

Inconsistent, insensitive translations of 'Allah'

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Comment

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THE use of the term "Allah" has captured the attention of the media again. Of late, even a newspaper from down south carried a commentary on the issue. The slant is usually political, and not religious, and does not throw any new light on the issue. It also does not appeal to the intellect; instead, it seems to border more on emotions that further confuse the issue.

To all Muslims the term "Allah" is laden with the concept of Tauhid - that Allah is "the One and Only" as defined in the Quranic language, which happens to be Arabic. Allah cannot be understood without this concept of his oneness. Any attempt to do so will amount to a vulgarism of sort, and an affront to Muslims.

Moving forward, let us briefly try and understand the reasons for Muslim misgivings by using the Bahasa Indonesia version which is translated from the English New King James Version and authorised by Konperensi Waligierja Indonesia (Edition, 2004). Let us randomly take The Gospel according to Luke, translated as Injil Lukas, to briefly illustrate the point

In Luke, "God" is generally substituted by "Allah", whereas "Tuhan" is commonly used to substitute "the Lord". Note the article "the" applies to "Tuhan," but not to "Allah". Hence, where there is "the Lord God" in the English version, it becomes "Tuhan Allah". "The Lord their God" becomes "Tuhan, Allah mereka". Note the use of a comma!

On some occasions though, "God" is also translated as "Tuhan", though "God" in this example does not carry the article "the" as in "the Lord". So does it mean there is a time when "God" is not "Allah"? Or that "Tuhan" is "Allah" after all?

Yet, on other occasions, "Allah" is used as substitute for "the LESUS." But then, "the LESUS your God" is rendered as "Tuhan, Allahmu" - note again the comma!

Just from these few random examples, one can already sense the complexity and confusion in the use of "Allah" in the translated version.

To make matters even more confusing, the biblical name "Mary" is rendered as "Maria" - when the Quranic equivalent would have been "Maryam"; And "John" as "Yohanes" instead of "Yahaya." Or for that matter "Gabriel" is not even translated but kept as it is. The Quranic "Jibrail" as an equivalent is not even considered! How about "Jesus" himself? Why is this rendered as "Yesus", rather than "Isa"? In the Quran both are the son of Mary or Maryam.

If the worry is that the use of the word "Isa" in the Quran is limited only to him being the son of man and not of Allah; unlike what is understood for the biblical "Jesus" - then should not the same consideration and sensitivity for Muslim feeling be shown when "Allah" is used in the translation, without any concern for the Quranic Tauhidic concept This inconsistency, indifference and arrogance is rather obvious when it comes to the biblical "the Son of God" and the use of "Anak Allah" as an equivalent in the translation - something which is conceptually outright not acceptable to Muslims. In fact, it tantamounts to the denial of the concept of "Allah" as explained in the Quran, Surah Al-Ikhlâs 112: 3 that "He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none co-equal or comparable to Him".

The consequence of this translation will be that Muslims will be confronted with blasphemous ideas that Allah has a son; that Allah's son was born in the manger; that Allah's son was crucified; that Allah's son died for all of us. This may have public order implications under section 298 of the Malaysian Penal Code which forbids the wounding of religious feelings.

As it stands, the use of "Allah" the way it is can only arouse suspicions as to why an Arabic word is used for an Indonesia-Malay translation of the Gospel. Why not use the Hebrew or Armenia equivalents, instead?

To add on to this suspicion is why there is no insistence that examples in the fore-mentioned names be substituted with the Arabic equivalent including places like "Jerusalem" which is substituted by "Yerusalem" which is not the name in Arabic either.

On the contrary, there are biblical names that are readily rendered to the equivalent Arabic in the translation. The examples are numerous, for instance: David as Daud; Zacharias as Zakharia; Aaron as Harun; Joseph as Yusuf; Moses as Musa; law of Moses as Taurat Musa (though, more appropriately it should have been "hukum Musa", since there is the specific term "Torah" for 'Taurat').

The final straw is when the patriarch "Abraham" who is the fountain head for Judaism, Christianity and Islam is also not rendered to Arabic "Ibrahim" - but left as "Abraham". Here, the inconsistencies, inaccuracies and insensitivities in the use and misuse of the word "Allah" become even clearer. And this must be the concern of all.

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