WHAT SHOULD WE CALL GOD?

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Category: Controversies

Lamin Sanneh in his excellent book Translating the Message: Missionary Impact on Culture (American Society of Missiology) points out that the Church has grown fastest in Africa where the traditional name for the 'high god' has been appropriated by the Church and *Christianised* through use in worship and the translated Scriptures. Where a foreign (either Western such as God or Dieu or Islamic, Allah) has been used the Church has not grown so quickly.

However, there are situations where a long history of foreign language domination means that the original name for God has actually been lost and the people only know and use a foreign name. This is especially true of societies where Islam has long held sway and people only know the Arabic derived word for God: Allah. Using Allah in Bible translation can be controversial as some people feel that somehow this is weakening the Christian faith. There is room for long discussion here, but essentially the process of bringing Christianity into a new cultural context always involves adding new meanings to words which have long existed in the culture - deepening the understanding of the word for God is no exception.

However, I was interested to note that in Malaysia the government is seeking to ban non-Muslims from using the word Allah. The idea that any one group, religious or not can actually 'own' words is very strange, especially as the word Allah has long been used by Malays of all faiths. It will be interesting to see how this pans out.

- Allah and Bible translation
- Allah and linguistic hegemony