsistency here. Furthermore, in any standard Indonesian or Malay dictionary, the word “allah” (in lower case letters throughout) is never found, while the word “ilah” is given the meaning “god, in Arabic”. The word “allah” is obviously not a generic word for “god” in Malay and, therefore, is not listed in the dictionary. Conceivably, “allah” or “ilah” may be adopted into common usage in Malay with time, but that has not happened yet. The fact that neither “allah” nor “ilah” are generic words for “god” seemed to have caused difficulty to the translators of the *Alkitab*. Another example is seen in 1 Corinthians 8:5, where we have:

1 Cor. 8:5, For even if there are so-called *gods*, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many *gods* and many lords)...

In the *Alkitab* we have:

1 Korintus 8:5, Sebab sungguhpun ada apa yang disebut “*allah*”, baik di sorga, maupun di bumi - dan memang benar ada banyak “*allah*” dan banyak “*tuhan*” yang demikian...

If the word “*tuhan*” had been used for “god”, there would have been no problem in the translation of these verses. The word “*tuhan*” means “god” and the word “*tuan*” means “lord, master”. It is often taken for granted that “*tuhan*” is a variant of “*tuan*” since it has been used for “Lord” (*kurios* in Greek) in the *Alkitab*. As far as I know, the words are etymologically unconnected.

Only their pronunciations are similar. If “tuhan” had been used for “god” in the *Alkitab*, there would be a need to find another word for translating “Lord” (*kurios* in Greek). That we would come to below. For the moment, we only point out that since “tuhan” is a generic word meaning “god”, it would have been suitable to be used in the *Alkitab*. We would then have “Tuhan” for “God”.

Theologically

Other writers have shown that Arabic is not a Hamitic language as claimed by some, but it is a Semetic language that is related to Hebrew.¹¹ Furthermore, the Hebrew language had not remained unchanged through the centuries but have undergone changes and been influenced by other related dialects and languages, including Aramaic and Arabic. Parts of the original Old Testament were, in fact, written in Aramaic. The Jews in the time of Christ actually spoke Aramaic, which was a Hebrew dialect, as well as Greek, which was the official language of the Roman Empire. What is referred to as “Hebrew” in the New Testament is actually Aramaic, the dialect used by Jesus Christ and the apostles, e.g. in John 5:2; 19:20; Acts 21:40; 22:2.

As to the question whether “Allah” was a pagan deity worshipped by the Arabs, it had been shown by able writers that while “Allah” was one of the deities worshipped by certain streams of Arabic people during some parts of their history, there were other Arabic people who worshipped “Allah” as the creator God.¹² Furthermore, the Jews and the Christians had been using the word “Allah” to refer to God long before the rise of Islam. It is historically inaccurate, therefore, to claim that the Arab Christians borrowed the word from the Muslims. Linguistically, therefore, “Allah” is the Arabic word for God and may be used by anyone.

From the theological point of view, is the “Allah” of the Muslims the same as the God of the Christians and the Jews? The Old Testament is regarded as the revelation of God by Christians and Jews alike. The God revealed in the Old Testament is the same God as that revealed in the New Testament. Christians would regard the Jewish understanding of the person of God as deficient, being unable to proceed beyond absolute monotheism to embrace the tri-unity in the Godhead. We are not claiming that the Jews are saved without faith in Christ. We are only saying that their understanding of the person of God as derived from the Old Testament is true, although deficient.

It is quite a different matter when we consider the Islamic god. Evangelical Christians would not regard the *Quran* as the revelation of God despite the fact that in academic discussions, Islam is often categorized as a monotheistic, revealed religion together with Judaism and Christianity. The doctrine of *the sole authority of Scripture* requires the understanding that the revelation of God ended with the completion of the book of Revelation. Since the *Quran* is not God’s revelation, the god revealed therein cannot be the same as the God of the Bible. Any vestiges of truth concerning God found in the *Quran* are but snippets of Gods’ *common grace* similar to what are found in *general revelation*. The Muslims, in common with those who are without the *special revelation* of Holy Scripture, are “groping for God, to find Him” (Acts 17:24-28; Rom. 1:18-25). Just because the *Quran* claims revealed truth including a monotheistic god, as in Judaism and Christianity, does not make it other than what it is - uninspired writings which are not Scripture.

Too much has been made of the account of Hagar and Ishmael in the book of Genesis to support the idea that God would bless the descendants of Ishmael, viz. the Arabs, and therefore the followers of the religion of Islam. It has been claimed that God had made a covenant with Hagar and her descendants, to bless them as He would bless the descendants of Sarah. We read in Genesis 16:10, ‘The the Angel of the LORD said to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.”’ The problems with this line of reasoning are many. Firstly, not all Arabic peoples are descendants of Ishmael. Instead, they are a mixture of peoples of diverse ancestries. The founder of Islam happened to be from one of the many tribes of Arabs who were of diverse descent. Secondly, the assumption is made that the promised blessing to the descendants of Hagar is in the form of the revealed religion of Islam. Thirdly, there is the failure to take into consideration the Bible’s explanation of the fulfilment of God’s covenant promise to Isaac *vis-a-vis* the promise made to Ishmael. It is made clear in Galatians 3:26-29 and 4:21-31 that the true inheritors of God’s covenant promise to Abraham are those born of the Spirit, through faith in Jesus Christ. All who are not united to Christ in faith are the descendants of Ishmael. Theologically, therefore, it is

untenable to claim any covenant blessing for the spiritual descendants of Ishmael, let alone for his physical descendants.

The word “Allah” may be taken as a word referring to God, but the “Allah” as taught in the *Quran* cannot be the God of the Bible. The Muslims are seeking to know *Allah*, but the “Allah” they worship is not the true God (cf. Acts 17:22-23).

III. A Proposed Solution.

We have attempted to understand the historical, linguistic and theological circumstances surrounding the use of the word “Allah” in the *Alkitab* - the Bible used in Indonesia and Malaysia. In support of the use of the word “Allah” in the *Alkitab* are the following reasons:

(i) “Allah” was known from Christian and Jewish sources in Arabia as the one God long before the advent of Islam. Arabic and Hebrew are Semetic languages and it is not surprising to find similar words used in both languages. For example, “prophet” in both Hebrew and Arabic is “nabi”. Arab Christians use “Allah” and “nabi” as derived from the Hebrew of the Bible and Arab Muslims use “Allah” and “nabi” as derived from the Arabic of the *Quran*.

(ii) The vocabulary of the Christians in Arab countries such as Egypt and Syria has developed along a different line so that the meaning of the words, including “Allah”, are distinctively Christian even though they are used by the Muslims.

(iii) The church in Indonesia has been growing unhindered for a longer period than in Malaysia so that a range of Christian words, including “Allah”, are already in common use. Since Indonesian and Malay are virtually the same language, it seems reasonable for Christians in Malaysia to use “Allah” as well.

The use of a language is never the sole prerogative of any group of people. Other races and religions have as much right as the Malays and Muslims to use the Malay language. This is recognised by the peoples of Indonesia, but not by the Malays of Malaysia. The Muslims in Malaysia would hold to the view that “Allah” is uniquely the god of Islam and that its use in a non-Muslim context would lead to confusion. Christians in Malaysia have generally taken the line that they should not bow to the pressures from the government and the Muslim community to stop using the word “Allah”. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Constitution of the country, and that would include the use of any word in any language in the practice of any religion. To give in to the pressure now would set the precedent for further attempts to deprive the Christians of their fundamental liberties. As it is, most of the states in Malaysia have passed laws prohibiting the propagation of other faiths to Muslims. This, in itself, is a curtailment of the rights of the Christians, since the propagation of the gospel to all nations (i.e. ethnic groups) is a command of the Bible.

In December 1986 I had written the following:¹³

I am all for making a stand against these attempts by the Government to curb the fundamental liberties of the Christians. I am concerned, however, that the years are passing by and the need of the Church to use Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) freely is not met. Remember, five years have elapsed since these problems first arose. If this matter of the freedom to use certain Malay words is brought to court to be settled there, I have no doubt that the Christians will win the case, assuming that the law is allowed to run its free course. But then, at what a price! The case will probably drag on, for how many more years we do not know, before it is settled. Meanwhile, there will be anxiety and unrest in many hearts. And the advancement of the Gospel among the younger generation of Malaysians will continue to be hindered.

Another 22 years have passed since that statement was published, making it a total of a good 27 years! How much longer are we prepared to allow the problem to continue? Fighting for our rights on the legal front is one issue. To be hindered from using the Malay Bible and Malay Christian books is another issue which, I contend, is a much more serious one. I am, therefore, putting forth a case for NOT using “Allah” in the Christian context, not because we have no right to use it, but because of the

following reasons:

(i) The word “Allah”, when adopted into Malay, becomes a proper noun which is not derived from a common noun. Unlike in Arabic, the word “allah” and “ilah” are not common nouns in Malay. The word “Allah”, therefore, is not an appropriate translation for *Elohim* and *Theos* in the Bible.

(ii) Unlike the Arabic Bible, in which the word “rabb”, meaning “Lord, master”, is used for *YHWH* and *Kurios*, the *Alkitab* uses “TUHAN” and “Tuhan” for these words. The word “tuhan” is actually a common noun and generic for “god”. It would have been more appropriate to use it in place of “Allah” to translate *Elohim* and *Theos*.

(iii) The word “Allah” is widely associated with Islam today. Ask anyone anywhere in the world who he thinks “Allah” is, and you would most likely get the answer, “The god of the Muslims.” This would seem to be the reason why certain Christian groups in Indonesia have rejected its use in favour of other words. Despite the fact that “Allah” has been used long before the advent of Islam, the word has been virtually hijacked by Islam. Muslims generally do not believe in translating their holy book into other languages so that the word “Allah” is inextricably linked to the *Quran*. Furthermore, as the population of the world continues to grow exponentially, the number of Muslims will increase accordingly. The Muslims believe in biological increase. This means that “Allah” will increasingly be associated with the Muslims.

(iv) The biblical principle that Christians should not insist on their rights for the sake of the weaker conscience of others (Rom. 14:1, 13; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23-24) applies here. Muslims everywhere, not just in Malaysia, are anxious that their sacred religion should not be desecrated by non-Muslims (“infidels”) - including the handling of Arabic versions of the *Quran* by non-Muslims, the representation of the prophet Muhammad in pictures, the use of the crescent as a symbol on top of the domes of their mosques after a non-Muslim had walked on the moon, or the use of “Allah” in non-Muslim contexts. Why must Christians whose native languages are not Arabic stir up anxiety among the Muslims by insisting on their rights to use “Allah”?

(v) If there is anything to fight for, it should be for the liberty of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of association, for everyone. These are fundamental liberties that all civil societies recognise, that are guaranteed in the Constitution of Malaysia. However, they have not been consistently practised because of conflicting demands made by self-interested groups. Bad laws should be reviewed and amended, or replaced by good ones. Each person should have the freedom to believe, practise, and propagate his beliefs without fear, coercion, or encroachment upon other people’s liberties. Disagreements can be debated or countered by rational persuasion without resorting to violence, threats, or force. Genuine faith is based on knowledge and conviction of truths, not on tradition, prejudice, or fear.

If the word “Tuhan” is used instead of “Allah” to translate *Elohim* and *Theos*, we would need another word to translate *YHWH* and *Kurios*. Following the English Bible, the Bible in other European languages, and the Arabic Bible, a word meaning “lord, master” should be used. The word “tuan”, which is different from “Tuhan”, may be used. However, confusion would arise due to the similarity in pronunciation of the two words. From the theological point of view, the word *Kurios* carries the implication of deity when used in reference to Jesus Christ. After all, He is “the King of kings and Lord of Lords” (Rev. 19:16). A word that might be suitable is “tuanku”, which is a title for royalty. However, the title is used widely by those of royal blood up to today. A stronger word, carrying the idea of “royalty, supreme master” would be appropriate.

In Malaysia, the king is known by the title “Yang Dipertuan Agung” which literally means, “The One Who Is Regarded As Supreme Master”, or simply, “The Sovereign”. To use this six-syllable term in reference to Jesus Christ would be too unwieldy. Is there a word similar to “Yang Dipertuan Agung”? Yes, in the Malay language, “Yamtuan” is the equivalent of “Yang Dipertuan Agung”. The use of this word in reference to Jesus Christ would be most appropriate. Since this is a dual syllable word with the same ending as “Tuhan”, existing hymns can continue to be used with slight amendment. No legal difficulty would arise out of its usage, unlike the title “Yang Dipertuan

Agung”. Of course, where *kurios* is used with no implication of deity, the word “tuan” should be used, e.g. Matt. 13:27; John 4:11. (The *Alkitab* uses “Tuhan” inappropriately in John 4:11.)

With these replacement words the verses we have quoted, together with a couple of additional ones, would read as follow in the *Alkitab*:

Matthew 4:10, ...the *LORD* your *God*...

Matius 4:10, ...*YAMTUAN*, *Tuhanmu*...

John 20:28, ...My *Lord* and my *God*!

Yohanes 20:28, ...Ya *Yamtuanku* dan *Tuhanku*!

Acts 2:34, ...The *LORD* said to my *Lord*...

Kisah 2:34, ...*YAMTUAN* telah berfirman kepada *Yamtuanku*...

Acts 2:36, ...*God* has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both *Lord* and Christ.

Kisah 2:36, ...*Tuhan* telah membuat Yesus, yang kamu salibkan itu, menjadi *Yamtuan* dan Kristus.

Deut. 6:13 ...the *LORD* your *God*...

Ulangan 6:13, ...*YAMTUAN*, *Tuhanmu*...

Psalms 7:1, 3, O *LORD* my *God*

Mazmur 7:1, 3, Ya *YAMTUAN*, *Tuhanku*...

Deut. 6:14-15, You shall not go after other *gods*, the *gods* of the peoples who are all around you (for the *LORD* your *God* is a jealous *God* among you), lest the anger of the *LORD* your *God* be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth.

Ulangan 6:14-15, Janganlah kamu mengikuti *tuhan* lain, dari antara *tuhan* bangsa-bangsa sekelilingmu, sebab *YAMTUAN*, *Tuhanmu*, adalah *Tuhan* yang cemburu di tengah-tengahmu, supaya jangan bangkit murka *YAMTUAN*, *Tuhanmu*, terhadap engkau, sehingga Ia memusnahkan engkau dari muka bumi.

2 Cor. 4:4, ...whose minds the *god* of this age has blinded... ...Christ, who is the image of *God*...

2 Kor. 4:4, ...yang pikirannya telah dibutakan oleh *tuhan* zaman ini... ...Kristus, yang adalah gambaran *Tuhan*.

1 Cor. 8:5, For even if there are so-called *gods*, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many *gods* and many *lords*)...

1 Kor. 8:5, Sebab sungguhpun ada apa yang disebut *tuhan*, baik di sorga, maupun di bumi - dan memang benar ada banyak *tuhan* dan banyak *yamtuan* yang demikian...

Matthew 13:27, ...*Sir*, did you not sow good seed in your field?

Matius 13:27, ...*Tuan*, bukankah benih baik, yang tuan taburkan di ladang tuan?

John 4:11, ...*Sir*, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep.

Yohanes 4:11, ...*Tuan*, Engkau tidak punya timba dan sumur ini amat dalam.

Deuteronomy 10:17, For the *LORD* your *God* is *God* of *gods* and *Lord* of *lords*, the great *God*, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe.

Ulangan 10:17, Sebab *YAMTUAN*, *Tuhanmulah Tuhan* segala *tuhan* dan *Yamtuan* segala *yamtuan*, *Tuhan* yang besar, kuat dan dahsyat, yang tidak memandang bulu atau pun menerima suap.

Revelation 17:14 (also 19:16), ...for He is *Lord* of *lords* and King of kings...

Wahyu 17:14 (19:16), ...karena Ia adalah *Yamtuan* segala *yamtuan* dan Raja segala raja...

Conclusion

The word “Allah” is native to Arabic but not to Malay. While Arab Christians have no difficulty using it in reference to God, the same cannot be said of Christians in Indonesia and Malaysia. The *Alkitab* uses “Allah” for *God* and “Tuhan” for *Lord*. There are linguistic and theological difficulties that arise from the use of these words. It is proposed that the word “Tuhan” should be used for *God*, and the word “Yamtuan” should be used for *Lord*, instead. These words, respectively, are linguistically and theologically more accurate. Their use should overcome the misgivings among certain Christian groups in Indonesia, and allay the anxieties of Muslims in Malaysia.

The Christian faith has spread and developed in Indonesia more freely than in Malaysia. A strong Christian vocabulary has developed in Indonesia, which is largely followed by the Christians in Malaysia. The *Alkitab* and other books have been imported from Indonesia into Malaysia, despite the restriction of their use to Christians only in the latter country. We have seen that the number of Christians in Indonesia compared to those in Malaysia are 10:1, and the number of Protestants in Indonesia compared to those in Malaysia are 30:1. For all these reasons, the Indonesian church obviously is the “big brother” to the Malaysian church. In order that the proposed words may be successfully use in the *Alkitab*, there must be strong support and initiative from the Indonesian church.

What if there is no support and initiative forthcoming from the Indonesian Christians? The Malaysian Christians would have no choice but to plough forward using these proposed words. That is assuming that the Christians in Malaysia are convinced of the suitability of these replacement words, and are convicted of the pressing need of having the *Alkitab* and Christian books freely available without being hampered by the present problems. Due to nationalistic and political considerations, Indonesian and Malay are developing along diverging paths.¹⁴ It would be to the good of gospel work in this part of the world if the Indonesian and Malaysian Christians share a common religious vocabulary. However, if that is not possible, the cause of the gospel in Malaysia should take precedence.

“Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all *men* in all *things*, not seeking my own profit, but the *profit* of many, that they may be saved (1 Cor.10:31-32).”¹⁵

References:

1. Internal Security (Prohibition of Documents) No. 3, Order 1982 (KHEDN:0.59/3/9Jld 4-PN(PU 2) 24 Pt II), dated 2 Dec 1981.
2. Passed in Terengganu on 11 June 1980 (SUK. TR(S) 307; PU N. TR. 15/73). Passed in Kelantan on 1 Dec. 1981 (SUK. (KN)60/81; PU. KN 370).
3. In the September 11 incident (often referred to as 9/11), a series of coordinated attacks were carried out by the terrorist group, *Al-Qaeda*, against a number of targets in the United States of America. Two commercial jet airliners were hijacked and deliberately crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A third airliner crashed into the Pentagon. A fourth airliner failed to hit its intended target. About 3,000 people died in these attacks.
4. On 12 October 2002, three bombs exploded on the tourist island of Bali, Indonesia, killing 202 people, 164 of whom were foreign nationals. The Islamist group, *Jemaah Islamiah*, were held responsible.
5. The World Fact Book, < <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/my.html>>.
6. Wikipedia, < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestantism_by_country#By_country >.
7. “A Bird's Eye View of the History of the Malay Bible Translation”, by Dr. Daud Soesilo, <<http://www.bible.org.my/updates/body.php?id=55>>.

8. “Munshi Abdullah’s Malay Dilemma”, < <http://www.sabrizain.org/malaya/malays3.htm>>.
9. See, for example: (i) *Siapakah Yang Bernama Allah Itu?* by Herlianto, PT BPK Gunung Mulia, Jakarta, 2005; (ii) *Siapakah Nama Sang Pencipta?* by Samin H. Sitohang, Yayasan Kalam Hidup, Bandung, 2003; (iii) *Menuju Dialog Teologis*, by Bambang Noorsena, Penerbit ANDI, Yogyakarta, 2001.
10. I am indebted to “elroy” of WordReference Forums, for these transliterations of the Arabic Bible, <<http://forum.wordreference.com/index.php>>.
11. See *Herlianto*, Chaps. 3 & 5.
12. *ibid.*, Chap. 5.
13. “Bahasa Malaysia Christian Terms”, by Poh Boon Sing, private circulation, Dec. 1986.
14. See *Herlianto*, footnote, p. 100: Stated in the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (The Great Indonesian Dictionary), there are 1,495 words of Arabic origin (including “Allah”), 1,610 words of English origin, and 3,280 words of Dutch origin, that make up the Indonesian language. In the Malay language of Malaysia, there would be a minimal number of words of Dutch origin. Instead, words of English origin predominate.
15. Bible quotations are taken from: (i) the New King James version, Thomas Nelson, Inc.; (ii) the Alkitab, Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia; (iii) the Van Dyke translation of the Arabic Bible.

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