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Allah: For Muslims Only?

By Mohd Alami Musa

Synopsis

The Malaysian Court of Appeal's decision to forbid the use of the term 'Allah' in the Catholic weekly The Herald is seen by many as a triumph for Muslims. The reference to the term 'Allah' is not exclusive to Muslims. In the context of Singapore, the court process is not necessarily the best means to resolve conflicts involving religion.

Commentary

THE MALAYSIAN Court of Appeal in Putrajaya made a judgment on 14 October 2013 that the term Allah cannot be used in the Catholic weekly *The Herald*. The Court ruled that the word Allah is not an integral part of the Christian faith.

The issue began in early 2009 when the then Home Affairs Minister, Syed Hamid Albar, issued an order forbidding *The Herald* from using the term Allah. Subsequently, the Kuala Lumpur High Court allowed the Catholic Archdiocese's application for a judicial review and lifted the government ban. This latest Court of Appeal hearing was convened to hear the government's appeal -- which was upheld.

Allah for Muslims only?

The Catholic Archdiocese now intends to take the matter to the highest level – the Federal Court of Appeal. The final decision may have far-reaching implications as the term Allah has been traditionally used for centuries by Christians in East Malaysia, even though assurances had been given that the judgment applies only to *The Herald* case.

In his book *God is Not a Christian*, Desmond Tutu reminds Christians that “God is not the special preserve of Christians and is the God of all human beings, to whom He has vouchsafed a revelation of His nature and with whom it is possible for all to have a real encounter and relationship”. This is a timely reminder that all people of religion need to be embracing of each other. Furthermore God or Allah abhors those who hate and despise each other.

The use of the term Allah predates the coming of Islam in 7th century AD. Arab-speaking Christians and Jews referred to God as Allah long before Islam was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. As a religion, Islam has the unique characteristic of adopting pre-Islamic traditions or customs as long as they do not contravene its teachings. The existence of the term Allah in the Quran is one such example.

The Quran used terms which were familiar to Arab society then as a way of helping people to understand its

content. Another example is the reference to animals. The Quran mentioned animals that were familiar to the Arabs, like camels and ants but not tigers as they were not found in Arabia. Furthermore, the term Allah had been widely used in pre-Islamic Arabian society. This was evident because names of people were linked to Allah. For example, the Prophet's father was Abdullah, which means the servant of Allah.

But the most telling indication that Allah is the God of more than just Muslims is the Quranic Verse 46 in the Chapter *Al Ankabut* (The Spider). Allah commanded Muslims to tell the Jews and Christians that "our God and your God is one and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)".

The late renowned scholar, Dr Ashgar Ali Engineer, alluded to this in his book *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*. He said since the Quran states that Allah has sent His prophets to all nations, many Islamic thinkers, theologians and Sufi saints believed there are Allah's prophets in non-biblical communities. The term Allah is also used in Sikhism. According to the President of the Malaysian Gurdwara Council, Jagir Singh, the term Allah is found numerous times in the Guru Granth Sahib, which is their holy book.

Conflict resolution – not through the courts

Therefore, to borrow and adapt from Desmond Tutu's profound words, one can say that Allah is not the special preserve of Muslims. He is the God of all human beings. Using the court of law to resolve such sensitive religious matters could lead to division in society. It is in the nature of the court to deliver cut and dry judgments. There will always be one party who will be aggrieved by the court's judgment.

Such religious differences should be resolved outside the court process. It has to be dealt with through dialogue – beyond the public purview - by religious leaders who can feel for each other and who have the wisdom to acknowledge that many points of disagreement may not after all be matters of principle but merely peripheral to the religion concerned.

When the controversy over the use of the term Allah surfaced in 2009, Muslim and Christian leaders in Singapore met to discuss it over tea at the Singapore Islamic Hub. In that meeting, the Archbishop of the Catholic Church, the Archbishop of the Anglican Diocese, the President of the National Council of Churches, the Mufti of Singapore and the President of Muis, ascertained that there was no issue about the use of the term Allah in Singapore. They resolved in a brotherly manner not to allow the matter to spill over into Singapore.

Building a religious harmony infrastructure

This has been Singapore's culture in resolving conflict situations and averting possible conflicts involving religion. Religious leaders in Singapore enjoy a high level of trust and they speak to one another as servants of their faiths - in humility, and with fervent prayer that they maintain harmony in society. After all religions are meant to harmonise the social order and their leaders conduct themselves accordingly.

This has been the trademark of inter-religious relations in Singapore whenever religious leaders are confronted with situations of conflict. The religious leaders played their part to counsel the affected parties. They wisely resolved such matters without compromising their principles. This model of conflict resolution - without the involvement of the courts - has been effective.

This is a good way to prevent the emergence of a divisive society. Singapore's "religious harmony infrastructure" - consisting of grassroots goodwill committees, inter-religious engagement platforms, conflict resolution mechanisms and legislation (which had never been applied) - can avoid the undesirable outcome of having a winner and a loser in resolving religious conflicts.

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