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What in God's Name...?



Joseph N Goh 3:53PM Feb 4, 2013

I have been trailing the development of the controversy surrounding the 'appropriate' use of the word 'Allah', and find myself doing so with a mixture of bemusement, concern and incredulity.

There appears to be, on the surface, three major camps involved in the dispute.

One camp comprises Malaysian Muslims who jealously guard the word 'Allah' and pronounce sovereign monopoly over it in the interest of preventing a dilution of and confusion over its significance.

Another camp is made up of Malaysian Muslims who demonstrate a departure from their more robust counterparts, and argue for the permissibility of the use of 'Allah' by all religious groups, despite proclaiming that its non-Islamic use will never attain the heights and depths of its meaning in the Holy Quran.

Yet another camp consists of Malaysian Christians who canvas a democratisation of the word 'Allah' and a continual use of it in their Bibles, liturgical practices and private devotions by appealing to its documented occurrence in Malaysian Christian history, as well as to the constitutional right of religious expression and practice.

The highlight of the controversy must surely have been the resounding call of Perkasa's Ibrahim Ali for the burning of Bahasa Malaysia-language Bibles which were deemed responsible for the proselytisation of Muslim students.

I have to admit, as one who currently identifies as an 'inter-faith Christian' but whose sprouting years included non-negotiable catechism classes and Cecil B DeMille's dramatisation of the Ten Commandments, that the entire issue reminded me of the grand old dictate, 'thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain'.

After all, the controversy saw different parties pitted against each other in attempts to invalidate the other's right of access to the sacred, and to accuse that the other was using The Name in vain.

What was it that caused Malaysians who shared sacred Abrahamic roots to verbally pummel each other, not only in a religious rat race of snatching back a 'legitimate' use of 'Allah', but in a seeming frenzy to defend the honour of ('their') God and to secure their religious right?

Which party indeed holds an exclusive copyright to this august appellation? What in God's Name do Malaysians think they will achieve in fighting over this matter?

It was clear to me that in the wake of the upcoming general elections, the 'Allah' issue was evidently entangled in the politicisation of religion that had truly hit the high notes.

Yet I did not relinquish the nagging prompting that stayed with me, that perhaps it was time for me to perform a little examen of my own on the Christian significance of God's name.

In the various times that this controversy had cropped up, my thoughts had wandered to the many religious Jews who maintain the tradition of never uttering The Name, for to do so was to tread unworthily into an alternate realm of utter sacredness.

It also seemed a tad too ironic for me that rather than emulating this other Abrahamic faith in revering The Name, Malaysian Muslims and Christians factions were knee-deep in debate over who could

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utter it in private and in public.

My examen was not as keen in taking sides in the debate as it was in pursuing a(nother) Christian understanding on the matter.

What did God's name mean for me as a liberal and radical Christian whose theological pursuits were often transgressive and boundary crossing?

Could I come to a more meaningful comprehension of the issue that could transcend deadlocked apologetics and polemics?

The proscription of using The Name 'in vain' was something that I thought of as a worthwhile lead in my exploration.

I decided to investigate what Christian scripture scholars had to say about The Name as it appeared in two particular books in the Bible - Exodus and Deuteronomy.

I discovered several interpretations of the proscription, but one glowed with particular luminance.

Dennis T. Olson (Theological Bible Commentary, 2009, p. 29) pointed out that not only was The Name ineffable due to its divine status, but also that The Name both *revealed and concealed something about God*.

I took his interpretation to a trajectory of my own.

What could I learn from this revelation/concealment binary that the Jews of that period observed as they tried to make sense out of their life circumstances in regard to their belief and trust in The One whose Name they did not mention out of reverence and awe?

How would I understand their perspectives in relation to the 'Allah' issue that was currently swirling in Malaysia?

Perhaps the whole mechanism of understanding The Name as something that was concomitantly graspable and ungraspable reflected the notion that the bearer of That Name was equally definable and indefinable.

Perhaps it was to submit to the reality that the mystery in which the Jews found themselves would always be impenetrable despite their best efforts to comprehend it.

Perhaps allowing The Name to remain in a space of ambiguity became a constant lesson in humility of knowing that no human person could ever monopolise or manipulate the identity and attributes of God, for it would always elude them.

God will always be God, and to claim to have captured the entirety of God in any religion is to reduce God to non-God who has finally been held captive by the human imagination.

I firmly believe that human believers, in whichever faith in which they find most meaning, are at best stewards and custodians of a representation of their sacred personage.

The traditions and historical complexities that have accompanied their formulations of what constitutes the personality of God, no matter how divinely inspired, remains a human endeavour that will always be subjected to deeper interpretation and understanding, for human beings themselves are marked by a shifting, evolutionary process.

Rather than pontificate on the 'rightful' use of The Name, I think that a more plausible alternative would indeed be to respect the fact that all sacred traditions in Malaysia attempt to explain some aspect of The Divine Identity as best they can, and that each aspect is a vital piece to a more holistic understanding of the big picture which will continue to unfold, even well beyond our lifetime.

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