

2013/1: An Appeal To The Christian Community In Malaysia

by BS Poh

[Race relation has always been a delicate matter in Malaysia, despite the vaunted claim of it being a harmonious nation made up of various ethnic groups. As the 13th General Election draws near, certain politicians and political parties have been stirring up religious and racial sentiments, including a call for the Malay Bible, the *Alkitab*, to be burned in public. The use of the term "Allah" in non-Muslim contexts was banned since the early 1980s. It remains an unsettled issue, which came to the fore again in recent days. See the articles [2008/6 Christians Use "Allah"?](#) and [2010/2 "Allah": What Next?](#). The present article was published in the news portal www.Malaysiakini.com on 25 January 2013.]

This is an appeal to the Christian community in Malaysia to drop the use of "Allah" in the *Alkitab*. Before you become defensive and/or offensive please read through my reasons.

The first reason is a biblical one. Christians are called upon to live in peace with all men (Rom. 12:18; 1 Tim. 2:2; Titus 3:2). The unabated provocations against the minority Christians in this country call for restraint and calm on our part. We are to repay no one evil for evil. We are not to avenge ourselves. We are to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:17-21). We have already won the legal battle for the use of "Allah". The law courts have declared that we have the right to use the word. No language is the prerogative of any ethnic group. A language may not be compared to a borrowed car, in which the rights belong to the owner. Rather, a language is public domain. The Scots, the Welsh, and the Irish have as much right to use the English language as the English people. The late Steve Jobs had the right to call his computer the Apple. Malaysians have the right to develop and speak Manglish. It is one thing to hold to religious convictions, it is another to uphold the rule of law. The onus is upon the law-makers and the law-makers-to-be to prove that they are capable of rising above themselves to uphold the rule of law. Otherwise, why should they be made law-makers?

The second reason is a linguistic one. In Arabic, "Allaah" is derived from the common noun "ilaah" in a similar way that "God" is derived from "god" in English. In the Malay language, however, "Allah" is adopted from Arabic while the corresponding generic word "ilah" has not been similarly adopted. In the Malaysian context, "Allah" is the personal name of the god of Islam. The generic word for "god" is "tuhan", and not "ilah". The early Christian missionaries to South East Asia translated "God" as "Allah" only because they wanted to retain the word "Tuhan" for "Lord". I have proposed that we use "Tuhan" for "God" (Hebrew, "Elohim"; Greek, "Theos"), and "Yamtuan" for "Lord" (Hebrew, "YHWH"; Greek, "Kurios"). The word "Yamtuan" is of Minangkabau origin and has been absorbed into the Malay language. It carries the meaning of "Yang Dipertuan" or "Baginda", i.e. "the highest Lord" or "his Majesty" in English. "Yamtuan" is a dual-syllable word which would not be confused with "Tuhan" when they are used together. Using "Tuan", meaning "Lord" or "Sir" will cause confusion when used with "Tuhan" as the two words

sound similar when spoken. Furthermore, “Yamtuan” rhymes with “Tuhan”, which makes for easy amendment of existing Malay hymns.

Consider this Sunday School song in Indonesian (sung to the tune of “Clamentine”):

*Yesus Kristus, Anak Allah,
Mati bangkit semula;
Yesus Kristus Juruselamat,
Bertobatlah, percaya.*

*Puji Tuhan, puji Tuhan,
Kami tetap puji Dia;
Tak peduli apa jua,
Tantangan dan derita.*

Translated into Malay using the terms suggested, we have:

*Yesus Kristus, Anak Tuhan,
Mati bangkit semula;
Yesus Kristus Penyelamat,
Bertobatlah, percaya.*

*Puji Yamtuan, puji Yamtuan,
Kami tetap puji Dia;
Tidak kira apa jua,
Cabaran dan derita.*

The translation is a breeze, at the same time that it removes the association with the god of Islam in the minds of both Christians and Muslims.

The third reason for not using “Allah” is a theological one. Since “Allah” in the Malay language is the personal name of the god of Islam, it is theologically unwise for Christians to use it in reference to the trinitarian God of the Bible. Furthermore, the Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew into Greek, known as the Septuagint, long before Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary. Jesus Christ and the apostles placed their imprimatur on the Septuagint by using it, as can be seen from their constant quotation from it in the New Testament. The Septuagint translates “Elohim” as “Theos” (English, “God”), and “YHWH” (Yahweh or Jehovah) as “Kurios” (English, “LORD”). The New Testament was written in Greek, in which God is referred to as “Theos”, just as in the Septuagint, while Jesus Christ is addressed by the title of “Kurios”. The Septuagint and the New Testament thus set for us the pattern of translating “Elohim” and “YHWH”, as well as the pattern for how Jesus Christ is to be addressed. Quoting the theologian, John Owen, “an apostolic example has the force of a divine institution”. This pattern has been followed in the translation of the Bible into English and various languages, but is not followed in the Alkitab. The suggestion to use “Tuhan” for “Elohim” (“God”), “YAMTUAN” for “YHWH” (“LORD”), and “Yamtuan” (“Lord”) to address Jesus Christ is consonant with apostolic example.

We have fought for our right to use “Allah” on socio-politico-historical grounds, viz.

- (i) The use of “Allah” for “God” among Christians in Arabic countries preceded the advent of Islam;
- (ii) The Bible has been translated into Malay for over 300 years in which “Allah” is used;
- (iii) The indigenous Christians in the states of Sabah and Sarawak have been using “Allah” long before the two states joined Malaysia in 1963; and,

(iv) It is the constitutional right of non-Muslim Malaysians to use “Allah” since the freedom of religion, speech and association is guaranteed, and the use of any language, including Malay, is not the sole prerogative of any ethnic group.

We have won the legal battle for the right to use “Allah”, although there have been attempts made to hinder us from using it freely. This problem has dragged on for a good thirty years! The question is, do we have to insist on exercising our right to use “Allah”? “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify (1 Cor. 10:23).” The recent hoo-hah over the use of “Allah” has revealed that a sizable number of Muslims in the country are distressed over its use by the Christians. Can we not go the extra mile to show forth Christian love by not using “Allah”? After all, there are the biblical-theological-linguistic reasons for *not* using “Allah” which must now be weighed up. It is not for others to force us to drop the use of “Allah”. It is for us to choose not to use it out of the conviction of the rightness of not using it. The *liberty of conscience* is a precious truth. God alone is Lord over the human conscience.

We are all looking forward to a better Malaysia, in which there are definite attempts made to abolish discrimination based on colour, class and creed. The cry for “liberty, equality, and fraternity” resonates in every heart. At the base of that ideal is the truth of *the liberty of conscience*.

Brethren, will you give this appeal - to drop the use of “Allah” - your consideration?

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