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The Qur'anic and Biblical Concepts of God: A Comparative Discourse

Dikko Bature Darma*

Abstract

Those who propagate the idea of religious pluralism try to strike middle position among different religious groups. They argue that sharing terms will help build a bridge of understanding between two religions. According to them, the god that is worshiped by all religions is the same, but each religion defines the meaning of God according to its own conviction. In Malaysia this had been a serious issue of controversy when recently the Court of Appeal maintained the ruling of the Higher Court, in favour of the government, that Christians are not allowed to use some Islamic terms namely; Allāh, *ka'abah*, *baitullāh*, *ṣolāt* among others, in translating Bible into the Malay language. The Malaysian Christians' attempt to use the word Allāh for God began in 1974 with the new initiative of Malay version of the Bible that would replace the Indonesian translation which was then in use. The governments step in as a result of discontent and suspicion that aroused among Malay Muslims, who perceived this as an effort to disseminate Christianity among them, which a constitutional rule forbids in Malaysia. Following some series of court cases, on June 23rd, 2013 the Court of Appeal confirmed the judgment that "Allāh" is not an integral part of Christian faith. Hence, Christian cannot use that term in the Bible translation. However, many Christians and Human Right organizations view this judgment as an attempt by the State to deny Christians right and freedom to freely practice their religion.

Keywords: God, Allāh, Pluralism, Comparative Religion, Malaysia.

Introduction

While the pluralists propagate the idea that, all religious groups share one and the same God, and it does not matter with whichever name God is mentioned: There has been a serious debate over the term 'Allāh' as to whether it can be used to translate words for God in the Bible. This argument comes from both Muslims and Christians alike. It is inconceivable to some people that, a word like Allāh which is so central

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in Islamic faith could be found in a Christian Bible. To these groups, Allāh and God represent different deities and, therefore, the term should not be used synonymously.¹

There is also an opposing group that considers the word Allāh as an Arabic term for the Supreme Being that can be used to translate the English word 'God.' Hence, it can also be used to translate Greek and Hebrew generic terms (*Theos* and *Elohim*) for God.² Both two contending groups have their viewpoints contrasted to each other. Undoubtedly, these debates and discussions will be a good introduction to our analysis of the Qur'anic and Biblical terms for God.

Discussions

The various opinions regarding the nature of the word Allāh, according to Kenneth Thomas, are summarized as follows:

The Arab philologist discussed the etymology of the word at great length. Some held that it was a loan word from Syriac or Hebrew, but most regarded it as a contraction of *al ilāh* ("the god"). Western scholars are fairly unanimous that the source of the word Allah probably is through Aramaic from the Syrian *alāh* ("the god").³

The study of the origin of the word and the way its meaning has changed over a course of time confirms that the Arab used the word Allāh to refer to the Supreme Being (*al-Ilāh*)⁴ right before the revelation of the Qur'ān. To further buttress this point is to consider that the father of the Prophet Muḥammad was named Abd Allāh (the servant of God), during the Jahiliyyah period, before the revelation of the Glorious Qur'ān. In the words of Izutsu:

[T]he name itself of Allah is common to Jahiliyyah and Islam. When, in other words, the Koranic revelation began to use this word, it was not introducing a new name of

¹ Kenneth J. Thomas, "Allah in the Translations of Bible", *International Journal of Frontier Mission*, Winter, Vol. 23, no. 4, (2006): p. 171.

² This view is common in the writings of most Arab Christians and even some of the Christians who live in an Islamic heartland.

³ Thomas, p. 171.

⁴ By which they meant the Creator, the Sustainer, the Nourisher, the Omniscient and Omnipresent. However, the name "Allāh" has never been attributed to any pagan god or idol of the *Jahiliyyah* neither in Makkah nor anywhere in Arabia. See, Ibn Manẓūr, Muḥammad Ibn Mukram, *Lisān al-'Arab*, vol.13 (Beirut: Dār al-ṣādir, n.d) p. 467.

God, a name strange and alien to the ears of the contemporary Arabs.¹

In one of many instances of the Qur'ān using the word "Allāh" in reference to the God worshiped by the Christians is where the Prophet is commanded to propose a *mubāhalah*, in which both Muslims and Christians should, publically, "invoke the curse of Allāh on those who lie."² Arguably, when the prophet Muḥammad addressed this Christian embassy from Najrān in the name of Allāh, he did so solely because he knew that this name meant something important to them which suggested a common ground of understanding of the term that existed between him and the other party. It is evident that the name appears not only in pre-Islamic poetry and compound personal names but also in old inscriptions.³ Hence, it is a fact that Christians in Arabia have been using the word Allāh in the translation of Bible from the earliest known Arabic version of the Old and New Testaments.⁴

Inscriptions with Allah have been discovered in Northern and Southern Arabia from as early as the fifth century B.C. Christians have used the word Allah from pre-Islamic times, and Allah has been used continuously in Arabic translations of the Bible from the earliest known versions in the eight century to this day.⁵

Furthermore, some studies show that a number of classical Muslims' scholars like Ibn Qutayba,⁶ used the word Allāh in the citations of biblical passages in their literature. Wahb Ibn Munabbih, a celebrated Muslim scholar of the first century Hijra,

¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran; Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Toppan Printing, 1964), p. 95.

² Qur'an 3:61. In his notes on this *Ayāh*, Yusuf Ali writes: "In the year of Deputations, 10th of the Hijrah, came a Christian embassy from Najrān.... They were much impressed with this passage of the Qur'ān explaining the true position of the Christ, and they entered into tributary relations with the new Muslim State. But ingrained habits and customs prevented them from accepting Islam as a body. The Prophet, firm in his faith, proposed a *Mubāhalah* i.e., a solemn meeting, in which both sides should sermon not only their men, but their women and children, earnestly pray to Allāh, and invoke the curse of Allāh on those who should lie. The Christians declined, and they were dismissed in a spirit of tolerance with a promise of protection from the State in return for tribute, "the wages of rule," as it is called in *Ā' ī ni Akbarī*."

³ Izutsu, p. 13.

⁴ Thomas, p. 171.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibn Qutayba (d.889) was a prolific Muslim scholar of religious topics, throughout his book *Kitāb al-mā' ārif*, he cited a number of the Old and New Testament passages in this form.

was reported to have translated a version of Psalms into Arabic¹ and naturally the name of Allāh and prophets in his translation are derived from Arabic. This shows that, Arabs Muslim scholars from the early centuries of Islam have no problem with the name of Allāh being used for God in the Bible and that on the contrary, they freely associate with the Jewish and Christian scriptures. If so, why raise a question about any problem that might arise with the use of Allāh elsewhere in the translation of Bible?

Another important point the proponents of the idea of using the word Allāh in the translation of the Bible propagate is that the use of the term will enhance Muslim-Christian dialogue and serve as a bridge between Muslims and Christians to understand one another.² The fact that Muslims and the People of the Book share one and the same God should be a firm testimony to the bond and common heritage that Muslims and Christians share of the idea of God of Christians and Muslims being one and the same. Hence the emphasis on this close affinity in the following verses of the Glorious Qur'ān:

Say: O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partner with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah.³

Here the Qur'anic reference to common '*kalimah*' (lit. a word) according to Muhammad Asad, a "tenet"⁴, by extension means that Muslims and Christians have the same concept of One True God, even though their views about His deity differ. Azly beautifully puts it, "it is a name conceived differently anyway, as different as how each soul conceives the divine".⁵

In another passage of the Qur'ān Muslims are instructed to tell the *ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book), namely; Jews and Christians:

¹ Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature* N.ed (UK: Curzon Press, 2002), p. 141.

² Thomas, p. 172.

³ Qur'ān 3:64.

⁴ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*. N.ed (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1980), p. 76.

⁵ Azly Rahman, "The "ALLAH" CONTROVERSY: Why I Wrote It," *Malaysia Today*, May 26, 2013, accessed September 13, 2014. <https://www.malaysia-today.net/2013/05/27/the-qallahq-controversy-why-i-wrote-it/>.

We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you; our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender.¹

Therefore, “Allāh” is not only the Muslim God and there is no single reference in the Qur’ān that “Allāh” should be sought as a specific “Islamic” or “Muslim” God. In this regards, it is enough to remember the Qur’anic syntagm *Rabbu l-‘alamīn* (Lord of the worlds). If Muslims are to see Allah as their God alone, then they will have a situation similar to the Greek relation to Zeus,² which in reality Islam does not ask for. On the contrary, it is because the Qur’ān radiates the strong universal spirit, because “Allāh” is not only some “Muslim God”, that Islam spread among different cultural and linguistic zones of humanity. Also it is very important to remember “The Beautiful God’s Names.” Namely, it was not only the universality of the name “Allāh” that influenced the adaptability of Islam during its expansion, but also “The Beautiful God’s Names”. Whether He is called by “Allāh” or by one of His Beautiful Names, according to the Qur’ān (17:110), the task is fulfilled.

Consequently, from the above discussions three points are clear: First, there is a long precedent of using “Allāh” in Arabia among the pre-Islamic Arabs when referring to the Supreme God. Second, the Arab Christians have been using the very word Allāh in the translations of the Bible over many centuries. Third, the term ‘Allāh’ is not and cannot be an exclusive name for the Supreme Being of Muslims alone; rather it is a generic term that the Arabs, Jews, Christians and others also share.

However the opposing group refutes the claim that the word ‘Allāh’ is a general term of reference to the object of supreme adoration, but rather a proper name of that One Creator and Ruler of the universe described by the Glorious Qur’ān in *Surah* 112, which negates the Christian Trinitarian idea of God. The relevant verses in the Chapter are as follows:

Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, Nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.³

That says if the Christians were to use the term ‘Allāh’, they should accept it within Islamic theological framework by His description in the

¹ Qur’ān 29:46.

² Zeus in the ancient Greek religion ruled as a king along with other gods. In some traditions, he was identified with the Roman god Jupiter and associated in the syncretic classical imagination with various other deities, such as the Egyptian Ammon and the Etruscan Tinia. Zeus is mentioned in the Bible in Acts 14:8-13 and 28:11 respectively.

³ Qur’ān, 112: 1-5.

above *Surah*; which means the general concept of God in Christianity will drastically change. Unlike Christian concept of Trinity,¹ the Islamic concept of God is *tauhidic* (an absolute monotheism).² Therefore, this acknowledgment of the Oneness of Allāh in Islam differentiates it from the concept of God in Christianity. Further argument states that in Arabic there are two words for “god” in English: “*Ilāh*” which means any deity and “*Allāh*” which means the One and Only God. Therefore, this view insists on using the word Allāh whenever reference is made to God in the capital ‘g’ sense.³ An assessment of the uniqueness of nature and quality of the name ‘Allāh’ is made in a book, *The Concept of God in Major Religions*, as follows:

Muslims prefer calling Allah, instead of the English word ‘God,’ which can be played around with. If you add ‘s’ to the word God, it becomes ‘Gods’, that is the plural of God. Allah is one and singular, there is no plural of Allah. If you add ‘dess’ to the word God, it becomes ‘Goddess’ that is a female God. There is nothing like male Allah or female Allah. Allah has no gender. If you pre-fix tin before the word God, it becomes tin-God i.e., fake God. Allah is a unique word, which does not conjure up any mental picture nor can it be played around with.⁴

Similar miracle is found in the very first verse of the Glorious Qur’ān, “*Bism Allāh, ar-Rahmān ar-Rahīm*”. When one counts the letters that make up this first verse, will find they are nineteen. Then it is discovered that each

¹ In Christian theology, the doctrine of Trinity refers to the existence of three persons in one substance. The three persons of Trinity are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Some Biblical verses that mention the idea of Trinity are Matthew 28: 19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit” and “Corinthians 13: 12-13 For just the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body and all were made to drink of one Spirit”.

² In Islam, the opposing term of *tawhīd* which is *shirk* (associating a partner to Allāh) is the greatest act of unbelief. The concept of *tawhīd*, according to Muslim theologians is classified into three, viz.: *tawhīd al-Rububīyah* (oneness of Lordship of Allāh), *tawhīd al-Ulūhīyah* (Oneness of worship of Allāh) and *tawhīd al-Asmā’ wa Sifāt* (oneness of Names and Attributes of Allāh). In any event one of these three is not fulfilled, and then the faith is incomplete. For details about *tawhīd* read, ‘Abd al-Latīf, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Muḥammad, *Al-Tawhīd lil al-Nāshiah wal Muḥtadīn*, (Saudi Arabia: *Wizīrah Shuūn al-Islāmīyah wal Auqāf wal Da’wah wal Irshād*, 2002), 11.

³ M.I. Saleh, *A Dictionary of Islamic Words and Expressions*, (Riyadh: al-Jumuah Magazine, 2002), 11.

⁴ Zakir Naik, *The Concept of God in Major Religions*, (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2007), p. 41.

word in this verse is mentioned throughout the Qur'ān a number of times which is consistently a multiple of nineteen. The first word, “*ISM* اسم,” is found throughout the Qur'ān exactly nineteen times. The second word, “Allah,” is mentioned in the Qur'an 2,698 (two thousand six hundred and ninety-eight) times, a multiple of nineteen (19x142). The third word, “*AR-RAMĀN*” is found in the Qur'ān fifty-seven (57) times, 19x3. And the last word “*ar-Rahīm*,” is mentioned in the whole Qur'ān one hundred and fourteen (114) times, six multiple of nineteen. “It should be noted that the Qur'ān consists of 114 *suras* (19x6).”¹

Concerning the above philosophical concept of the word Allāh, some maintain that the term is not an Arabic derivative but came from the Revelation, as such,² and there is no similar concept of ‘Allāh’ in Christianity, or in any other religion for that matter. As a result, it is inappropriate for those religions to use this term. In other words, on the basis of this argument, the word Allāh as a proper name has some special connotations. Therefore, the use of the term in the translation of the Bible is totally absurd.³ Hence, al-Attas declares that “the ‘God’ of Islam is not the ‘God’ of Christianity.”⁴ Similarly, some individuals and group of Christians express the same opinion that, it is not only the language of expression and the mode of worship in Islam and Christianity that differ, but also, Muslims and Christians do not serve the same God.⁵ There is a report that, in Indonesia in 1998, a Christian movement led by an organization known as *Bet Yeshua Ha-masiach* totally rejected the use of “Allāh” and some Arabic terms. Their argument is that, the word Allāh in the Qur'anic context is not the same as *Yahweh* or *Elohim* in the Biblical narratives of God, therefore, urge the need for the Christians to go back to their religious roots in Hebrew. Consequently their Bible publication in 2000 bears names like *Yahwe*, *Eloah* and *Eloin* in place of Muslim terms for God. Among Christian theologians who argue that Allāh is not the God of the Bible is an Australian, Brutus Balan, who advances his theory as follows:

The word '*Allah*' no matter the origin pre Muhammad is understood in the Islamic context today as the Quranic deity.

¹ Mahmood Rowhani, *Al-Mu'jam al-Iḥṣā' li-'Alfāz al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, (Iran: mu'assah al-Jāb wa Intishārāt, 1987), p. 236.

² Mohd. Zaidi Ismail, “Understanding the “Allah” Controversy” in *Controversy over the Term Allah in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Attin Press Sdn Bhd, 2013), p. 22.

³ Al-Attas, p. 10.

⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵ This is the opinion of one G. J. O. Moshay in a book, “*Who is this Allah*” as cited in Thomas, p. 171.

It is not a word that depicts the Trinitarian *Yahweh-Elohim* (Lord God) of the Bible. It is wrong for any translation of the Bible in any language to use this word 'Allah' to refer to the God of the Bible. Doing so brings confusion and ambiguity between what the Bible teaches as the Trinitarian monotheistic God with that of the 'Allah' of the Quran. It cannot be considered as a mere argument over semantics for Christians of the Protestant/evangelical variety. To use 'Allah' synonymously in reference to the Biblical deity is both confusing for the Muslims and Christians as to which God one is referring to as it is poles apart theologically. There is the danger for both sides untaught of its respective theologies to think it is the same God who is worshipped. Christians must distinguish themselves in their doctrine and not use an Arabic word for the Biblical God.¹

Moreover, another leading authority in mission similarly asserts that: "The God of the Christian Bible *Yahweh-Elohim* beginning from Genesis to Revelation is a Trinitarian monotheistic God...The Quranic concept of 'Allah' is in total opposite to this".² He urges the Christians to avoid using the term Allāh in Bible translation, and emphasizes the need for keeping with revelatory Biblical language in translation and "when untranslatable, transliterated."³ To the same effect Georges Houssney makes the following remark:

Any similarities between Allah of Islam and the Judeo-Christian God are marginal. For instance, at the core of Islamic doctrine is the belief that Allah is impersonal. All of his attributes stem from this concept [essence]. Antithetically, at the core of the Judeo-Christian faith is the belief that God is personal. All His attributes center around that belief. Here lies the great schism in the worldviews of Muslims and Christians.⁴

With this principle in mind, it is not enough to translate the word 'Allāh' by mere looking at its meaning as God in the English dictionary because what the word "Allāh" means in its religious sense cannot be

¹ As cited in the case of the Court of Appeal of Malaysia (Appellate Jurisdiction) Civil Appeal No. W-01-1-2010., 13. Also available at:<http://www.danielpipes.org/comments/185481>

² Ibid., p. 13-14.

³ Ibid., p. 15.

⁴ Georges Houssney, "Allah: The God of Islam. Biblical Missiology," *Biblical Missiology*, accessed May 9, 2015, <http://biblicalmissiology.org/>

comprehended from a dictionary definition. But, we are still faced with a far more demanding task of understanding the word in its Islamic religious sense; which clearly shows the complexity of using one's religious terms in translating religious texts of others.

Moreover, with regards to the claim that for many hundred years before the revelation of the Qur'ān, the Jews and Christians in Arabia called God by the name Allāh. al-Attas as a prominent opponent of using the term Allāh by the Christians made the following remarks:

Even if one were to admit that indeed the Christian Arabs in the Middle East use the term 'Allah,' they do not do so in reference to the term 'God' as reflected by the Bible or the translations of the Bible into Arabic. If they do use the term 'Allah' in their speech, it is because they are following the traditions of the Arabs as far as their culture is concerned and not to reflect a particular set of theological beliefs.¹

His contention is that the word "Allāh" does not appear in the original Hebrew Bible of the Christians, known as *Tanakh* or in the first translation of the Bible into Greek, known as *Septuagint*. The word "Allāh" did not appear in the Latin New Testaments either. "That being a historical fact, it was submitted that the word "Allah" is not an integral part of the faith and practice of Christianity."² Whereas, there is historical evidence about the use of the term 'Allāh' as a proper name in the Qur'ān and the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him: a fact that cannot be disputed.³ In other words, the name Allāh as it is used today is not known to the world before the advent of Islam. Therefore, it carries no other meaning apart from the one that was given to it by the Glorious Qur'ān. Therefore, other religious groups refer to Allāh as the God of Muslims. This brings us to another point which contended that the Christians today misuse Islamic terms in order to confuse Muslims, for the subtle purpose of propagating Christianity to them. It is alleged that:

The more Muslims' understanding of "Allah" is informed by Scriptures, the more Biblical their theology of God will become. Therefore, if the translator's objective is to render the Scriptures in a way that will be received as "Good

¹ Syed Ali Tawfik al-Attas, p. 10.

² As established by the rule of the Court of Appeal of Malaysia (Appellate Jurisdiction) Civil Appeal No. W-01-1-2010.

³ Mohd Zaidi Ismail, p. 23.

News” by Muslim readers, the solution to this linguistic quagmire is not necessarily to avoid the term “Allah”, no matter how vehemently some non-Arabic knowing Christians may oppose it.¹

Accad one of the leading authorities on Muslim contextualization considers the task of filling Islamic religious terminologies with biblical meaning as justifiable. He reiterates this claim in the following statements:

But just as I do not stop using the word “God” in English because many false sects also use the same word, I do not need to stop using the word “Allah” just because the Qur’an uses the same word. Rather, I need to show Muslims the true identity of Allah in the Bible instead of fighting with them over semantics, and therefore never getting to the real issue.²

Such statements by Accad and others make some Muslims see the need to call for an effort by Muslims to stop Christians from using the word Allah in Bible translation, to protect the purity of Islam.³ The most important point to note in their argument is that, “language and thought are reflexive” which means that language influences the manner in which one thinks.⁴

In other words, as a tool language can be used to influence ones’ thought. Therefore, by portraying Allah in a biblical context, there is a possibility that Muslims can be confused regarding their understanding and correct usage of the word.

Conclusion

The main concern of this discussion is about the validity of using or not using the word Allāh in the translation of the Bible. The issue is a subject of a long debate, especially between some non-Arab Muslims, and some Orthodox missionaries. As a consequence, there emerged two conflicting views on using terminologies, culture and forms of worship of one religion on another. In a specific terms, while some people conceived the word Allāh in the Bible to be a mere translation of an English word God and that can also be used by both Muslims and non-Muslims, others insist that the term is an essential part of the worship and instruction of faith and practice of the Muslim community

¹ As established by the Court of Appeal of Malaysia (Appellate Jurisdiction) Civil Appeal No. W-01-1-2010., p. 17.

² Fouad Accad, *Building Bridges*, (Colorado Spring, C.O: Navpress, nd), p. 22.

³ Wan Azhar Wan Ahmad, *Controversy over the Term Allah in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Attin Press Sdn Bhd, 2013), p. 2.

⁴ Syed Ali Tawfik al-Attas, p. 8.

universally regardless of culture, language or race and, therefore others cannot use it.

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