

Of God's many names and the use of 'Allah'

'Allah' is the Arabic equivalent of 'God'. And the two words have been used synonymously by all people throughout the history of religion, but there are distinct conditions on its use, writes MOHAMMAD HASHIM KAMALI

Of the 99 beautiful names of God (al-asma' al-husna), three, namely "Allah", "al-Rahman" and "al-Rahim", are most favoured. This is known by all 114 suras of the Quran, except for one, beginning with the typical Islamic phrase, the tasmiyah: Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim ("In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful"), a phrase that includes all the three chosen names of God.

Similarly, every Quranic recitation in the five daily prayers begins with the tasmiyah. Of the three names, God has chosen only two, that is, "Allah" and "al-Rahman", by which He may be called.

The reason for the exclusion of "al-Rahim" is probably due to its repetition of the meaning of "al-Rahman". They obtain from the same root, rahima (to be kind, compassionate).

It is reported that the second caliph of Islam, Umar ibn al-Khattab, explained this repetition by saying that "al-Rahman" is meant for Muslims and "al-Rahim" for the rest of mankind.

This understanding endorses the principle that God is universal, omniscient and omnipresent. He is the creator and cherisher of all without exception.

"Allah" is the Arabic equivalent of "God", and the two words have been used synonymously by all people throughout the history of religion.

God has made Himself known to Muslims by His 99 illustrious names, which consist of His attributes that occur throughout the Quran.

The self of God is not known to us; we only know Him by these names and attributes -- such as Ghafoor (forgiving), Wadood (loving), Kareem (noble), Lateef (gracious) and Haleem (perseverant, patient).

When read together, they also set the ethico-cultural optima that Muslims should emulate and manifest in their conduct within the family, in society, and at all times. Belief in one God, or monotheism, is the central theme of the Islamic principle of tawhid, the oneness of being, which means that there is only one God and essentially also one humanity.

Tawhid permeates every aspect of Islam, in that the presence of God in the universe is the connecting force that binds the whole of the created universe into coherent

parts.

Tawhid also implies unity of the human origin in one and the same creator, an article of the Islamic faith implying an innate sense of belonging for all members of the human fraternity.

God, therefore, belongs to the whole of humanity and no sect or section of humanity may deny this sacred link to anyone.

God created Adam and breathed into him of His own spirit and then created from it its pair, and from them a multitude of humans that scatter on the face of the earth. Those who believe in God are repeatedly asked in the Quran to remember Him often and nurture God-consciousness into themselves through zikir (remembrance), whenever they can.

It should be obvious, then, that in reference to all monotheists, there is no restriction whatsoever regarding the use of the word "Allah" when mentioning Him partakes in the spirit of remembrance, invocation and doa.

This is the basic position of Islam.

However, when Allah is mentioned in a context that amounts to distortion and abuse, if the usage is clear in its abusive import and wording, it may amount to blasphemy, which is an offence.

In the event of more subtle varieties of misuse, that is, when a good use is intended to obtain a bad result, the position may be ascertained under the principle of sadd al-dharai or blocking the (lawful) means for obtaining an unlawful end.

For instance, commerce is lawful by itself but when it is used as a means of usury (riba) or of hoarding and profiteering that inflict harm and distort the normal flow of trade in the marketplace, then the means towards such ends should be blocked.

This can also be said of marriage, which is lawful, but if someone enters into it for quick gratification, to be followed by an abusive divorce, the marriage in question is unlawful, and the authorities are within their rights to prevent it.

This may also be said of the use of "Allah" if the purpose is to convert unsuspecting Muslims, as occurred in some parts of Indonesia, whereby a specious parallel is drawn by Christian missionaries between Islam and Christianity in order to entice Muslims to embrace Christianity.

It is a question to some extent of differentiation between the upright and the deceitful propagation of a doctrine.

If there are equivalent words, such as "Tuhan", but "Allah" is used instead for purposes of proselytisation, then it could well amount to distortion of the kind that

violates the sensitivities of the Muslim community as well as taking advantage of the ignorance of its targets.

If Christianity does not accept Islam as a valid religion to begin with, then for Christian missionaries to select only the word "Allah" out of Islam for purposes of proselytisation is tantamount to a misapplication of the term.

Had they recognised Islam as a valid religion, the issue might have begged a different answer. Moreover, the Christian doctrine of Trinity is also founded in an understanding of God that cannot claim acceptance in the Islamic doctrine of tawhid. Allah's illustrious name may thus be used by all monotheists, Muslims or non-Muslims, for its intended purpose, but if it is used in a way that amounts to distortion and abuse, be it by a Muslim or non-Muslim, it should be obstructed by recourse to the principle of sadd al-dharai.

This principle should not be too liberally applied, however, and confined only to manifest instances of abuse.

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