Editorial

To Use "God" or "Allah"?

Recently there was a discussion on the American Academy of Religion list-serve's "Islam" section on whether "Allah" is simply a noun or a proper name of God and whether English-speaking Muslims should use "God" instead of "Allah." As the majority seemed to agree that "Allah" is Arabic for God, as "Khoda" is in Urdu and Persian, there was no agreement on using "God" instead of "Allah." But what I did not see discussed was how the Qur'an presents the term *Allah*; after all, it uses this term about 980 times.[1] Admittedly there was one attempt to bring in al-Ghazali's theological stance, but it was pursued no further than "Allah is God's proper name."[2]

Before I proceed, I wish to relate an anecdote that highlights both my own predicament and practice regarding these two names. As a professor of Islamic studies who regularly attended the mosque in Winnipeg, Canada, I was sometimes called upon to lead Friday prayers when the regular imam (should I find a precise English equivalent?) was out of town. Having used "God" while teaching mainly non-Muslim students, I had always used it at the mosque as well. Once, a humble man who appeared to be genuinely happy with my sermon congratulated me and whispered into my ear: "But brother, could you try to use 'Allah' instead of 'God'?" to which I politely replied: "I will try, *insha' Allah*." To be sure, although I have always used "God," I have no ideological or theological bias against "Allah." In fact, I cannot imagine using any other word than "Allah" when speaking Arabic or "Naa Wuni" when speaking Dagbanni.[3]

Several scholars have spoken about this subject. But perhaps one of the most articulate arguments in favor of "God" comes from the immensely charismatic and knowledgeable American scholar Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah. In his "One God, Many Names," he implores English-speaking Muslims to get in the habit of using "God" rather than "Allah." He thinks this is imperative, as it is strategic and beneficial. He concludes:

> Use of "God" emphasizes the extensive middle ground we share with other Abrahmic and universal traditions and provides a simple and cogent

> means by which Muslims may act upon the Qur'anic injunction to stress the similarities between us … We must overcome our misgivings about "God" both because of the word's intrinsic, historical merit and because it empowers us to communicate with our Jewish, Christian, and other English-speaking neighbors in a meaningful way.[4]

More than anything else, his arguments are culturally and etymologically compelling; however, they leave much to be desired both religiously and, especially, Qur'anically. This discrepancy is important because one cannot press cultural harmony (no matter how desperately needed) with an incomprehensive or one-sided analysis, even if it is compelling. While ignoring the Qur'anic worldview or what the majority of actual ecumenical participants think about "Allah," the argument is strongly tilted toward the use of "God" simply for meaningful communication.

To be sure, the article does identify in general the "Jewish, Christian, and other English-speaking neighbors" as those who need to be pleased and made comfortable. But it also opened with some remarks about Pat Robertson and Franklin Graham, both of whom are on record for making disparaging remarks about "Allah." From my own inquiry, however, those Jews, Christians, and others who get involved in interfaith dialogue have no difficulty in understanding or accepting "Allah" as "God." Nor are they even mildly irritated by its use in ecumenical settings. So the people we are truly left to contend with are the likes of Robertson and Graham. Frankly, using "God" will hardly turn them from their extremist positions. Thus we need more compelling, even if simple, reasons to abandon the use of "Allah" in favor of "God."

Muslims must be encouraged to use whatever term they deem comfortable, be it "Allah," "God," "Khoda," "Naa Wuni," and so on. It is reasonable, however, to use "God" for uniformity and coherence when speaking English. But everybody knows that using one word from another language or culture is not always necessarily wrong or irritating. After all, "New Orleans may not be a 'Mecca' of gamblers as Las Vegas is, but it will still take a 'guru' to win at '*chemin de fer*' in its casinos."

Having said this, there is still a case to be made against using "Allah" repetitively to a generally non-Muslim English-speaking audience, especially, if followed each time by *subḥanahu wa ta`ala* (glorified and exalted). For those non-Muslims who remain undisturbed by its use, uttering "*Allah subḥanahu wa ta`ala*" three times in a single sentence, while theologically reassuring to Muslims, may distort the former's thoughts and lead to inco-

herence. I believe this may be one of Dr. Abd-Allah's main concerns. Even in this sense, however, cultural and religious relativism must not be totally disregarded.

Another aspect that must not be excluded is the Qur'an's worldview of Allah and how the Arabs and, subsequently, Muslims came to settle on it as God's name. The majority of Muslim theologians and Qur'anic commentators from al-Tabari (d. 923) to al-Zamakhshari (d. 1143/44), al-Razi (d. 1209), Ibn `Ashur (d. 1973), al-Tabatabai (d. 1981), and those in between, believe that the Qur'an presents "Allah" as God's proper/real name. They are almost unanimous that "Allah" is a "proper name for His essence" (*ism `alam li-dhatih*) and that all other names and attributes constitute adjectives for it. The Qur'an is replete with examples of this formula. A few of these, along with the Arabic equivalent, are provided below for clear juxtaposition.

1. The opening chapter begins with: "Praise belongs to God (*Allah*) Lord (*Rabb*) of the worlds. The Most Benevolent (*al-Rahman*), The Most Merciful (*al-Rahim*). Master (*Malik*) of the Day of Judgment" (1:2-4).
2. In the popular "Verse of the Throne (2:255)," God supposedly describes Himself as "God" (*Allah*): "There is no god (*ilaha*) but Him, the Ever Living (*al-Hayy*), the Ever Watchful (*al-Qayyum*)." This is repeated verbatim in 3:2.
3. Another declaration from God states: "God (*Allah*) is indeed the Provider (*al-Razzaq*), the Powerful, (*Dhu al-Quwwah*), and the Ever Mighty (*al-Matin*)" (51:58).
4. Introducing Himself to Prophet Moses, God is heard saying: "Indeed, I am God (*Allah*). There is no god (*ilaha*) but Me" (20:14). Interestingly, since God spoke to Moses in Hebrew, "*Allah*" here would have been "*Elōhim*."
5. Quoting both prophets Moses and Jesus addressing their people (the latter as an infant), the Qur'an states in 3:51 and 19:36, respectively, that "Indeed, God (*Allah*) is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him."
6. Perhaps the most indicative of this "proper name-adjective" formula is 59:22-24. I will pay tribute to Dr. Abd-Allah here by using his translation, despite the fact that my own would look quite different.

> He is God, other than whom there is no god: Knower of the unseen and the manifest. He is the All-Merciful, Bestower of special Mercy. He is God, other than whom there is no god: the King, the Holy One, the Perfect

> Peace, Granter of security, Giver of protection, the Omnipotent, the Overwhelming, the Imperious: Glory be to God against whatever is (falsely) associated (with him). He is God: the Creator, the Originator (of all things from nothing), Giver of forms, His are the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and earth proclaims his glory, and he is the All-Powerful, All-Wise.[5]

The attributes of God that appear in these verses beside "Allah" are: *`Alim al-Ghayb wa al-Shahdat, al-Rahman, al-Rahim, al-Malik, al-Quddus, al-Salam, al-Mu'min, al-Muhaymin, al-`Aziz, al-Jabbar, al-Mutakabbir, al-Khaliq, al-Bari', al-Musawwir,* and *al-Hakim.* Those with Sufi inclinations would even consider "Allah," the greatest and most magnificent of God's names (*ism Allah al-a`zam*) to be endowed with such great potential that once it is invoked "appropriately," any supplication will be accepted.[6]

Now, how can "Allah" as a proper name of "God" be reconciled with its etymological roots? Etymologically, *Allah* is rooted in *ilah*, a common noun for "anything being worshiped." This etymological root is also found in Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and other Semitic languages. Dr. Abd-Allah wrote: *Elōhim* derives from *elōh* (Hebrew for "god"), and *Alaha* is an emphatic form of *alah* (Aramaic/Syriac for "god"), while *Allah* is connected to *ilah* (Arabic for "god").[7]

This etymology is not lost on such Muslim scholars as Ibn `Ashur, for they declare that *Allah* is a proper name of God. But they insist, however, that it is connected to *al-Ilah* (the one being worshiped), which has never been used as a common noun for anything being worshiped (only *ilah* or *aliha* are used in the latter sense). Therefore, the shift to the proper name must have occurred when the Arabs added *al* to *ilah* (*al-ilah*) and specifically reserved that term for the supreme being, God, all the while referring to other gods as *ilah/aliha* and particularly relating them to tribes, clans, people (e.g., *ilah bani fulan*: god of such and such people).[8]

One would be justified in postulating that *al-ilah* is both the point of connection and of break for *Allah* with its etymological roots. It is a point of connection because it has its own roots to *ilah* as "anything worshiped." It also serves as a point of break because it became its own proper noun when *al* was added to make it *al-ilah* as the supreme being: God.

So how did the change occur from *al-ilah* to *Allah*? According to Ibn `Ashur, a modern commentator from Tunisia, the "hamza: i" of *al-[i]lah* was eventually omitted to make *allah,* due to its excessive use in reference to the supreme being. This is not uncommon in Arabic, for *al-nas* (pronounced

annas: people) was originally *al-[u]nas*, but again, the "hamza: u" was omitted due to excessive use. In both cases, the older word may still be used.[9] It would be reasonable to argue that due to its sacred status, *Allah* (God's proper name) should not have to go through this kind of morphological metamorphosis. And yet it is precisely because of the value and respect accorded to it and to its reference (God) that it was understandably easier that it goes through such change.

But another question, one that may carry a theological sensitivity, remains: why should God allow the people to determine His proper name? This can be responded to by stating that virtually all languages have a name for God, and that if God were to reveal Himself to a prophet in any of them, He would have to use the term by which He is known, regardless of its etymology. Arabs had already settled on *Allah*, so it would be natural for God to use it as He talks about Himself.

Finally, considering God's nature, should not His proper name be free or independent of all of the descriptive qualities from which people have to derive it? According to some famous scholars like al-Zajjaj the philologist (d. 923, author of *Tafsir Asma' Allah al-Husna*) and Sibawayh the grammarian (8th CE), *Allah* is only a proper name for God without any etymological derivation from *ilah*. For them, it is a coincidence that *ilah* came to be closer to *Allah* in its meaning.[10]

So far, this discussion has taken for granted that *Allah* goes back to *ilah*, which is rooted in the verb *aliha* (to worship). But other roots with different meanings have also been suggested. One opinion is that *Allah* is a proper noun from *lah* (the concealed or hidden one), which comes from the root verb *laha* (to conceal or hide). This also was suggested by Sibawayh. In this sense, despite being a proper name, *Allah* would still be a derivative from another word. Yet another root has to do with the assumption that people get mystified and perplexed about God's essence. Thus *Allah* is derived from *wilah* and *ilah* (the object of mystery) with the root verb as *waliha* (to get mystified). *Wilah* turned into *ilah* the same way *wi`a'* turns into *i`a'* (container/sack); then the "hamza: i" of *[i]lah* is omitted leaving it as *lah* to be made into proper noun as *al-lah*: *Allah*.[11]

I would like to conclude with what I think brings out the nuances of this Allah-God predicament. In 17:110, the Qur'an says: "Say: Call unto *Allah* (God) or call unto *al-Raḥman* (the Magnanimous), whichever you used to call, [for] the most beautiful names belong to Him." It is interesting to note that this verse was revealed in conjunction with the comments made by a

prominent leader of the Makkan polytheists, Abu Jahl, about how Prophet Muhammad worshiped two different gods, as he heard the latter invoke "*ya Allah, ya Raḥman.*"[12] Muslims should not be overly alarmed by Graham's claim that "Allah" is somehow different from his "God" any more than the Prophet should have been about Abu Jahl's opinion. But it would not hurt if, without any prejudice, they can use "God" for effective communication.

The editors of the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* would be pleased to consider publishing a paper (provided it meets all editorial requirements) that is empirical, excellent, academic, and exhaustive in its coverage of both the use of "*Allah*" in the Qur'an and the attitudes of Muslims around the world to the use of "*Allah*" and its equivalent in other languages.

This final issue of AJISS for 2006 leads off with Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu's "Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung: A Critical Analysis of Toshihiko Izutsu's Works." Following a textual analysis, Solihu examines, from both an ethical and a theological perspective, Izutsu's application of semantic theory to the key Qur'anic concepts in his *God and Man in the Qur'an* and *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an.* His objective is to investigate the extent to which semantic analysis can enrich one's understanding of the ontological problems raised in the Qur'an.

In his "The *`Aql-Naql* Theory of Human Symbols and the Making of Cultural Sociology," Mahmoud Dhaouadi uses both reason (*`aql*) and Qur'an-based knowledge (*naql*) to establish his *`Aql-Naql* Theory of Human Symbols (ANTHS) and explain its relevance to the formulation of cultural sociology. Based on five observation/concepts, he uses this theory to argue that "human individuals are by nature human symbols users." He further insists that Qur'anic verses also stress the importance of human symbols for human identity.

Masood Ashraf Raja's "Jihad in Islam: Colonial Encounter, the Neoliberal Order, and the Muslim Subject of Resistance" is our next paper. In response to the essentialist claims of American neoconservative scholars, Raja suggests that jihadist militancy is not inherently Islamic, but rather a product of the material political conditions created by the Muslims' colonial experience and perpetuated by the destabilizing influence of power politics, neoliberal capital, and the failure of the postcolonial Muslim nation-states's national promise. He elaborates the idea of reactive *mujahid* subjectivity in a two-pronged approach: he first provides the theoretical and theological explanations of jihad itself and then traces its mythic usage in the works of Muhammad Iqbal. In the end, he focuses primarily on Pakistan and attempts

to explain the rise of Islamic fundamentalism within the context of the Soviet-Afghan war and the rise of the neoliberal market economy system.

Finally, Abdin Chande presents us with his courageous paper on "A Critical Evaluation of Some Prolematic Hadith Narratives." Bringing together a small sample of problematic hadith narratives in order to evaluate them according to certain criteria, he begins by examining some issues critical to the understanding of hadith in the modern context. He then argues that some of these problematic narrations continue to make the hadith literature a subject of controversy in some Muslim and non-Muslim quarters.

I hope that our readers will find these papers not only stimulating and thought-provoking, but also sources of inspiration and motivation that will challenge them to produce their own fine research papers. Although the opinions expressed by the authors are their own, AJISS is proud to bring together such a collection of experts.

Endnotes

1. Abd al-Maqsud Muhammad Salim, *Fi Malakut Allah ma`a Asma' Allah* (Cairo: Sharikat al-Shamrili: 1983), 41.
2. I give due credit to all of these professors, but withhold their names because they never meant to publish their opinions.
3. A language spoken by the Dagombas, a main tribe in northern Ghana.
4. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "One God, Many Names," 7-8. Online at www.nawawi.org/downloads/article2.pdf.
5. Ibid., 4.
6. Salim, *Fi Malakut Allah*, 8.
7. Abd-Allah, "One God," 3.
8. Muhammad al-Tahir ibn `Ashur, *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Tarikh, 2000), 1:160.
9. Ibid., 1:161.
10. Ibid., 1:163.
11. Ibid., 1:162.
12. Ibid., 14:185.

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