

# DID JESUS WORSHIP ALLAH?

## The Malaysian Government Bans Christian Use of Allah

By Nick Gier

"Fee al-badi' khalaqa **Allahu** as-Samaawaat wa al-Ard . . . "

--Genesis 1:1 in the Arabic Bible

Malaysia is a backward, pagan state because God teaches freedom for everyone, and the word “Allah” is for everyone.

--Bassilius Nassour, Greek Orthodox Christian Bishop in Damascus



Arabic Bible from AD 867 and Mary holding an Arabic Text

There are about 12 million Arabic speaking Christians in the world. They live as substantial minorities in Lebanon (35%) and Syria (10%) and in lesser numbers in Iraq, Palestine, and North Africa. Millions of them are good citizens in dozens of nations throughout the world. (One of the first people I met as a graduate student in Denmark was a Palestinian Christian.) Contrary to popular belief, the majority of Arabs living in the U.S. are Christians, not Muslims. Ralph Nader, for example, comes from an Arab Christian family.

A majority of the refugees from Iraq are Arabic speaking Christians, who have come under great pressure since the U.S. invasion gave rise to Muslim extremism. Osama bin Laden condemned Saddam Hussein for his secularism and for the fact that his foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, was a

Christian. Because of militant attacks about half of the one million Iraqi Christians have been forced to leave their own country.

### **Arab Jews and Christians Worshipped Allah Before Mohammed**

For at least 1,200 years Arab Christians have read their Bibles with the Hebrew and Greek words *elohim* and *theos* translated as Allah. The oldest extant Arabic Bible (parts of the New Testament) was produced in AD 867 and was found at St. Catherine monastery on Mt. Sinai. In Syria at a Greek Orthodox Church, founded by Emperor Justinian in AD 547 he had a vision of the Virgin Mary, one can view a mosaic of Mary holding an Arabic text. Wikipedia informs us that “the first Christian ruler in history was an Arab called Abgar VIII of Edessa, who converted ca. AD 200.”

Jews and Christians prayed to God as Allah long before the prophet Mohammed, who himself acknowledged that Arabian Jews and Christians of his time used the word Allah for God. The Charter of Medina (AD 622) guaranteed freedom of religion and while recognizing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as different religions, it assumed that their Arabic speaking followers worshipped the same God Allah.

### **Malaysian Government Bans the Use of Allah for Christians**

In 2007, under pressure from Muslim fundamentalism but going against two millennia of tradition, the Malaysian government decided to ban all Christian publications that translated God as Allah. Government leaders said that they did it because they did not want members of the Muslim majority (60 percent) to be confused and to be misled into converting to Christianity, a punishable offense in Malaysia.

Last month a judge for the nation’s highest court ruled that the prohibition violated the principle of religious freedom. Judge Lau Bee Lan declared that Malaysian Christians “have a constitutional right to use Allah.” The great irony is that Arabic is not the language of Malaysia, and Allah is a loan word in the Malay language. Nevertheless Malaysian leaders think that they have the right to decide how the word should be used.

Thousands of Malaysia’s Muslims have been protesting the high court decision and the government has appealed the ruling. Since January 7 nine churches, a convent, and a Sikh temple have been fire bombed by militants on motorcycles. No one has been hurt, but the first floor of one

church was destroyed. The Sikhs have been targeted because they have always used Allah for God.

The 2.5 million Malaysian Christians are primarily Chinese and Indian immigrants, and Hindu Indians joined these Christians in candle light vigils at the churches in Kuala Lumpur. In August 2009, 50 Muslims had staged a protest at the site of a new Hindu Temple, and they brought in the severed head of a cow, sacred to the Hindus, and stomped on to show their dislike for their Hindu compatriots. To their credit the government and Muslim leaders have condemned this incident and the firebombing of churches.

### **A Malay Christian Scholar Sets the Record Straight**

Commenting on the many delays in prosecuting the charge, Malay Christian scholar Ng Karn Weng states: “I think the government knows that its policy of banning the use of the word ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims is just intellectually untenable, legally indefensible, and morally embarrassing.”

Laying out a detailed linguistic explanation, Weng informs us that “*allah* is an ordinary Arabic word which is not specifically linked to a particular religion.” The word is composed of two parts “al-ilah” literally meaning “the strong God.” The root word Il is exactly the same as the Canaanite El, which appears many times in the Old Testament as El Bethel (God at Bethel) and El Shaddai (God of the Mountain). (Do you think that the Canaanites led protests yelling: “El is our God not yours”?) The plural form Elohim is the most common word for God in the Old Testament.

Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language from Syria. There are at least a dozen phrases in the New Testament where the authors have transliterated Jesus’ Aramaic words or sayings into Greek. Trying to be as authentic as possible in his film *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson has Jesus speaking Aramaic and praying to Aalah, Western Aramaic for God. But having anyone in the film speak Latin, as Gibson’s Jesus does with Pontius Pilate, was a “blunder,” says Rabbi Steven Geller of New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary. Koine Greek, the language of the New Testament, was the common language of the Mideast not Latin.

Allah and Elohim are not names of God; rather, they are generic terms for deity. When the Quran lists the 99 names of God, Allah is not among them. (Only some Sufis believe that Allah is the 100<sup>th</sup> name of God.) Some

argue that Allah is a superior word for God because it is genderless and cannot be made into a plural. I agree with Muslims who are concerned that the Trinity undermines Christian claims to monotheism. See my essay at [www.class.uidaho.edu/trinity.htm](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/trinity.htm)

One could argue that Yahweh/Jehovah was a unique divine revelation to Moses and therefore special to the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, in his book *The Early History of God*, Mark Smith has discovered that Yahweh has an earlier appearance as a warrior-god in religious traditions of the Midianites and Edomites.

### **God as Lord in Malay and Chinese Bible Translations**

Malaysian Muslims have proposed that Christians choose the Malay word Tuhan, which means Lord, for the Christian God, but the Christians insist that Allah is more accurate and they are supported by Muslim authorities all over the world.

When Roman Catholic missionaries produced the first Chinese translation of the Bible, they chose for God the Chinese phrase Tian Zhu, which means “Lord of Heaven.” Coming much later Protestant missionaries were not satisfied with this, and a great controversy arose about this issue. James Legge, missionary and first great translator of the Chinese classics, had a vivid religious experience at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, and he became convinced the Christian God was the same as Shang Di, the highest God of the ancient Chinese. Other Protestants were scandalized by this suggestion and they finally agreed, very reasonably, on the Chinese word Shen, a generic term for deity just like Allah and Elohim.

Here are the key Chinese words in the translation of the first verse of John: “In the beginning was the Dao and the Dao was with Shen, and the Dao was Shen.” (I think that Dao is a very poor translation of the Greek Logos. I believe that the neo-Confucian word Li would be much better.) Never once did anyone hear a murmur of protest from Daoists or Confucians that the Christians had stolen these Chinese religious words.

When I taught the existence of God in my philosophy classes, the conclusion, if any the arguments are valid, is that there is one God not many. That conclusion could be expressed in any number of languages--Allah, Elohim, Deus, Dios, Dieu, Gott, Gud--and of course it would be absurd for believers to insist that only their word for deity is the legitimate one.

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