

No One Religion Can Monopolize or Copyright the Term ‘Allah’

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The Logical, Historical, Cultural and Constitutional Case for the Right of Everybody to use ‘Allah’

The Deputy Minister of Internal Security, Johari Baharum, recently declared that only Muslims may use the word ‘Allah’ to describe the God they worship. He was reported as saying, “The word ‘Allah’ can only be used in the context of Islam and not any other religion ... Only Muslims can use ‘Allah’. It’s a Muslim word, you see. It’s from (the Arabic (language)). We cannot let other religions use it because it will confuse people.”

That an official of such high standing can make such a declaration is disturbing. Not surprisingly, there have been some emotional responses from the public to the Deputy Minister’s declaration. But it is important that we go beyond emotional responses and offer a firm, rational and clear rebuttal to the flawed rationale that underlies the Deputy Minister’s declaration.

The declaration is questionable for the following reasons: 1) its logic is flawed 2) it omits of historical facts 3) it shows disrespect for cultural identity and 4) it disregards Constitutional rights of Malaysian citizens.

1) Flawed Logic

Looking at the declaration, the Deputy Minister’s logic is as follows:

- (1) If x is Arabic then x belongs to Islam
- (2) x = ‘Allah’ is Arabic
- (3) Therefore ‘Allah’ belongs to Islam

The problem with this reasoning is its flawed premise (1). The logic outlined above just cannot be applied to linguistic terms that were in use in pre-Islamic Arabia. In particular, the term ‘Allah’ was the common term used to refer to the supreme God long before Islam existed. The evidence for this is supported by many authoritative reference works including the following:

“That the Arabs, before the time of Muhammad, accepted and worshipped, after a fashion, a supreme god called Allah – “the *ilah*” or the god, if the form is of genuine Arabic origin; if of Aramaic, from *alaha*, “the god” – seems absolute certain” (*Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed., H. A. R. Gibb & J. H. Kramer, p. 33).

“The cult of a deity termed simply “the god” (*al-ilah*) was known throughout southern Syria and northern Arabia in the days before Islam... It seems equally certain that Allah was not merely a god in Mecca but was widely regarded as the “high god,” the chief and head of the Meccan pantheon,...Thus Allah was neither an unknown nor an unimportant deity to the Quraysh when Muhammad began preaching his worship at Mecca” (*The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito, p 76-77).

The Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu remarks that it is precisely because the name Allah was common to both the pagan Arabs and the Muslims that gave rise to the heated debates that arose between Muhammad and his adversaries. Likewise, Muhammad addressed his adversaries in the name of ‘Allah’ without bothering to explain what this name meant given their common understanding of ‘Allah’ as referring to the supreme God (*God and Man in the Quran*, Toshihiko Izutsu, pp. 100-117).

These pertinent observations of the common usage of ‘Allah’ by Arabs before Islam also found confirmation among archaeologists. One may consult the archaeological report by the great German scholar Julius Wellhausen who gave an exhaustive list of inscriptions referring to ‘Allah’ in pre-Islam Arabia. Wellhausen’s observation is confirmed by W. Montgomery Watt in his work *Muhammad’s Mecca* (Chapter 3: Religion in Pre-Islamic Arabia) that affirms the thesis that belief in a high or supreme god was common throughout the Semitic Near-East in the Greco-Roman period. Watt, quoting Javier Teixidor, says “The epigraphical material reveals that the worship of a supreme god coexisted with that of other minor gods.... But the increasing emphasis on such beliefs is evidence of a trend towards monotheism, namely towards the exclusion of other gods' existence.”

The historical evidence suggests that Quranic Arabic was a subset of Arabic language and literature in the Middle East at that time. It is also beyond dispute that ‘Allah’ was widely used by all monotheists in pre-Islamic Arabia. Hence the premise –

(1) If x is Arabic then x belongs to Islam

is clearly wrong especially if x (the Arabic term ‘Allah’) was common currency before Islam. In short, it is a fallacy to conclude that just because it was referred to in Arabic; ‘Allah’ belongs exclusively to Islam.

2) Omission of Historical Facts

The standard lexicons on the Arabic language point out that there are linguistic similarities between ‘Allah’ in Arabic and other references to God in the cognate Semitic languages – for example, ’ēlāh in Aramaic and *ilu* in Akkadian. ‘Allah’ certainly bears linguistic affinity with the Hebrew *el*, with the root meaning “to be strong”, or *eloah*, the singular form of *elohim*. *Allah* could be derived from *ilah* meaning a deity or god, with the addition of the definite article *al-* *Al-ilah*, “the God”.

It is because of the linguistic affinity between the term ‘Allah’ and other Semitic terms that Christian Arabs called the supreme God ‘Allah’ centuries before the appearance of Islam. Arab Christians continue to use ‘Allah’ today. It is also true that historically, Christians in South East Asia have used ‘Allah’ to refer to the supreme God they worship. The earliest Christian writing in Malay, *Kitab salat as-sawai* (Christian prayers) was printed in Arabic type 1514. Christian catechisms in Malay were published around 1545. ‘Allah’ was used in the printed version of the Gospel of Matthew in Malay (1629) and the complete Malay Bible (1731-1733).

‘Allah’ as such has been used in the liturgy, prayers and worship among the Christian native peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak from the very beginning when these churches were first established generations ago. The fact of the centuries-long usage of ‘Allah’ among native Christians bears importance significance to what is perhaps an unexpressed charge behind the Deputy Minister’s declaration, “We cannot let other religions [the context refers to Christianity] use it because it will confuse people.” That is to suggest that there is a hidden agenda when Christians use ‘Allah’ in their Scriptures, that is, to confuse Muslims.

But Malay-speaking Christians have already been using ‘Allah’ for centuries and there was never any suggestion that in using the term ‘Allah’ Christians were at any time confusing

Muslims. Indeed, it may be argued that the existence of a common term ‘Allah’ facilitates communication and promotes mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims.

The Malayan Declaration of Independence (1957) provides an outstanding example of how common usage of ‘Allah’ builds mutual understanding. The Declaration of Independence begins with the phrase “*Dengan nama Allah yang Maha Pemurah lagi Mengasihani, segala puji bagi Allah yang Maha Berkuasa.*” The Declaration continues to affirm an agreement between the Queen and the Malay Rulers whereby Malaya was granted Independence. Obviously, the Declaration assumes that both the Queen of England (who is the head of Christianity in England) and the Malay Rulers could appeal to the same supreme God (‘Allah’) to ratify their agreement. The Deputy Minister ought to take note that there was no hint of any confusion regarding the Independence granted to Malaya.

3) Disrespect for Cultural Identity

It is vital that due respect and freedom be given to Malaysian natives in their desire to continue their centuries-long practice of referring to their supreme God as ‘Allah’ in their Scriptures, liturgy and songs. That is to say, their expression of faith in God (‘Allah’) and their prayers to God (‘Allah’) in their mother tongue – the soul-language that frames their linguistic and emotional matrix – is foundational to their religious and cultural identity.

For this reason, any attempt to prohibit Christian natives (and for that matter any Malaysian, since Bahasa Malaysia has become their primary language of proficiency) from using ‘Allah’ amounts to a blatant disrespect of their cultural identity and cultural freedom.

It is recognized that religious identity transcends national boundaries. Thus, Muslims in Malaysia proudly identify with Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere. By the same token, Malaysian Christians also share a wider religious identity with Christians in other countries. An important factor in this transnational religious identity is that both Malaysian natives and other Malay-speaking Christians refer to their supreme God as ‘Allah’ along with fellow-Christians in Indonesia, India, the Middle East and Africa. It is when they worship the same supreme God (‘Allah’) together that they have a sense of oneness in their religious identity.

That being the case, the Deputy Minister's declaration to prohibit Christians from referring to God as 'Allah' amounts to a disregard for their religious identity and religious freedom.

4) Disregard for Constitutional Rights of Malaysian Citizens.

Article 11 of the Federal Constitutions defines freedom of religion to include the following:

(1) Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it.

(3) Every religious group has the right –

(a) to manage its own religious affairs

(b) to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes...

In the light of these provisions, the prohibition of Christians from referring to their supreme God as 'Allah' results in denying their children to be educated and instructed about matters of Christian faith in their mother tongue. It is a fact that the authorities periodically seize Christian literature written in Bahasa Malaysia, as well as the Malay Bible (*Alkitab*). Such acts by in effect prevent Malaysian natives and Malay-speaking Christians from professing and practicing their faith in their mother-tongue and hence it is a violation of their religious freedom enshrined in Article 11 of the Federal Constitution.

It is our sincere hope that the arguments given above will persuade the authorities to accept the right of every Malaysian Christian to refer to their supreme God as 'Allah' in the profession and practice and propagation of religious faith.

I also attach below some photos taken from some early nineteenth century Malay Bibles (Please note that these photos are copyrighted and may not be used or reproduced without permission). These photos provide undeniable evidence that our indigenous Christian believers have been using 'Allah' in the Bible and in their worship centuries before our policy makers even consider making the absurd claim that the terms 'Allah' and other religious terms like '*kitab*', '*firman allah*', '*injil*', '*nabi*', '*iman*', '*wahyu*' etc are exculsively Islamic and therefore could not be used by non-Muslims.

'ELKITĀB,

'ĪĀ 'ĪTU,

SEGĀLA SŪRAT

PERDJANDJĀN LĀMA

DAN BAHĀRUW.

TEBSĀLIN KAPAĀA BAHĀSA MALAJUW.

Babuwa teterelab Kitāb 'alī 'awleh J. THING dan J. S. HUGHES, didalam
Dhassan 'itu jug denamā'ij 'Īāsi,
'Itas titah dan balandja 'awrag jug bertawlibat didalam London negerij Inggris 'itu
'akan per'idāran Kitāba 'mukhadis sebāb 'awrag p. sakampogras dan 'awrag p.
Kapada tibon Meséhiij 1821.

INGJIL LUKAS

37 Tetapi marika itu kuta-
sangka dia orang tölöh mülíht
sa'orang jin.

38 Maka katanya kapada ma-
rika itu, Mungapalah kamu
müñjahl aneah, dan mungapa-
lah bärbangkit fikirán dalam
hatimu?

39 Tengoklah tanganku, dan
skiku, maka inilah aku sündiri;
mahlah akan daku; lihatlah,
rumu jin itu tiada ada bärda-
ng, dan bärulang spürü yang
kau lihat ada padaku.

40 Maka apabila sudah iya
kata kata itu, lalu diunjok-
ta tangannya, dan kakinya
da marika itu.

Maka sündüntara marika
blon bulih pürchaya, ulih
suka chitanya, dan hie-
sa itu, maka kata Isa
a marika itu, Adakah
makanan kapada kamu

Maka dihi ulih marika
üping ikan goreng, dan
ülah bärmaña.

41 Maka dijawabnya, süraya
nya dihadapan marika

42 Maka katanya kapada
u, Adapun pürkataan
ng kukatakan kapada
ntara aku lagi düng-
ya itu sagala pürkara
a dapat tiada akan
ang tölöh túrtulis
et Musa, dan dalam

surat nabí nabi, dan
Masmor deríhal aka.

43 Sudah itu deríhal
lah akal marika itu
bulih mungarti akan ora-
ng jin.

44 Maka katanya
marika itu, Dúngun
turtulis, dan dúngun
Almoah itu akan mungarti
bärbangkit deripada hatimu
hari yang katiga.

45 Maka jawab, dan
pasa deripada dua mata
dumashorkan dúngun
diantara sagala bangsa
diJerusalem.

46 Maka kamalah ab
deríhal pürkara pürkara itu.

47 Maka sündüntara
aku sampiekan pürjanjan Allah
ku ka'atas kamu, tütapi
kamu dalam nagri Jerusa-
lem sampie kamu béróh
deripada kótínggias.

48 Maka diunjok-
akan marika itu kluar
kaBúthani, süta dúngun
tangannya, lalu dibérkati
marika itu.

49 Maka sündüntara
tara dibérkatinya akan marika
itu, maka bärchúcielah ia
pada marika itu, lalu tús-
katilah iya kúlíngit.

50 Maka sündüntara
akan marika itu kluar
kaBúthani, süta dúngun
tangannya, lalu dibérkati
marika itu.

51 Maka sündüntara
akan marika itu kluar
Jerusalem dúngun akan
sangat.

52 Maka sündüntara
dalam ka'abah mungarti
munguchap shukor akan Allah
Amin.

INGJIL
YAHYA.

FATSAL I.

MAKA habwasanya adalah
pada mula mulanya Kalimah
itu, maka Kalimah itu bäsürta
dúngun Allah, dan Kalimah itu
Allah adanya.

2 Adapun iya itulah pada
mulanya pun bäsürta dúngun
Allah.

3 Maka sagala sésuata tölöh
diJulkannya, maka dúngun ti-
da iya suntu pürkara pun ta'ji
yang tölöh jadi.

4 Maka dalamnya itulah ada
hidop, dan hidop itulah trang
manusia adanya.

5 Adapun trang itulah bär-
chahya chahya dalam gülap,
tütapi gülap itu tiada münürima
akan dia.

6 Süharmula maka adalah
sa'orang orang yang tölöh dibu-
rohkan Allah, yang bärnama
Yahya.

7 Maka adalah iya itu datang
sübab müñjadi saksi, maka iya
bäróh müñjadi saksi akan
trang itu, supaya sagala manusia
bolih pürchaya ulih sülah dia.

8 Bahwa bukannya dia itu
sündiri trang itu, mülainkan
iya disuruh supaya müñjadi
saksi deríhal trang itu adanya.

9 Maka adalah iya tölöh datang
datang kaurgrinya sündiri, tü-
tapi kaumnya sündiri itu tiada
münürima akan dia.

10 Tütapi süberapa orang
yang tölöh münürima akan dia
itu, süta pürchaya pula akan
namanya, maka dihirinya kwasa
kapada marika itu akan müñ-
jadi anak anak Allah.

11 Maka iya itu dipasakkan
birkannya deripada daruh, akan
deripada kahandak hawa nafsu,
akan deripada kahandak manu-
sia, mülainkan deripada Allah
adanya.

12 Maka adapun Kalimah itu
tölöh müñjadi manusia, süta
tinggal pula iya diantara kami,
maka kita tölöh mülíht künm-
liannya, iya itu spürü künmlian
Anak yang tóngol deripada
Ayah itu, pünmbiah iya dúngun
anagrah dan kabínanan.

13 Shahadan maka Yahya
pun bürsaksilah akan dia samül
bürsu sru katauya, Bahwasanya
inilah dia yang tölöh kukata-
kan; Adapun orang yang datang
kündian deripada aku ini maka
iya itu dilebikkan deripada aku,
kürna iyalah yang túrdahulu
deripada aku.

14 Maka deripada külem-
pahanuya, kita skalian tölöh
münürimat anagrah atas anu-

Fat. I.

INDJILU -'LKHUDUS
TERSÜRAT 'AWLEH
J A H H J A.

FATSAL JANG PERTAMA.

PADA mulanja 'adalah Kalimat,
dan Kalimat 'adalah sama 'Allah,
dan 'Allah 'adalah Kalimat.

2 'Ija 'ini 'adalah pada mulanja
sama 'Allah.

3 Samowa sudah dedjadikan 'aw-
lehnia: maka bärang fawatu pawn jang
jang chäts sudah tijada menjambot
di ja.

12 Tetapi barapa p 'awraig sudah
menjambot di ja, maka pada marik
'itu 'ija sudah memberij kawafa mer
djadi 'anakh p 'Allah, 'ija itu pad
segala 'awraig, jang pertjaja 'aka
namanja.

13 Jang sudah taper 'anakh buk