

Should Christians Use the Word ‘Allah’?

How does the word Allah relate to Islam and its teachings? That’s a challenging question in for 21st century Christians to consider.

What Does ‘Allah’ Actually Mean?

The term Allah (Arabic: الله, *Allāh*) is the standard Arabic word for God and is most likely derived from a contraction of the Arabic article *al-* and *ilāh*, which means “deity or god” to *al-lāh* meaning “the [sole] deity, God.” There is another theory that traces the etymology of the word to the Aramaic *Alāhā*.

Today’s Arabic speakers from all religious backgrounds (Muslims, Christians and Jews) use the word Allah to mean God. In pre-Islamic Arabia, pagan Meccans used Allah as a reference to the creator-god, possibly the supreme deity.

The first-known translation of the Bible into Arabic, which took place in the 9th century, uses the word Allah for God. In fact, Arab Christians were using the word Allah for God prior to the dawn of Islam, and it is important to note that they were using it in place of Elohim, but not in place of Yahweh. That means Allah is a generic word for God, but not the personal name of God. (Radical Muslims in the West claim that Allah, not Yahweh or any other Bible name, is the name of the one true God.)

As an example closer to home, Christians and non-Christians alike use the word “God” in English, but that does not make the God of the Bible the same as the god of the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses or others. Another example is that when irreverent people use the expression “Oh my God!” in their day-to-day communications, they are not referring to the God

of the Bible when they invoke that term.

When the prophet of Islam started his ministry in Mecca, he considered at one point uniting the Arabs under a different name for God. His favorite was Al-Rahman but he chose Allah to name his god. After the spread of Islam in the Middle East, Arab Christians continued to use word Allah since it did not have any negative connotations to them personally. Once again, it is important to understand that both before and after Muhammad, the Allah of the Arabs was not the Allah of the Arab Christians.

Today, Muslims claim they worship the same God as Christians and Jews. In fact, the Islamic propaganda machine in the West is attempting to change our English vocabulary to accommodate Islamic beliefs. Before tackling that topic, however, I'd like to address a controversial subject that is gaining momentum among American Christians, and is greatly harming the propagation of the Gospel among Muslims: the notion that Allah was the name for a pagan moon god of pre-Islamic time. I believe this theory is greatly misunderstood by American Evangelicals, and is being mixed up with the Islamic push to use Allah in our vocabulary as His name or as an alternative to the word God.

Is Allah a 'Moon God'?

Currently, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the Allah of the Qur'an is in fact a pagan Arab moon god of pre-Islamic times. This idea has been mentioned in literature for more than a century, but only recently has it been seriously promoted. The theory is particularly used in one leading evangelical author's books and pamphlets, which has set the stage for many Christian evangelical authors to adopt it and assert it in their writings about Islam.

This theory claims that a pagan deity, a moon god named Allah, was married to the sun goddess, and the stars were his

daughters. Proponents of this theory point to the fact that the crescent moon symbol is found on many flags of Islamic countries and on top of mosques. I have encountered many questions during my seminars on Islam about Allah, and have even been challenged that I should not use the word Allah during some of my lectures on Islam because Allah is the moon god. The theory is becoming so controversial that some Christian ministries on the Internet replaced the word Allah with the word ilah ("deity god") in the most common version of the Arabic Bible (Vandyke version) on their websites. One ministry went as far as producing CDs for the Arabic Bible exchanging the word Allah with ilah.

Such chaos is greatly harming the cause of Christ among Muslims and other Arabic-speaking individuals. Here is a summary of my objections:

It is an unproven theory, so it may well be false. Even if it turns out to be true, it has little bearing on the Muslim faith since Muslims do not worship a moon god. That would be blasphemy in Islamic teachings.

If we use the moon-god theory to discredit Islam, we discredit the Christian Arabic speaking churches and missions throughout the Middle East. This point should not be discounted lightly because the word Allah is found in millions of Arabic Bibles and other Arabic Christian materials.

The moon-god theory confuses evangelism. When Christians approach Muslims, they do not know whether they need to convince them that they worship the wrong deity, or to present them the simple Gospel message of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The moon-god theory promotes an "us versus them" mentality. Most Christians in the . seem to be living in fear about their Muslims neighbors, but instead our Lord calls us to be reaching out in love to Muslims and not to alienate them.

As far as the moon symbol on the mosques or on the flags, the

simple reason behind it is that Islam depends on the moon for their religious calendar (lunar calendar) specially during the Ramadan (month of fasting). Islam forbids symbols or pictures of God.

Can 'Allah' Refer to the God of the Bible?

The Islamic propaganda machine in the West is actively pushing for the use of the word Allah instead of God in the Western languages, especially in English. The sole purpose of this push is to promote Islam and render it an acceptable mainstream religion alongside Christianity in the West, not just from man's perspective but from God's.

A quick look at Islamic English Web sites and Islamic English literature reveals how widely the word Allah is used instead of God. Christians should be very concerned about the use of the word Allah in the English language since it is not only accommodating Islamic beliefs, but also transforming the word Allah into a NAME for the God of the Bible.

I think that what the church needs is to stand against and not to be entangled with the moon god theory, which has no scholastic proof and hinders evangelism to Muslims in the USA and the West.

I was particularly saddened to see several English Christian Web sites posting the English Bible text with the word Allah substituting for God as an attempt to witness to Muslims. In doing so, they have inadvertently asserted the Muslim claim that Allah is the name of the one true God!

Should I Refer to 'Allah' When I Share the Gospel With Muslims?

I have found that in a personal witnessing situation, it is best to share my faith with a Muslim by assuming that we are both talking about the same God, the One who created the heavens and the earth. The apostle Paul used that approach in

Acts 17 when he came to Athens and his spirit was stirred in him when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry (Verse 16). He later addressed the pagan Greeks telling them about the one true God who is the Lord of heaven and earth who cannot dwell in temples made with hands (verses 22-24).

I have also found that the issues regarding the term Allah are difficult for many American Christians to sort through when it comes to understanding Islam. We need wisdom and we need to be vigilant. Allah should not be the subject matter of our evangelism with Muslims, and Allah should not be accepted as an alternative word for God in the English language.

As a ministry, we are committed to helping Christians better comprehend the tenets of Islam, and to support Christian workers who are actively reaching Muslims.

Conclusion

Arabic-speaking Christians should continue to use the word Allah in their language to address God since it is their generic word for the one true God, even though the understanding of His character is horribly messed up in Islam, which happens to share the same Arabic language. The Arab Christians will always be challenged to maintain that distinction and to remain biblical.

The Christians in the West should not be entangled with the moon-god theory, especially when witnessing to Muslims. In addition, English-speaking believers should resist the use of Allah in their own language and refrain from using it in any English Christian media or publications aimed at Muslims.

May the Lord fuel our evangelism to Muslims in the . and abroad with wisdom, passion and love!

Michael Abd Al-Massih *is the founder and director of Arabic*

Bible Outreach Ministry (ABOM), a Christian mission organization with a passion to extend the Word of God to the Arab and Muslim world. His vision is to see vibrant and reproducing churches in the Arab world and among large Muslim communities in North America. You can follow ABOM on Facebook and on Twitter via @ArabicBible.