CHRISTIAN FEDERATION OF MALAYSIA
(PERSEKUTUAN KRISTIAN MALAYSIA)
Address: 26 Jalan Universiti, 46200 Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
Tel / Fax : + 60 3 7957 1457
Email: cfmsia@yahoo.co.uk

16 May 2013

FOR DISTRIBUTION TO CHURCHES IN MALAYSIA

WHEN, WHY AND HOW CHRISTIANS USE THE WORD 'ALLAH'

Introduction and Background

The objective of this document is to explain briefly to those Christians who do not understand when, why and how Churches in Malaysia use the word 'Allah. It is also for Christians who are confused about how to respond, when confronted by the ignorance of non-Muslims about the Christian use of the word 'Allah'.

There are many (misleading) statements by non-Christians who claim that we should not use the word, because it is an exclusive Muslim term for the God of Islam and can be used only by Muslims. This is a situation peculiar to Malaysia, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, Arabic-speaking Christians use the word 'Allah'.

Christians themselves are sometimes ignorant, because unless we pray in Bahasa Malaysia, we pray to 'God' in our own language. In English services, for example, nowhere do we use the word 'Allah'.

However, more than 60% of Malaysian Christians only speak Bahasa Malaysia, and the word used for God in the Bahasa Malaysia Bible (*Al-Kitab*) since its translation in 1731, is 'Allah'. The word is used by Bumiputera Christians who only have Bahasa Malaysia as their common language in Sabah, Sarawak and peninsular Malaysia, and by the Baba community in Malacca.

Historical Usage and Meaning

1. The word 'Allah' was a term used for the supreme God in a pantheon of gods, before the revelation of Islam. The *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* ed., H. A. R. Gibb & J. H. Kramer and *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito, both affirm and support this contention.

2. Historically, Malay-speaking Christians in South-East Asia have used 'Allah' to refer to God. The proof is as follows:

    - The *Kitab salat as-sawai* or Christian catechisms in Malay written in 1514 and published around 1545,
    - The printed version of the Gospel of Matthew in Malay by A.C. Ruyl in 1629,
    - Malay-Latin Dictionary was printed in Rome in 1631 (The *Dictionarium Malaicum-Latinum* and *Latinum - Malaicum*)
    - The translation of Genesis by D. Brouwerius (1662),
    - M. Leijdecker's translation (1733),
    - H.C. Klinkert's translation (1879),

- W.A. Bode's translation (1938), and
- The complete *Malay Bible* of 1731-1733 containing the word 'Allah' for God.

3. Therefore, from the very beginning, the word 'Allah' has been used in the liturgy, prayers and worship of those Christians who speak Bahasa Malaysia. But for centuries, there has been no opposition or uproar about their use of 'Allah'.

Language

Objections to the use of the word 'Allah' comes mostly from political discourse, or those who argue that the translation and usage of the word is a recent decision. This is not true for the following reasons:

1. In Semitic languages, the word 'Allah' has been widely used in the Middle East dating back to the 5th century BC and up to the time of the expansion of Islam and the spread of the Arabic language in the 7th century AD.

2. The translation of the *Al-Kitab* is not from the English translation but based on the Hebrew and Greek text of the Bible. In the Hebrew language, the word 'God' has the same root form as the Arabic language. So, when the word 'God' was first translated into Bahasa Malaysia, the translators merely followed the Arabic Christian usage and retained the word 'Allah'.

3. As stated earlier, the word 'Allah' pre-dates Islam. It is *not* a creation of the Muslims and its existence does not begin in the *Al-Quran*.

Should Christians Substitute the word 'Allah' with 'Tuhan'?

This is not possible for the following reasons :

1. In the Malay language, 'Allah' means 'God' and *Tuhan* means 'Lord'. As is obvious when we read the Bible, both God and Lord are used in the Bible, and both have different connotations. Therefore 'Allah' cannot be substituted by 'Tuhan'.

2. The word *Tuhan* has been applied to Jesus Christ and read as *Tuhan Yesus*. If Christians are to substitute the word 'Allah' for *Tuhan,* it will render many Biblical references to God and Jesus incoherent because:

    - The meaning of 'Allah' and *Tuhan* are different.
    - This is obvious in just one example. In Isaiah chapter 41 and verse 13; also 43 : 3 and 51 : 15. "For I am the LORD, your GOD..." is translated as "Akulah TUHAN, ALLAH kamu...". (*ALKITAB : Berita Baik*. 2001. 2nd edition. Published by the Bible Society of Malaysia).
    - It creates an absurd situation if Christians have to translate the biblical phrase 'Lord God' as *Tuhan Tuhan.* The repeated words *Tuhan Tuhan* indicates plural in Bahasa Malaysia, and creates the impression that Christians believe in many Gods, which is unacceptable.
    - Bahasa Malaysia-speaking Christians will not be able to affirm the deity of Jesus Christ and teach the doctrine of the Trinity as these two

foundational words are essential to maintain and communicate these truths.

Consequences of Banning the Word "Allah"

1. Being denied the use of the word 'Allah' disregards the constitutional right of Malaysian citizens to freedom of religion under the Federal Constitution. Article 11 of the Federal Constitution safeguards the right of each Malaysian to profess and practice one's religion of choice. Article 11(3) expressly provides that every religious group has the right to manage their own religious affairs.

2. In 2009, the High Court handed down a judgement allowing the Catholic Church to use the word 'Allah'. The government (of all Malaysians, including Christians) is appealing the judgement and it is pending.

3. There have been other infringements on the right to use words imperative in the Bahasa Malaysia Bible. See the directive of 5 Dec 1986 from the Ministry of Home Affairs stating that, in addition to 'Allah', the words: *Al-Kitab, Firman, Rasul, Iman, Ibadah, Injil, Wahyu, Nabi, Syukur, Solat* and *doa* are not to be used in the *Al-Kitab*. In addition, making such prohibitions through *fatwa* render them only relevant to Muslims as the Shari'a does not apply to non-Muslims.

4. Prohibiting the use of the word 'Allah' and these other terms is unjust. Bumiputera Christians should be given the respect and freedom to call God in the only language they have in common. This is important to their religious and cultural identity.

5. If Churches in Malaysia agree to stop using the word 'Allah', it means that the right to edit the Scripture of a major world religion has been given over to a secular government. This would be a shameful and an unprecedented development for any religion and government.

Conclusion

Some Muslims have claimed repeatedly that Christians in Malaysia refuse to stop using the word 'Allah' because they want to confuse and convert Muslims, thereby posing a threat to national security. The claim is groundless as there has been no evidence offered of any threat to security. These remain unfounded accusations.

On the contrary, such an assertion is made in ignorance of the fact that when Christians use the *Al-Kitab*, it is simply for Bahasa Malaysia-speaking Christians. Malaysian Churches have never suggested changing the words 'God' and 'Lord' to 'Allah' and 'Tuhan' respectively, in the other languages of the Bible.

16 May 2013.

PREPARED BY THE CHRISTIAN FEDERATION OF MALAYSIA
(Persekutuan Kristian Malaysia)
Corrected copy 3 June 2013