

DID JESUS WORSHIP ALLAH?

American Christians and Malaysian Muslims Fight Over Their Gods

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“Fee al-badi' khalafa Allahu (God) 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

Early this month (October 2015) the Georgia Department of Education removed a teaching guide for world history. Parents in Walton County were protesting the way Islam was being taught, especially the claim that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God. Some parents were fearful that their children had actually become Muslims because they had been forced to memorize the Five Pillars of Islam.

Meanwhile half way across the world a judge in Malaysia ruled last year that the word Allah is exclusive to Muslims and that the nation’s 2.5 million Christians must refrain from using the word in their scripture and worship. Bibles have been confiscated all around the country. Malaysian Christians speak Malay and their Bibles are printed in that language, but Allah, a loan word from Arabic, is used for God.

In January of 2009, nine churches, a convent, and a Sikh temple were fire bombed by militants on motorcycles. (Malaysian Sikhs also use Allah in their worship.) Malaysian Christians are primarily Chinese and Indian immigrants, and Malaysian Hindus joined the

Christians in candle light vigils at the churches in Kuala Lumpur. In August 2009, 50 Muslims 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.

Christian Arabs Live All Around the World

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. (One of the first people I met as a graduate student in Denmark was a Palestinian Christian.) Contrary to popular belief, 63 percent of Arabs living in the U. S. are Christians, not Muslims. The most famous Christian Arab Americans are Ralph Nader, Frank Zappa, Steve Jobs, Paula Abdul, Ralph Nader, and Serj Tankian.

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. (A great number of the Syrian refugees are also Christians.) Osama bin Laden condemned Saddam Hussein for his secularism and for the fact that his foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, was a Christian. By 2008 half of the one million Iraqi Christian had fled their country, and now with the rise of the Islamic State even more have been forced to leave.

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 pictured above) 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, one can view a mosaic (pictured above) of the Virgin Mary holding an Arabic text.

Jews and Christians prayed to God as Allah long before the prophet Mohammed. Wikipedia informs us that “the first Christian ruler in history was an Arab called Abgar VIII of Edessa, who converted ca. AD 200.” The Charter of Medina (AD 622) guaranteed freedom of religion, and while recognizing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as different religions, it declared that their adherents worshipped the same God, acknowledged by all those present as Allah.

A Malay Christian Scholar Sets the Record Straight

Malay Christian scholar Ng Karn Weng has the following response to the controversy: “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 Hebrew

word 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”?) Elohim, however, is the most common word for God in the Old Testament.

Allah and Elohim are not divine names; 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 100th 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 the unity of God and Christian claims to monotheism. Read my essay on this topic [here](#).

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. One of them is rather famous: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me”? (Matt. 27:46). 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.

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 Malaysian Christians still insist that Allah is more accurate and they are supported by Muslim and Christian 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. Deity could be expressed in any number of languages as Allah, Elohim, God, Deus, Dios, Dieu, Gott, or Gud, but of course it would be ignorant (or arrogant and intellectually dishonest for the well informed) for believers to insist that only their word for deity is the legitimate one.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read or listen to his columns at www.NickGier.com.