The question is asked by certain groups whether Allah can validly be used to translate words for God in the Bible. It is inconceivable to many that a word that is commonly associated with the Islamic religion would be found in a Christian Bible. There are some English speakers, for example, who say that the words Allah and God refer to different deities and therefore that Allah should never be used in any translation of the Bible. One person who has written a book arguing against the use of Allah by Christians is a Nigerian, G. J. O. Moshay. In his book, *Who Is This Allah?*, he writes, "For long we had assumed that Christians and Muslims serve the same God, and that it is only in the language of expression and mode of worship that they differ." But he concludes that they are not the same. Significantly, this objection does not come from traditional Arab Christians, most of whom live in the Islamic heartland.

The basic question is whether the word “Allah” can be considered a generic term for the supreme being that can be used to translate *elohim* or *theos*, which are themselves generic terms in Hebrew and Greek. The Arab philologists discussed the etymology of the word at great length. Some held that it was a loan word from Syriac or Hebrew, but most regarded it as a contraction of *al ilah* (“the god”). Western scholars are fairly unanimous that the source of the word Allah probably is through Aramaic from the Syriac *alāh* (“the god”). In either case, the Arabs used the word Allah for the supreme being before the time of Muhammad. Inscriptions with Allah have been discovered in Northern and Southern Arabia from as early as the fifth century B.C. Christians have used the word Allah from pre-Islamic times, and Allah has been used continuously in Arabic translations of the Bible from the earliest known versions in the eighth century to this day. One Arabic translation of the New Testament using the word may even be pre-Islamic.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims have used Allah in their citations and translations of the Bible since the first centuries of Islam. Jewish commentators writing in Arabic used Allah in their translations and citations. Sa’adiah Ga’on b. Joseph, a 9th-10th century A.D. Rabbanite translator of the Hebrew into Arabic (using Hebrew characters), used Allah for *elohim*. For example, for Genesis 1:4
he has: “And Allah saw that the light was good.” This practice of Sa‘diah was followed by the Karaites, a Jewish sect in Jerusalem, in the 10th century. An acquaintance of St. John of Damascus, Abu Qurah, the Bishop of Haran in the 8th–9th century A.D., uses Allah to translate theos in his citations of the Bible in Arabic. For example, in John 1:1 he has “the Word was with Allah.” A number of Muslim writers in the 9th century A.D. used Allah in their citations of the Bible. Al-Tabarî, quoting the words of Jesus in John 10:36, has “Allah sent me into the world” and, quoting the words of the devil in Matthew 4:3, has: “If you are the son of Allah . . .” Another Muslim writer, Ibn Qutayba al-Dinawari of Baghdad, quotes Jesus as saying in Matthew 6:24, “You cannot serve both Allah and Mammon.” A Shi‘ite Muslim scholar of the 9th century, Al-Ya‘qubi cites the answer of Jesus to the devil in Matthew 4:7, “Do not test Allah your Lord.” Thus, from the beginning of contacts between Jews, Christians, and Muslims there was use of Allah that enabled them to enter into common discussion about biblical content and to dialogue with one another.

It should be noted that the biblical translations of the Bible into Arabic and other languages used by the majority Muslim communities in the region in their choice of the word for the supreme being. Another exception is the Swahili translation of the Bible in East Africa where the traditional name for the supreme being, Mungu, was retained. Recent translations of the Bible into languages used by majority Muslim communities have generally followed the precedent set by earlier biblical translations in the major languages in the region in their choice of the word for the supreme being. Thus new translations in Africa (e.g., Juba and Wolof) and Southeast Asia (e.g., Patani Malay) use Allah, while those in South Asia (e.g., Baluchi and Dari) use Khoda. Likewise, new translations in Central Asia in areas that were once part of Persia use Khoda (e.g., Kazakh, Kirghizi, Tajiki, and Uzbeki). These are the words for the supreme being that have long been used by the peoples in these geographical regions. Thus new translations rarely use a word for the supreme being that differs from the common usage of the language group or from other available transla-
Does common usage of a generic term mean that Christians and Muslims have the same concept of the supreme being?

The use of the same word for the supreme being by people of various religions need not mean that they all have the same views about deity. Each religion defines the meaning of the supreme being according to its own convictions. Those of different religions who use the word “Allah” understand the nature of the supreme being to which it refers according to the beliefs of their own traditions. English speakers can understand this reality by reference to their own usage patterns. Allah is the equivalent to the English word “God” with a capital “G”. Michel observed that “Just as ‘God’ is the name in English for the one divine being who alone is to be worshipped and obeyed, used by Muslims, Christians and Jews, so God’s name in Arabic and those languages who derive their religious terminology from Arabic (like Bahasa, Indonesia) is ‘Allah.”

Many Muslims have recognized the equivalency of these words as generic terms when writing in English by using the English term “God.”

A prominent Arab Christian writes that for more than five hundred years before Muhammad, the vast majority of Jews and Christians in Arabia called God by the name Allah. How, then, can we say that Allah is an invalid name for God? And what about the 10 to 12 million Arab Christians today? They have been calling God ‘Allah’ in their Bibles, hymns, poems, writings, and worship for over nineteen centuries. What an insult to them when we tell them not to use this word Allah?”

When those whose mother tongue is Arabic and who live among Muslims have no problem with the name Allah being used for God in the Bible, this raises a question about what possible problem there might be with the use of Allah elsewhere in the translation of the Bible. It would...
seem that those who object to its use do so in order to maintain a radical distinction between the Christian and Islamic concepts of the supreme being. Precedence indicates that each faith community has clearly defined its distinctive understanding of Allah through its contextual use, teaching and tradition.

Translators involved in new translations of the Bible or revisions of the Bible in languages used by the majority Muslim community are advised to use the word for the supreme being that is commonly used by people in that language group. It is a standard principle of translation to use the words and expressions in common use, and that principle also applies to the word for the deity. In spite of allegations that Allah is not the same as the elohim and theos in the Bible, the use of Allah by Christians speaking Arabic and many other languages demonstrates its acceptance as a word to be used in their Bibles. Christians should not be encouraged to avoid the use of Allah where it has been traditionally used. The argument of non-Arabic speakers cannot be determinative for those who have a long history of using the word Allah. Rather the term for the supreme being in the translation of the Bible should be determined by what is already the term used by the Christian community, whether Allah, Khoda, Mungu, or some other local word.

Endnotes

1Ibadan, Nigeria: Fireliners Int., 1990, 8.


7Meira Polliack, op. cit., p. 112.

8Loc. cit., pp. 36ff. Note the example of Yefet ha-Levi ben ‘Eli’s use of Allah (hll’) in his introduction to Genesis, loc. cit., pp. 43 and 293.


11Loc. cit., p. 119.

12Loc. cit., p. 120.

13The completely revised Malay Bible of 1996, however, restored the practice of translating elohim as Allah. This was at the advice of the Malaysian church leaders, who considered the translations of 1912 and 1988 as not being exegetically accurate or faithful to the original texts. Thus the rendering of the divine names returned to the precedent established in the history of the Malay/Indonesian translations since 1629. The Biatah translation is also being revised to restore Allah as the translation of elohim. Information from Daud Soesilo, “Translating the Names of God Revisited: Field Experience from Indonesia and Malaysia,” (a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL/AAR in November 2000), pp. 4 and 8.

14Thomas Michel, S.J., in “Official