

WHY I USE "ALLAH."

A layman's perspective

In the current ongoing debate, some are of the opinion that Christians should just give in and forego the use of the word "Allah" so that the threats and attacks on churches will stop and Malaysia can continue to enjoy her peace and move on unhindered to developed nation status.

Now, more than ever the country needs clear-minded Malaysians and not "confused" citizens, Christians included.

There are ten salient facts and reasons and I would like to address these to the ordinary man in the street and lay people in the Church.¹

1. The use of "Allah" predates Islam

"Allah" is the Arabic name for God, and it indeed pre-dates Islam and even Christianity. The pagan Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula called God "Allah," even though they worshipped hundreds of idols in addition. Christians all across the Arab World today use the word "Allah" for God, and if one were to read an Arabic Bible, he would find that God is indeed called "Allah."

"Allah" is also the name that Jesus Christ called God. "Allah" is the Arabic equivalent of "Elohim," which is Hebrew for God. The "im" is a plural appendage of respect, and so the word is "Eloh," which is very similar to "Allah." In addition, the Aramaic word for God is "Alaha," and Aramaic was the language which Jesus himself spoke. Moreover, the word "Allah" is found in the English version of the Bible which we read today. In Matthew 27:46 we read: *"About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' - which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"* The word "Eloi" is the Aramaic form of the Arabic "Allah."²

It is important to know the fact that Christians in Malaysia didn't start using "Allah" only recently, as some contend.

2. It is used all over the world by Christians.

The Arabic word is commonly used by Christians to describe God in such countries as Egypt, Syria and Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation.

¹ This article is in response to the many requests for clarification from lay people in churches.

² Hesham A. Hassaballa is a physician and writer living in Chicago. He is co-author of *The Beliefnet Guide to Islam* (Doubleday). <http://www.middle-east-online.com/English/?id=36608>

So it is not just a Malaysian word, for the Malaysian context only. One cannot just decide to copyright an “international” word and hope to escape ridicule.

And anybody in Malaysia can tell you that it is more than just one word that can be involved. The focus now may be on one word, thereafter the contention will be expanded to include other words, and at a later stage any other word or words that the “authorities” may so decide.

3 “Allah” was used by East Malaysians before Malaysia was formed

The SIB church was formed in Sarawak in 1928, nearly 30 years before Malaysia's independence, and they were already using “Allah” in their worship and literature.

And some of them don't even speak BM or English, only their own mother tongue and in their mother tongue, the word used is “Allah.”

So it's not only the Alkitab, the BM Bible. The other Scriptures which use “Allah” are the Kelabit and Lunbawang Bibles.

Daniel Raut, a senior leader of SIB Church — the largest Malay-speaking congregation in the country — said it will not drop the use of the word “Allah,” even though Christians fear for their safety.

“Since our forefathers become Christians in the 1920s, we have been using Allah even in our mother tongue,” said Raut, who is from the Lunbawang tribe in eastern Sarawak state.

Furthermore, how does one propose that its use be restricted to East Malaysians only? What happens when they come to work in West Malaysia? What about the thousands who are already in West Malaysia? What about our existing West Malaysia Bahasa Malaysia churches?

What happens when an East Malaysian crosses over to Labuan (a Federal Territory) for the weekend?

Some proponents of the “East Malaysia only” concept take it a step further and suggest (to those of us in West Malaysia), “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

Though debatable, the new political landscape has all the major political parties, including the key partners of the Barisan, not aligned with Caesar, on this issue.

The Malay equivalent is “Masuk kandang lembu, menguak. Masuk kandang kambing mengembek” (When entering the cattle pen, moo. When entering the goat pen, bleat).

Perhaps it is time the *new* minority, moo and bleat with the majority.

4. The success of our National Language education policy

Since the introduction of the National Language policy, our emerging generation has become more proficient in Bahasa Malaysia. And with the continued emphasis, the next two generations can be expected to be not only proficient but dependent on the Bahasa Malaysia as the lingua franca in our nation.

Alongside the Allah contention, there are clear intentions to further impose restrictions on other words like “Injil” (Gospel) and “firman” (Word).³

So the logical question we all are asking is “how would this pan out?”

Any strategists will tell you that in winning the generational war, ignore the “old diehards” and focus on the future generations.

Our grandchildren and great grand-children, will find themselves *reluctant* to read Scriptures in a language in which they are less proficient and also not be able to access the Alkitab, and also, perhaps be the first generation who have never heard of “firman” and “Injil?”

I can understand the zeal of the government to Islamize the nation,⁴ but I pray that they will do so with honesty and integrity. “*Bring all to the table*” and aim for the hearts. Malaysians will respect you for that.

But no coercion, no bullying, no media misrepresentation, no *scrambling* the minds of our children and no re-writing of Scriptures!

But I also pray that by the same token and in the true spirit of religious freedom, the day will soon come, when others, if they so desire be allowed to share their respective faiths with our Muslim friends as is fully acceptable and permissible in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world. Surely Indonesia is a great example to us on what freedom of religion is all about. Sharing one’s faith with another should not be narrowly interpreted as with ‘intent to convert’. Understanding one another’s faith is surely an excellent way of promoting goodwill, peace and harmony among the multi religious population in this lovely country of ours.

Under the present circumstances, the many proposed “inter faith dialogues” and formation of councils to facilitate such dialogues will be nothing but a monologue, as the other faiths are “gagged” in the name of the constitution.

³ See the Pahang enactment

⁴ I believe every true and faithful follower will want to share their faith, and Muslims are no exception.

5. Used by others as well

The Sikhs use "Allah" in their Scriptures. Do we stop them next?

What about Hindus, who also refer to one of their gods as "Allah?"

Rigveda is the most sacred scripture of the Hindus, and one of the attributes given to God Almighty in Book no 2 Hymn no 1 verse 11, is 'Ila' which if pronounced properly is the same as Allah⁵.

So it is not a Christian issue alone. What the Christians are asked to do, the Sikhs and the Hindus will be asked to do, eventually.

6. Constitutional right to "manage" our own religion

This right must include how we address our God.

Over enthusiastic bureaucrats, consequentially are interfering with the worship & education of Christians – CDs have been confiscated, Sunday School materials are held up by customs, besides the confiscations of the Alkitab.

According to Prof. Dr. Shad Saleem Faruqi⁶, the Malaysian Constitution provides that Islam is the religion of the federation. But all other religions may be practised in peace and harmony: Article 3(1).

In respect of religion, every person has the right to three things:

1. To profess
2. To practice
3. And, subject to Article 11(4), to propagate his religion: Article 11(1)

⁵ Other references to use of Allah :

BOOK 2 - HYMN 1 Verse 11 - Thou, God, art Aditi to him who offers gifts: thou, Hotrā, Bhāratī, art strengthened by the song. Thou art the hundred-wintered **Ila** to give strength, Lord of Wealth! Vṛtra-slayer and Sarasvatī.

BOOK 3 - HYMN XXIII Verse 4 He set thee in the earth's most lovely station, in **Ila's** place, in days of fair bright weather. On man, on Āpayā, Agni! on the rivers Dr̥śadvati, Sarasvatī, shine richly.

⁶ Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr. Shad Saleem Faruqi is a Malaysian Senior Professor of law who has served Universiti Teknologi MARA in Shah Alam, Selangor in various capacities from 1971 onwards. He served as the Head of the Diploma in Law program (1979 - 1984), as Assistant Rector (1996-1999), Assistant Vice Chancellor (1999 - 2001) and Legal Advisor (1996 - 2006). He has also served on the faculties of law at the International Islamic University Malaysia, part time at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and a visiting professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia

Every religious group has the right to:

1. Manage its own affairs
2. Establish and maintain institutions for religious purposes.
3. Acquire and own property and administer it: Article 11(3).
4. Establish and maintain institutions for religious education: Article 12(2).⁷

Our constitutional right, to manage our own affairs, to practice religion freely has been increasingly under threat particularly over the past two decades.

7. Dictating what should be in the Scriptures of a major religion in the world

This suggestion that another word be used is perhaps “the biggest joke.”

Whether one agrees or not about the word is not the main issue.

The basic issue, lest we forget the obvious, is that each and every religious *Scriptures is the sacred book* – of Christians (including the Kelabit and Lunbawang), the Sikhs and the Hindus. We are not talking about some supplementary textbooks or a “pseudo scripture” just written recently.

Are those who argue for a substitute word suggesting that all these Holy Books be re-written to accommodate a few?

If it is suggested by adherents of the respective faiths, this could perhaps be more acceptable. But when followers of *one* faith, suggest (and insist) that believers of *another* faith, re-write their Scriptures to pander to their “unsubstantiated convictions” then we are not too far from the “height of arrogance.”

I know Malaysia is “boleh-land” but this move to “force” the other religious groups to rewrite their Scriptures is preposterous.

8. Prominent scholars of Islam and Muslim organizations have supported the use of "Allah" by Christians

In Malaysiakini dated 13th Jan 2010, Constitutional Law expert Abdul Aziz Bari contends that it is pretty clear that the use of Allah by Christians has some basis in the Quran.

⁷ The Federal Constitution and the Social Contract by Prof. Dr. Shad Saleem Faruqi – http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:VoCPy4Nb85sJ:cpps.org.my/resource_centre/Prof.%2520Dr.%2520Shad%2520Saleem%2520Faruqi.ppt+Malaysia+constitutional+Article+11&cd=7&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=my&client=firefox-a

This is strengthened by the exposition of eminent scholars, including Egyptian scholar Shaykh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (Maal Hijrah award recipient 2009) who said that Christians, as part of the Abrahamic faiths together with the Jews and Muslims, can use the word 'Allah'.⁸

Earlier on, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) on 4 Jan 2010, also issued a statement viz -

“With regards to actual and historical practices, Christian Arabs have been using the word “Allah” to refer to God in their religious sources since the inception of Islam, and have never been challenged by private Muslims or Muslim governments on this ground. Islamic law is clear that followers of the Christian faith have the right to practice their religion according to their own religious teachings.

We call on the Malaysian government to uphold the religious freedom of Christians and to let the court ruling stand. We also urge Muslim NGOs to respect Islamic teachings and long-held Islamic traditions, and to withdraw their opposition to the use of the word “Allah” by their Christian compatriots.”⁹

We would like to hear from our government a more coherent and intelligent response to these prominent voices than simply quote “this is Malaysia.”

9. Our State Anthems will take on a new meaning.

How does one sing the state anthems of Selangor, Kedah, Pahang, Johor, Kelantan and Trengganu now, since there are references to “Allah” in these songs, as it is now implied to refer to the Muslim God only?

In schools, about 30 years ago, we were told we were singing to “God.” Now are our children to sing only to one particular God?

See appendix for list of affected State Anthems.

Unless, of course, one is liberal and don't mind singing to all gods or any god or just the Muslim god.

⁸ <http://national-express-malaysia.blogspot.com/2010/01/allah-decree-does-sultan-have-power.html>

⁹ <http://www.isna.net/articles/News/ISNA-Commends-Malaysian-Court-Ruling-that-Affirms-Religious-Freedom-of-Christians.aspx>

10. We need to keep in mind that there was "good harmony" in the first 30 years after Merdeka, with freedom to use "Allah."

It never was an issue until enthusiastic politicians promulgated the infamous ISA gazette in 1982, referring to the Alkitab as a document "prejudicial to the national interest and security of the Federation."

The rest is history.

What an insult! But the Christian community has always been a peace loving people.

For the sake of harmony, Christians engaged in closed door meetings in the past, to negotiate "restricted use" of the word rather than to bring it to the courts. And we were always assured by the government that we could use our Alkitab.

But today, they are saying we cannot use the word and the various government agencies started confiscating various Christian materials, not just the Alkitab. And the claim is we "used to accept it" – but that's because we have been *tricked* into negotiating behind closed doors in the name of the Malaysian culture of "talk and resolve quietly." So because "nobody" heard from us, now they take advantage and say, we accepted it all this while. This is absolutely not true. Christians have been moaning, complaining, objecting and writing to the government for years.

Should we concede for the sake of peace alone? Friends, the days of closed door meetings - where our views are deliberately misrepresented¹⁰ and compromised - where the minority is always bullied and threatened into submission for the sake of harmony and in the name of sensitivity, are perhaps over?

It is indeed sad, that after 52 years of independence, the country is still not ready for mature dialogue, and is still struggling to hear the voice of reason.

¹⁰ Muhyiddin said he had been receiving quite a number of messages from non-Muslim friends in Sabah and Sarawak who said there were Christians who felt that things would not have happened in the first place "if we, the Christians, would just not use the word 'Allah'". **Malaysia Insider 14th Jan2010** – we disagree with this view, as the leaders of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), the component members being the Roman Catholic, the Council Churches of Malaysia and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship of Malaysia, have met on several occasions over the last few years and have repeatedly affirmed the wishes of the Christians, both in East and West Malaysia, ie we would not compromise on the use of the word "Allah." The dissenting voice is a very small minority and is obviously being used to portray a misleading view. I would urge all Christians to refer to **the "Kuching Declaration"** dated Sept 1989, where the Roman Catholics, the CCM and the NECF came together to formally adopt a united stand to use the word "Allah." See -

<http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&action=view&menuid=154&retrieveid=976>

This is not a race issue, this is not a Malay supremacy issue, this is not even a religious issue. And this is definitely not an East-West Malaysia issue.¹¹

Before us are simply constitutional and “human rights” issues, a call to respect the spiritual convictions and Scriptures of other faiths. This is simply a call to exercise common sense and to respect boundaries – ie *no rewriting Scriptures!*

I hope and pray that the above facts and reasons would help Christians understand that we are not insisting on using “Allah” to “irritate” the “easily confused people” of the land.

We continue to pray for peace and seek a *reasoned solution*, so that Malaysia can indeed shine as a land so affectionately known as “truly Asia.”

Eu Hong Seng
Pastor

20th Jan 2010.

¹¹ Just because a few Christians in West or East Malaysia, don’t understand the issue and voice their ignorance, this does not mean the whole of West or the whole of the East Malaysian communities are against the use of the word. We need to be aware of the sinister aims to make both the West and East Malaysian Christians misunderstand each other. By all means, “share” and educate each other. But beware of answering and correcting in the cyber space and give the impression, that the West or the East Malaysian Christians are ignorant, naïve or disunited. The “**Kuching Declaration**” clearly shows the Christians in both West and East Malaysia are united. And today, we remain resolute and unyielding in our stand.

Appendix – State Anthems

Selangor

Duli Yang Maha Mulia
 Selamat di atas takhta
Allah lanjutkan usia Tuanku
 Rakyat mohon restu bawah Duli Tuanku
 Bahagia selama-lamanya
 Aman dan sentosa
 Duli Yang Maha Mulia

Kedah

Allah selamatkan Sultan Mahkota
 Berpanjangan usia diatas Takhta
 Memelihara agama Nabi kita
 Negeri Kedah serata-rata

Perak

Dilanjutkan *Allah* usianya Sultan
 Adil dan murah memerintah watan
 Ditaati rakyat kiri dan kanan
 Iman yang soleh Allah kurniakan
Allah berkati Perak Ridzuan
Allah selamatkan Negeri dan Sultan.

Johor

Allah peliharakan Sultan
 'Nugrahan dia segala kehormatan
 Sihat dan ria, kekal dan makmur
 Luaskan kuasa, menaungkan kami
 Rakyat dipimpin berzaman lagi
 Dengan Merdeka bersatu hati
Allah berkati Johor
 Allah selamatkan Sultan

Pahang

Ya *Allah* Yang Masa Kuasa,
 Lanjutkan Usia Duli Yang Maha Mulia,
 Dirgahayu, Darul Makmur,
 Aman dan Bahagia Sentiasa,
 Ya *Allah* Selamatkan Duli Tuanku Raja Kami

Trengganu

Allah daulatkan Tuanku Sultan,
 Terengganu Darul Iman,
Allah peliharakan Tuanku Sultan,
 Sejahtera sepanjang zaman,
Allah rahmatkan Tuanku Sultan,
 Memerintah rakyat aman.

Kelantan

*Lanjutka usia Al-Sultan kami
Sultan Kelantan raja ikrami
Aman sentosa Tuhan sirami
Kekal memerintah kami
Kasih dan taat setia disembahkan
Keriangin diucapkan
Segala kebesaran Allah cucurkan
Bertambah kemuliaan*