Inside Out Apologetics: Engaging Cultural Narratives in Peninsular Malaysia

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# Abstract

In the Western world, Christian apologists, missionaries, and thinkers who noticed the dangers of a cultural shift called postmodernism have developed many resources in recent years to engage it. This shift started from a time when it was impossible to not believe in God to one in which such faith is one among many possibilities. Meanwhile, extensive analyses of and apologetic engagement with the Eastern culture (Arabic, Confucian, and Southern Asian clusters) has been sidelined, with only limited resources to believers in those parts of the world. Unlike communities and cultures in the West, Eastern communities are shaped more by a sense of honor and shame than by individual reasoning, guilt, and innocence. Hence, a recent apologetic method, called the Inside Out method, developed by apologists Mark Allen and Josh Chatraw, is proposed to engage the prevailing cultural narratives found in the Eastern cultures, particularly in Peninsular Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country. This presentation will apply an Inside Out method within the Malaysian context to engage its cultural narratives of religious pluralism and filial piety. The paper shows how apologetic conversations can be framed with a non-Christian Malaysian. By identifying and challenging his or her take on pluralism and piety, the method invites him or her to consider how the Christian faith tells a better narrative, because the Gospel is the greatest narrative to be told.

**Inside Out Apologetics: Engaging Cultural Narratives in Peninsular Malaysia**

Imagine journeying through the present age of Eastern culture. What would it look like?

What kind of narratives would be heard in the streets? One philosopher lays such questions out

concisely:

> What's the shape of the existential terrain in which we find ourselves in late modernity?
> Where are the valleys of despair and mountains of bliss, the pitfalls and dead ends? What
> are the sites of malaise and regions of doubt? Where are the spaces of meaning? Are they
> hidden in secluded places, or waiting to be discovered in the mundane that is always with
> us?[1]

As the apologist travels through the marketplace and ponders these questions, he is deeply

troubled by the pantheon of idols scattered along the roadsides. As he meets the locals, he

converses with them about the Christian story, telling them of the good news of a better place

and a better God from where he came. He is met with questions and disdainful remarks about

this strange place that he came from, and this divine being unheard of in their culture. Undeterred

by these disagreements, he wonders what kind of apologetic maps he could sketch that would

navigate them to consider this good news he has brought with him. How can he best appeal or

defend the better story he has received from the one who sent him? Who is he drawing these

maps for? A dutiful son whose loyalty belongs to his family? A taxi driver who is content with

what his gods provided for him in life? A devout Hindu mother whose daughter is bedridden

from an accident?

Throughout centuries, apologists have drawn elaborate maps for the people in their

particular time and place to help them navigate their way to the good news. However, more

emphasis had been given to cultures in the Western world, leaving mere sketches of maps in the

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[1] James K. A. Smith. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 10.

Eastern world. For example, in the 20th century, many have breathed the air of Western culture and sensed a change in the scent, a cultural shift in what philosophers called the "modern age" to the "*post*modern age." Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's work titled *A Secular Age* tackled the subtle yet pervasive change in his time: "the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[2] This shift in times to what he defined as a secular age prompted Taylor to map out the present age. It was an apologetic effort to "[undercut] the confidence of the secularist 'take' on the world, showing it to *be* a take, a construal, a reading,"[3] rather than a reality.

Only a couple of decades before Taylor, missionary Lesslie Newbigin returned from the mission field in India back to England after being gone for almost forty years. He returned to find a very secularized England. As one biographer writes, "The culture shock prompted Newbigin to write that Christians must now approach Western culture the same way missionaries approached a foreign culture."[4] His works focused primarily on the split between the secular and the sacred, the privatization of religion away from the public sphere, another product of the modern age.

The works of these men are merely snippets of the works that many other philosophers, missionaries, pastors, or theologians have contributed to.[5] Their analyses of the Western culture

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[2] Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age* (London, England: Belknap Press, 2018), 3.

[3] Smith, *How*, 80.

[4] Benjamin K. Forrest, Josh Chatraw, and Alister E. McGrath. *The History of Apologetics: A Biographical and Methodological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 676.

[5] Some helpful works include an analysis of this cultural shift in its early formation from theologian Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason: A Penetrating Analysis of Trends in Modern Thought* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1968). Following in his footsteps, author Nancy Pearcey critiques and engages with the

affirmed one thing: the map of the present age in the Western world, its cultural narratives,[6] is

just as hostile to the Christian map of reality as the other cultures in the world. This shift to a

postmodern or post-Christian era in recent decades had prompted an effort in the Christian

community to defend the Christian faith.

While much of the apologetic effort and resources is focused on this shift, there is a lack

of a comprehensive analysis, a map, of the present age in the Eastern world. The problem is not

that modern or postmodern thought has infiltrated the Eastern mindset. Far from it![7] Rather, it is

that the map of the present age in Southeast Asia is rather *incomplete*. For example, missionary

Jayson Georges, founder of the HonorShame ministry, developed a test to evaluate a group's

culture type:

> In 2014 Jayson developed The CultureTest.com – an online questionnaire to assess a
> group's culture type. The initial nine thousand results from around the world have

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secular/sacred split in *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2005). More recent works include Carl Trueman's treatment on a similar shift in the matter sexuality: Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020). Christopher Watkins produced a comprehensive engagement, showing how the whole Bible story "out-narrates" the modern cultural narratives in Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022).

[6] Drawing from his analysis of Taylor's works, pastor-theologian Timothy Keller, in one of his strategies to reach and preach to a postmodern Western culture, calls readers to engage with what he calls the "baseline cultural narratives" of the present age: "They are things that 'everybody knows,' premises that seem so self-evident as to be nearly invisible and unquestionable to those who hold them. They are usually expressed in slogans or epigrammatic 'truisms' that are spoken to end discussions – they are thought to be beyond argument. 'Everyone has the right to their own opinion' or 'You have to be yourself' are two of many examples." Timothy Keller. *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2015), 86. The map of any culture in any age consists of cultural narratives. Whether they are conscious of them or not, they are the expressions of their worldview. According to author James Sire, "A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story." James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 141. For the purpose of consistency, the term "cultural narratives" will be used to refer to the cultural map of the present age.

[7] "They [non-Western theologies] are not integrating with modernity, which may be a good thing, except where Western missionaries have influenced them or where their own theologians have studied in Europe or North America." Roger E. Olson. *The Journey of Modern Theology from Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 13.

confirmed what anthropologists and missionaries commonly observe – non-Western cultures are most influenced by honor-shame values. This data suggests that approximately 80 percent of the global population (i.e., Asians, Arabs, Africans and even Latin Americans) runs on the honor-shame operating system.[8]

The map is incomplete because it does not account for the diverse manifestations of different religious beliefs and practices specific to each country nor is it sufficient in presenting the aspects of religions that are *more salient* within any particular culture. Hence, this thesis would attempt to contribute to a mapping of the present age in the Eastern world so that by forming such a map the missionaries and local believers in those regions are more equipped to do apologetics within their specific contexts.

While the study is about apologetics in the Eastern world, the focus will intentionally be limited to Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country, because each country has its own unique manifestation of the religions, and this thesis will use Malaysia as an example to discuss a method of apologetics by which anyone can use to map out their particular context. Moreover, the hope is to use this thesis to further the conversation of apologetics there. The area of interest will also be restricted to Peninsular rather than East Malaysia. However, whenever Malaysia is mentioned, it should be understood to be focused primarily on the Peninsular.

Within Malaysia, the focus will be on the cultural narratives found in polytheistic communities (the worship of many gods), focusing more on the Hindu and Chinese religious groups, or a variation of such. Hence, the Muslim faith would not be emphasized, even though it is the majority culture. This is because the Islamic faith is distinct from Hinduism and the Chinese religions, in that the former is strictly monotheistic, exclusive, and stemmed from a

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[8] Jayson Georges, and Mark D. Baker. *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials*. (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 19.

Judeo-Christian framework. On the other, the latter two are inherently polytheistic, inclusive, and

stemmed from an animistic framework. The scope of this study will not be able to fully consider

these differences and other necessary factors as well when engaging with the cultural narratives

in the Muslim communities. One of these factors include the law stating that it is illegal for any

to proselytize Muslims or for Muslims to convert. According to the Federal Constitution of

Malaysia, "Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and, subject to Clause

(4), to propagate it."[9] This freedom is restricted by Clause 4: "State law and… federal law may

control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing

the religion of Islam."[10] Hence, engaging with that community in light of the legal factor will be

beyond the scope of this study, even though the Islamic faith is the predominant religion in

Malaysia.

Consequently, this study has two limitations. Firstly, it does not provide an exhaustive list

of cultural narratives found in all the communities in Malaysia because the multicultural and

multifaceted nature of religious thoughts will be an enormous task to undertake in this paper.

Secondly, this study is an academic endeavor lacking a personal missional experience. The goal

is to, however, contribute to the academic conversation through research and then gain

experience from the field, allowing the initial speculations to guide methodology yet also be

willing to be informed by the experience itself.

In light of the gap in the contemporary conversation of apologetics and cultural

engagement, the limitations set in place naturally or intentionally, this paper presents a vision for

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[9] Malaysia Federal Constitution, Article 11, Clause 1, 31 August 1957.

[10] Ibid., Article 11, Clause 4.

Inside Out apologetics, an appeal and a defense for Christianity as the better story among cultural narratives, that engages with the contemporary Peninsular Malaysian context.

In order to do that, the apologetic method will be introduced. After that, the cultural context of Malaysia will be painted, followed by an identification of the prevailing cultural narratives and how they manifest in certain communities in the present age. The apologetic method will be used to address them.

## The Inside Out Method

### What Is the Inside Out Method?

The Inside Out method is a method that frames the apologetic conversations (conversations that aims to appeal or defend the Christian faith) with individuals by entering "inside" the person's worldview, engaging the cultural narratives that influence them by affirmation and challenge, and inviting them "outside" to consider the Christian worldview where a better narrative of reality is told.[11]

According to apologists Josh Chatraw and Mark Allen, "The goal of starting with the other person's assumptions is to create a space so they can consider some of the problems with their own outlook and be willing to consider the plausibility of Christianity."[12] The method contains some diagnostic questions to mentally scaffold apologetic conversations:

Inside:
1. What in this view can be defined and what needs to be challenged?
2. Where does this view lead?
   a. How is it inconsistent?
   b. How is it unlivable?
Outside

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[11] Josh Chatraw. *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk about God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 63-70. See also Josh Chatraw, and Mark D. Allen. *Apologetics at the Cross: An Introduction for Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2018), 213-21.

[12] Ibid., 214.

1.  Where do competing narratives borrow from the Christian story?
2.  How does Christianity better address our experiences, observations, and history?[13]

Overall, the method seeks to facilitate an apologetic dialogue (not a debate!) that is both others-

centered, gospel-centered, and promotes a biblical apologetic tone that reflects the charge of the

Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3:13-17. The ultimate goal and hope is that by showing how the

Christian story tells a better story than the individual's cultural narrative, it brings the latter one

step closer to realizing that the former *is* the only reality that is true and satisfying.

**How Does the Method Affect Apologetic Conversations?**

This is different from the typical apologetic conversations because before the case for

Christianity is presented, the conversation starts from seeking to understand the individual's

viewpoint, and then pointing out internal inconsistencies from the lens of the Christian

worldview. People hold on to their view of the world for many reasons that are integrated

together, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. But as Chatraw writes, "By joining an

unbeliever within their story and by keeping the gospel well integrated, we can more readily (and

sincerely) identify points where Christianity overlaps with the other person's assumptions."[14]

This identification of common points allows the apologist to challenge the individual with some

problems in their worldview. These softer transitions in and out of both worldviews allow for a

genuine conversation to happen rather than an argumentative tone. When the individual feels like

they are not being threatened, instead of building higher mental walls, they will be more willing

to listen and consider the case for the Christian faith. The Inside Out method is not meant to be a

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[13] Chatraw, *Telling*, 221.

[14] Ibid., 64.

strict method of argumentation but is the case for Christianity is woven throughout the dialogue between individuals, from the beginning to the end.

**Why This When There Are Already So Many Other Methods?**

The flexibility of the method allows the apologist to use any of the apologetic methods mapped out by Brian Morley.[15] The differences between the method used here among other methods is discussed extensively in Allen and Chatraw's book,[16] but the one important distinction of the Inside Out method is that it is as much others-centered as it is gospel-centered. This method varies in appearance depending on the individual's worldview. As Allen and Chatraw note, "while there are times for offering numerous arguments that support and reinforce each other, apologetics at the cross [from which the Inside Out method originates] stresses that different people find different arguments and collections of arguments more persuasive than others."[17] In this approach, however, the emphasis will typically be more on counternarratives rather than counterarguments.

The method is also rooted in a biblical understanding of 1 Peter 3:15, the famous verse or "prooftext" for apologetics. This instruction to give an *apologia* or "defense" is situated within the theme of responding to hostility by suffering for the sake of doing what is right.[18] Peter is encouraging the believers of his time, who were undergoing a harsh period of suffering and were pressured to conform to the culture, to continue living rightly in God's eyes instead of

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[15] Brian K. Morley. *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Approaches* (Bronx: InterVarsity Press, 2015). Morley maps out five methods: Presuppositionalism, Reformed Epistemology, Combinationalism, Classical Apologetics, and Evidentialism.

[16] Chatraw and Allen. *Apologetics*, 105-31.

[17] Ibid., 130.

[18] Greg Forbes, Andreas J. Kostenberger, and Robert W. Yarbrough. *1 Peter: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 112-19.

succumbing to evil even if it means suffering. He writes, "even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed" (3:14a).[19] Why? Because earlier he referenced an ancient prayer of King David, who after witnessing God's deliverance, proclaimed that God has promised to be on the side of the righteous (Peter quotes Ps 34:12-16 in 3:10-12. Emphasis is given on v12).

Therefore, Peter charged the believers in a negative sense, "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled," and in a positive sense, "but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy," because their reverence to Christ should trump the fear of their persecutors. This reverence to Christ comes in the form of "always being prepared to make a defense [*apologia*] to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you," (3:15) that is, the gospel hope, the living hope to which believers have received through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1:3). This charge is counterintuitive to the believers who were on the verge of giving in to the ways of the persecutors. Peter continues to describe in the next verse how believers should make an *apologia*: "with gentleness and respect," and "having a good conscience." The reason is because God will ultimately put to shame those who do evil.

This understanding of apologetics within the context of suffering is crucial. As Allen and Chatraw describes, "he is not setting the course for a war of words; he is not pitting Christians against unbelievers. Instead, Peter sets the *tone* for apologetic conversations by giving a persecuted community hope and by encouraging them to endure with joy."[20] As theologian

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[19] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations will be from the English Standard Version (ESV).

[20] Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics*, 17.

Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, "Peter's focus is not on what to say but on how to say it."[21] Hence, the Inside Out method steers the apologist into a gentle and respectful dialogue with the individual by conversing with him or her as one made in God's image marred by sin in need of restoration, rather than as an opponent in a fighting match. This apologetic tone is also consistent with the image that Peter wants to paint in the believers' mind with the word *apologia*. Kostenberger and Forbes state that although "the noun is a legal term used of a formal defense in a courtroom setting (Acts 22:1; 25:16; 2 Tim 4:16)[,] [t]his does not imply that the recipients of this letter were being formerly indicted for their faith… as the term can also relate to a less formal response in the face of criticism or request (1 Cor 9:3; 2 Cor 7:11)."[22] As believers faced hostility each day, they were basically "on a daily trial,"[23] and they need to revere Christ as holy by defending the hope which originated from His work on the cross.

**An Example**

Examples of the Inside Out method can be found in both Chatraw's book *Telling a Better Story*.[24] In it he shows how this can be implemented to tell a better story about the meaning of life, the basis of one's identity, the pursuit of happiness, the path to tolerance, and a better approach to reason. Then, he does the inside out method, engaging the culture's story, pointing out where it falls short and where it borrows from the Christian story, and concluding how the Christian story explains it better.

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[21] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 218.

[22] Forbes, Kostenberger, and Yarbrough. *1 Peter*, 116.

[23] J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 188.

[24] Chatraw, *Telling*, 75-167. In Part 2, He writes a chapter on each cultural narratives found in the present Western postmodern age. These include imagining a better Meaning, True Self, Happiness, Inclusiveness, and Reason.

For example, in dealing with the cultural narrative "you have to be true to yourself by following your heart," Chatraw explains how that would look like if one were to truly live it out: "basing our identity solely on our internal feelings and desires is unstable, since feelings and desires often change – from day to day and year to year. The fluctuation leads to a personal identity crisis, with its accompanying anxieties."[25] Although the desire to be true to oneself allows the individual to feel autonomous over his or her life, it actually undermines the very ideals that they strived for: "a stable identity that can't be lost, a real morality, a rationale for pursuing justice, and a love that truly sets us free."[26] All these can be found within the Christian story, but to get them to see that, the apologists have to first converse with them in a way that would allow them to reflect on the inconsistencies and the empty promises of their viewpoint. This is a classic cultural narrative of the secular Western age now that had sprouted since the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th century that has now pervaded many contemporary cultures, perhaps even in the youth of today's Eastern world who have access to Western entertainment.

## Journey to the Southeast: Introducing Malaysia's Cultural Narratives

### Introduction to Malaysia

Now turning to the Eastern world, identifying the prevailing cultural narratives, religious pluralism and filial piety, and how they manifest in certain communities in the present age in Malaysia allows the apologist to better address them using the Inside Out method. Consideration will also be given to any contextualization needed to the method.

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[25] Chatraw, *Telling*, 88.

[26] Ibid.

*Religious Pluralism*

Once a hub for maritime trade network in Southeast Asia attracting many people groups

to its shores, Malaysia is now a multicultural country home to diverse ethnicities, languages,

religions, food, and many more. Although each of the ethnic groups have maintained their own

beliefs and practices, they as a whole have striven for and taken pride in their racial unity in

diversity, cultivating harmony ever since the formation of the country in 1963. As of 2020, the

country's population is estimated at 32.4 million people, with the major ethnic groups being the

Bumiputeras (Malays and indigenous people), Chinese, and Indians.[27] Besides that, the census

states that the religious demography amounted to 61.3% identifies as Muslim, 18.7% Buddhists,

9.1% Christians, 6.1% Hindus, 0.9% categorized as "Others", and 1.8% having no or unknown

religion.[28] In general, Malays are Muslims, Chinese are either Christians or Buddhists, Indians

are either Christians or Hindus (or Sikhs, but there is no known statistics), and the indigenous

people varies depending on the tribe. As mentioned above in the Introduction, though Islam is

the dominant religion of Malaysia, the government allows a sense of freedom of religion, except

to Muslims who desire to convert and towards proselytization. Naturally, the diversity of cultures

comes with theological issues, namely religious pluralism. Although there is a somewhat

restrained freedom on religion as stated in the Malaysian Constitution by the Islam majority, it is

enough to breed a cultural narrative of an "all roads lead to heaven" mentality.

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[27] Department of Statistics Malaysia, *Launching of Report on the Key Findings Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 2020*, by Mohd Uzir Mahidin, (Putrajaya, 2020). The statistics are as shown: Bumiputeras (69.4%), Chinese (23.2%), Indians (6.7%), and others (0.7%).

[28] Ibid.

*Filial Pietism*

Moreover, the people groups that make up the demographics of Malaysia all belong to an

honor-shame culture. David Livermore, a researcher in Cultural Intelligence, writes that

Malaysia belongs to one of the cultural clusters that is "traditionally very hierarchical and

service, honor, and respect are considered some of the most important ways to treat guests,

elderly, and high-status people."[29] Several researchers published a quantitative study on three

"cultural logics" or a measure of their dignity, honor, and face in different individualistic and

collectivistic cultural groups. The results showed that Malaysia scored highest in emphasizing

"face" in their culture.[30] They defined face as the following:

> a distinctive emphasis on hierarchy, humility and harmony. Within this logic, an
> individual is given face by others *on the basis of* the extent to which their actions create
> and preserve in-group harmony, order, and coordination across status lines. Loss of face
> for oneself or for the other also incurs shame.[31]

They defined honor as "the creation and maintenance of respect for the individual as a member

of a specific group. Honor can be gained or lost as a consequence of one's actions, and those

who lose honor are more likely to experience shame.[32] Although they made a distinction between

"face" and "honor," the nuance is smaller in comparison with "dignity," which matches a guilt-

innocence culture and failure to uphold either will result in shame. More on "face" and "honor"

will be discussed in the next section, and one of the manifestations of honor-shame culture in

respecting people of higher social status will be termed as filial piety.

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[29] David A. Livermore. *Leading with Cultural Intelligence: The Real Secret to Success*. Second edition (New York: American Management Association, 2015), 236-7.

[30] Peter B. Smith et al. "Is an Emphasis on Dignity, Honor and Face more an Attribute of Individuals or of Cultural Groups?" *Cross-Cultural Research* 55 no. 2–3 (2021): 112.

[31] Ibid., 97-98.

[32] Smith et al. "Emphasis," 97.

**How Would the Cultural Context of Malaysia Affect the Inside Out Method?**

*Cultural "Honorability" Structure*

Chatraw and Allen's Inside Out method focuses heavily on understanding the

individual's cultural narratives in order to craft an apologetic map specific to him or her.[33]

Hence, before applying this method, which was crafted in the Western world to meet Western

culture, a modification is suggested to be considered before doing so. In the Western world,

influenced by the Enlightenment era, where human reason became the authority of what is true,

apologists have since engage with the culture's "plausibility structure." This was a term used by

sociologist Peter Berger, which Newbigin borrowed to identify the cultural phenomenon in

which he intended to address in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. He explains, "Every

society depends for its coherence upon a set of what Peter Berger calls 'plausibility structures,'

patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are

plausible to its members and which are not…"[34] In that same paragraph he continues to critique

the Western plausibility structure on putting greater weight on human reason than divine

revelation.

However, the concern in the honor-shame culture is not so much about what is reasonable

but rather what is honorable or respectable, which can be thought of as a cultural "honorability"

structure. Georges and Baker claim that "Honor and shame function like a social credit rating

measuring one's reputation."[35] Since the question posed in the "Inside" part of the method has to

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[33] Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics*, 194-7.

[34] Lesslie Newbigin. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Washington: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 13. See also Peter L. Berger. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1967), 92-93.

[35] Georges and Baker. *Ministering*, 40.

do with individualistic and rationalistic thinking, a product of the Enlightenment era, in which

the individual thinks for him or herself whether something is consistent or livable, a better

question about "honorability" could be asked instead. This is because the deciding factor for the

individual in an honor-shame context is not what is best for him or her, but rather what is best for

the community.[36] Hence, in dialoguing about the cultural narratives' logical conclusion, the end

should focus on the plausibility or honorability of the individual's reception of the Gospel in

relation to divine authority more than to familial authority.

### How Much of the Christian Story Has Influenced Malaysia?

Robbie Goh's summary of Christianity in Southeast Asia provides an accurate time lapse

for the degree of the religion's influence on the Malaysian culture. [37] Christianity arrived in

Malaysia together with European traders, later than the other faiths (first was Hinduism and

Buddhism, then Islam in the 14th century). When the Portuguese came to the port of Malacca in

the 16th century, the main trading center of Malaysia then, they brought in Catholic influence.

Then, in the next century, the Dutch came and brought in Protestantism. When the British came

and colonized Malaysia, they brought with them a much greater and lasting Christian influence

with them, such as other denominational missionaries and educators. However, even then, they

had a policy of the missionaries not interfering with the Malay-Muslim customs and religion.

Hence, their efforts were primarily towards the Chinese and Indian immigrants. To this day, East

Malaysia has more Christians than the Peninsular due to "the different racial composition and

less dominant position of Islamic traditionalism have permitted Christianity to establish a larger

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[36] Georges and Baker, *Ministering*, 45-46.

[37] Robbie B. H. Goh. *Christianity in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 47-56. What follows is a summary of his chapter on Christianity's influence in Malaysia.

base among the local peoples."[38] Not so with Peninsular where Islam is dominant. Each region

has its own periods of conflicts and constraints.

Both historians conclude that though Christianity has entered into the "religious playing

field" later than the rest, they have grown progressively through the Catholic, Protestant, and

British missionaries. However, there is little interference or outreach to the Islam-Malay

community throughout the former's spread: "West [Peninsular] Malaysia remains majority

Muslim with a small Christian minority."[39] Unlike the Western world where Christianity was

once the main religion but now dominated by the cultural narratives of modernity and

postmodernity, apologists in Southeast Asia need to present the Gospel clearly with the aid of

apologetics and not assume that the culture knows about it.

<div align="center">

**Engaging Religious Pluralism: Telling A Better Story**

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**Inside**

***What In This View Can Be Affirmed and What Needs To Be Challenged?***

The Motto of Malaysia is "Bersekutu Bertambah Mutu," which means "Unity is

Strength." This goal of unity pervades the psyche of Malaysians in everything they do, which is

reflected in the utilitarian and tolerant blending between religions. This includes a blending of

deities which were added to the collection of household deities that the community would pray to

meet their daily needs. Some examples include the worship of Adi Granth, Guan Yin, and Datuk

Gong. Sikhism, a product of Hinduism and Islam in the 15th century, worships the Adi Granth,

their sacred living book. Although not formed in Malaysia, there are several gurudwaras (Sikh

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[38] Goh, *Christianity*, 52.

[39] Michael D. Crane, and R. LaMon Brown. *A Brief History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings, Endings, and Reflections* (Penang, Malaysia: Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 229.

temple) and a number of Sikhs. Moreover, Buddhism from India and the Chinese religion,

particularly the Daoist pantheon of deities, brought forth Guan Yin, a female version of

Avalokitesvara, goddess of compassion. Again, though this deity originated in China, it was still

welcomed and widely worshiped in Malaysia. And when the Chinese religion came in contact

with the Malay Indigenous religion, the deity "Na Tuk Gong" or "Datuk Gong" was formed and

worshipped by many.

The underlying narratives of religious pluralism in the Chinese and Indian communities

are commonly expressed in a utilitarian manner – "*Recognize Christ as Savior and accept Him*

*into my heart? Sure! The more gods on my side, the better!*" – and a tolerant manner – "*I worship*

*Jesus and other gods as well. Who are you to tell me that Jesus is the only way?*" Both subplots

are inextricably linked to form the narrative and can be found in many communities in Malaysia.

However, for the purpose of illustration, a distinction is made between the Chinese and Hindu

community.[40]

**Chinese Community: "Recognize Christ as Savior and Accept Him into My Heart?**

**Sure! The More gods On My Side, The Better!"** In order to understand pluralism in the

Chinese "popular" or "folk" religion as seen in Malaysia, one must understand the difference

between two types of religious groups which sociologist C. K. Yang taxonomized as

"institutional religion" and "diffused religion." He defines the former as a system of religious life

that has an independent theology, form of worship, and organization of priestly positions to

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[40] The Chinese religion has been influenced by Buddhism as well, which grew out of the Hindu framework. Hence, this distinction between both religions is artificial for the purpose of illustrating two different aspects of one cultural narrative.

facilitate those two.[41] In any country that practices either of these religions, they look more or

less the same. The Christian theology of the Baptist denomination, for example, in America and

Malaysia, will be similar to one another. However, in diffused religion, its "theology, cultus

[worship], and personnel so intimately diffused into one or more secular social institutions that

they become a part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant

independent existence."[42] Such religion is very malleable and fits the mold of whatever society it

dwells in that Buddhism practiced in Nepal, for example, looks very different from the

Buddhism practiced along with other religious practices in Malaysia.

Therefore, Winfried Corduan, a professor of religion, describes the Chinese religion as "a

synthesis of separate elements: traditional religion, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism

(Taoism)… For them it only makes sense to draw from the best of the various sources of ancient

wisdom."[43] These three institutionalized religions, also called the *Sanjiao* (Three Teachings) are

synthesized together and diffused into the Malaysian context, forming what the Chinese

communities believe and practice. This is what anthropologist Tan Chee Beng means when he

describes it as "the complex of Chinese beliefs and practices involving the worship of ancestors,

deities and ghosts, in contrasts to Buddhism and Taoist Religion (*daojiao*)."[44]

Tan describes this syncretism in Malaysia as an "eclectic combination that forms a

distinct religious organization. Any of them may borrow different aspects of moral teachings

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[41] C. K. Yang. *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 294.

[42] Ibid., 295.

[43] Winfried Corduan. *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 388.

[44] Tan Chee-Beng. *Chinese Religion in Malaysia: Temples and Communities* (Leiden, Brill, 2018), 2.

from Confucianism and Buddhism, together with religious rites from Buddhism and the Taoist

Religion… Each religious organization reorganized the Chinese pantheon and provided its

version of a systematic religious teaching, one that derived from the larger popular religion and

from the three teachings."[45] This is why he prefers a loose dichotomy of the two religious groups

provided by Yang, choosing instead to describe the Chinese religion as the institutionalized

religions (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism) or religious "sects" within the complex of

Chinese religion. They are distinct and have existed independently in history but poured and

stirred into a cauldron of "Chinese theology," and poured out into the diverse mold of each

Chinese communities in the Malaysian society.[46]

Despite the eclectic nature of Chinese religion, there is a general pattern to how the

people in such communities worship their deities and ancestors. Corduan observed the central

role that the religion plays in the home:

> Traditionally, each home contains a small shrine, usually not much more than a little
> shelf mounted in a red frame on the wall. On the shelf are implements for the daily
> veneration of family ancestors: a container that holds a few incense sticks, possibly a
> bowl with token food offerings and decorations such as a peacock feather. Behind the
> shelf are small tablets that bear the names of the departed and possibly their pictures… A
> Chinese home may also include small figurines of gods (for example, the kitchen god or
> the three gods of happiness, prosperity and longevity).[47]

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[45] Tan, *Chinese Religions*, 97.

[46] Hence, in the Malaysian census, the reason 18.7% are Buddhists and 0.8% are labeled "Others" is
because "The Chinese who follow their traditional religion do not have a separate name for their beliefs and
practices [unlike institutionalized religions]." Tan, *Chinese Religions*, 8. Furthermore, the Malaysian government
does not recognize Taoism or Confucianism as an official religion. Since the specific religion in which the deities
originated from that the Chinese worship are blurred in the cauldron of theologies, those who predominantly
worship the Buddhist deities will find it convenient to identify themselves as "Buddhists" even though they do
worship other Chinese deities as well.

[47] Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 630.

The diffusion of these religions is based on the Chinese characteristic of being pragmatistic, syncretistic, and moralistic.[48] The key to understanding this is their ultimate goal in life. Corduan notes that "The goal of the religion, broadly speaking, is this-worldly. In a sense the popular religious infrastructure exist to support the human being's pursuit of prosperity, health and overall success in life."[49] In summary, the religious pluralism narrative is expressed in the view that the choice of deities and the religious activities in the temple all serve to meet the daily needs of the people. This utilitarian view of God is reflected in the first cultural narrative as mentioned above.

    **Indian Community: "I Worship Jesus and Other gods as Well. Who Are You to Tell Me That Jesus Is the Only Way?"** A quick study of the culture or a simple observation of a multitude of temples attributed to different Hindus gods, especially deities such as Vishnu or Krishna or Shiva, would lead to the conclusion that Hinduism is polytheistic, the belief in millions of gods. However, Hindus actually believe that there is a universal god, or an ultimate Reality, called Brahman, who is worshipped in diverse forms. Steven Rosen explains the misconception that "these 'many gods' are simply a manifestation of how God descends in an infinity of ways – sometimes manifesting his full power and identity, and, by way of various gradations, manifesting in lesser or incomplete forms as well."[50] All of these gods are part of an ultimate reality. According to professors of religious studies, the nature of brahman is made clear in one of Hindu's sacred texts, the Upanishads, which describes this reality that "[t]his

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[48] Milton Wan. "Chinese Religions," in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*. Edited by William A. Dyrness, Veli-Matti. Kärkkäinen, Juan Francisco Martinez, and Simon Chan. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2008), 161.

[49] Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 410.

[50] Steven J. Rosen. *Essential Hinduism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 33.

expansive, overarching power, which is both the mysterious source of all creation and the creation itself, is called Brahman (Supreme Being or Absolute Reality)."[51]

Since Brahman is the ultimate reality in which creation exists, mankind is also part of this reality. The relation between Brahman and mankind, or the Atman-Brahman identity, is described by Professor Gavin Flood as an impersonalist monism: "*brahman* is not only the essence of the ritual and of the world, but is also the essence of the self (*atman*), the truth of a person beyond apparent differences … the smallest particle of the cosmos … as salt placed in water … completely dissolves and cannot be seen, though it can be tasted, so *brahman* is the essence of all things, which cannot be seen but can be experienced."[52] So, in the beginning was Brahman, the ultimate reality, and all creation, including mankind, are part of this reality. Brahman manifests itself in the forms of various gods, of whom the Hindus worship.

However, this reality has been corrupted. The Atman or soul of mankind has attached its identity to the material world, ignorant (*maya*) to the fact that it is part of the Brahman.[53] The significance of this corruption in the world is emphasized by the Hindu understanding of the immortality of the soul and the endless cycle of life. According to the Bhagavad Gita, which is one of the sacred texts in Hinduism, Krishna speaks to Arjun, the main interlocutor in the narrative, concerning the soul: "As the embodied soul continuously passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death."[54] The soul is

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[51] Thomas A. Robinson and Hillary P. Rodrigues. *World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 163.

[52] Gavin D. Flood. *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84-85.

[53] Ibid., 241.

[54] Vedabase. "Bhagavad Gita as it Is." Accessed March 15, 2023. https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/2/13/

the true identity of the self, while the physical body is like clothes, which grow old. The soul

moves on to the next life by removing the old and putting on the new body. Since the soul is

immortal, Hindus believe that every individual undergoes a vicious cycle of birth, death, and

rebirth, which is known as *samsara*.[55]

Within this *samsaric* cycle, the law of *karma* binds a person to his duty (Good actions

reap good rewards and bad actions reap bad rewards).[56] Stuck in this endless cycle, trapped by

the illusions of the world, Hindus long to escape this reality. This liberation of the Atman from

the *samsaric* cycle, called *moksha*, and reunion with the Brahman, is the ultimate goal of

Hinduism. "Hindus acknowledge that there are numerous ways through which one may attain

*moksha*. The paths that one chooses to follow are called *yoga*s. The word *yoga* means 'union'

and could be thought of as a uniting of one's seemingly separate self, built out of ignorance and

illusion, with one's true Self."[57] The three forms of yoga that Krishna recommended in the *Gita*

include Jnana-yoga (knowledge), Karma-yoga (action), and Bhakti-yoga (love).

If the Chinese community emphasize that the gods they worship would allow them to

prosper in this world, the Hindu community emphasizes that the gods they worship would allow

them to escape the wheel of samsara. The yoga paths reflect the religious pluralism narrative that

there are many paths to salvation, and that the worship of deities meet that human need. Paths

such as the Bhakti-yoga invoke the aid of the incarnations of Brahman to help the individual

attain *moksha*. Corduan suggests, "Just as Hinduism includes many different ways and multiple

paths within each larger way, so religions outside of Hinduism are also allowed as ways to God,

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[55] Robinson and Rodrigues, *World*, 161.

[56] Ibid., 162.

[57] Ibid.

even if they are considered inferior."[58] This is why Hindus are not just pragmatic in their worship but also highly tolerant of other religions, as expressed in the second cultural narrative above.

**Affirm.** In this manner, understanding the utilitarian and tolerant nature of religious pluralism in the Malaysian context allows the apologist to step into the non-Christian Malaysian's worldview and provide affirmation and challenge. Firstly, *there is a general sense of fear towards the divine*. These communities believe that the deities they worship are powerful enough to provide for them what they could not have done by themselves. They would pray that their businesses may prosper, that they may excel in examinations, etc. Secondly, *they seek after an ultimate Reality that transcends the self*. They have a worldview that does not attempt to divide the secular and the sacred, but rather the supernatural greatly influences the natural world. Thirdly, *they are willing to make sacrifices to appease the divine*. They would offer food and prayers to whichever deity that they believe would help them. Fourthly, *the virtues of unity, harmony, and tolerance are good desires to pursue in the contexts of cultural or ethnic or racial diversity*. These affirmations are not exhaustive but provide a starting point for apologists to bear in mind when conversing with individuals from communities who are influenced by the cultural narrative of religious pluralism.

**Challenge**. The first problem to address is that although they earnestly seek after the divine, *they worship the divine according to their own terms*. If they fear the divine, and if they acknowledge that such a transcendent being is truly capable of pronouncing blessings and curses, should they not worship them on their terms? Are prayers and food offerings sufficient to appease the gods? Would not the gods be displeased if they knew they were only being used and

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[58] Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 465.

not properly worshiped, that their devotees are using them as a means to their ends? If the gods

are in and of themselves powerful, why do they depend on finite beings to provide them with

offerings that they could obtain without them? The point is for them to consider the impropriety

of their worship as dishonoring to God.

The second problem is *the inconsistency of religious pluralism*.[59] An individual may be

accepting towards another individual of a different ethnicity or cultural context but cannot be

consistently tolerant towards all religion because of the contradicting truth claims held by each

religion. The religious pluralist fundamentally views many paths to whichever gods one

worships. However, the Christian fundamentally claims that there is only one way to one God.

So do the Muslims and the Jews, even though they differ as to how it looks like. Moreover, the

Buddhists do not have a personal god to worship, only divinized humans. These religions differ

on their claim of sin, salvation, redemption, and more. Hence, the narrative "Who are you to tell

me that Jesus is the only way?" leads to *another kind of intolerance* towards the exclusivity of

the Christian religion.

Furthermore, a popular objection that originated from religious pluralist John Hick is that

every religion is an attempt to express their experience of the divine that he calls the "Real,"

because the divine cannot be ultimately known because of its transcendent nature.[60] However,

the fact that he could say that the Real is transcendent is in itself an affirmation of knowing

something about it. One response to Hick's objection by Harold Netland offers a rebuttal

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[59] Todd Miles calls these two arguments from religious pluralist John Hick "reductionism" and "obfuscation" in Todd L. Miles, *A God of Many Understandings? the Gospel and a Theology of Religions* (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Academic, 2010), 143-50. See also Harold A. Netland, *Christianity & Religious Diversity: Clarifying Christian Commitments in a Globalizing Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 137-63.

[60] John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Edited by Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 31.

statement: "On Hick's terms, no causal properties can be ascribed to the Real. But if that is the

case, then the existence of the Real cannot be used as part of a causal explanation for religious

phenomena being what they are or for the moral transformation of religious believers."[61] If the

Bible is not divinely authoritative but the solely inspired by humans, and if Jesus was not the Son

of God but was an exalted human being, and if God had not revealed Himself through sending

His Son into the world to fulfill His purposes, then religious pluralism will be correct to put

Christianity as one of the human expressions of the divine. However, the Christian religion

claims just the opposite. Therefore, taking this narrative to its conclusion may lead to a dishonor

to Jesus because Christians did not come up with this truth claim, but profess that He said so

(John 14:6).

**Outside**

*Where Do Competing Narratives Borrow from The Christian Story?*

Since Malaysia is not a post-Christian country nor is it predominantly Christian, there is

little borrowing or overlap between the cultural narratives and the Christian story. However,

operating under the belief that everyone was created by God, there is a common history shared

from the events described in Genesis 1-11, from creation up until the dispersion over the face of

all the earth. Hence, the need for offering sacrifices as a form of worship reflects the Old

Testament sacrifices (Gen 3:21; 4:3-5). Besides that, the desire for tolerance towards the voice of

others is based on the truth that everyone is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). Though

there is a Creator-creature distinction, God designed humanity to be with equal worth and

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[61] Netland, *Religious Diversity*, 162.

dignity, to live under His perfect rule, and to represent His rule as co-regents over His creation

(Gen 1:28).

### *How Does Christianity Better Address Our Experiences, Observations, And History?*

**God is Greater Than All gods.** Since communities in Malaysia value seeking after the

divine, apologists could invite them to consider seeking the God who is greater than all the gods

they worship on His terms and not theirs. Christianity seeks a God greater than all the household

gods because He is the "everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint

or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable." (Isa 40:28) There is none like Him (Isa

43:10). All the gods in the world are made by metals that He created and by human hands whom

God created. Such gods can do nothing for themselves, let alone for those who trust in them (Isa

46:5-7). Consider the foolishness of such idolatry in Isaiah 44:6-20 – the same wood that is cut

down to be used for fuel is the same used to be made into a god. It is better to trust in and

worship the One true God who is greater than these gods to bless and to curse, otherwise those

who worship them will be as folly as the gods they worship (Ps 115:3-8).

**The Worship God Requires**. This God requires obedience and loyalty to Him more than

the food offerings and prayers for Him.[62] To obey Him is to honor Him, and that means

following what is acceptable to Him. When He chose a nation to bless and be a blessing to the

other nations, He requires His people to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before Him

because that is how He designed life to be like (Mic 6:6-8). In Jesus' time, He says a similar

thing, "to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and

to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices"

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[62] Psalm 40:6-8, 51:16-17; Prov 21:3; Isa 1:10-18, 66:1-4; Jer. 6:20, 7:21-26; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-27; Micah 6:6-8; Matt 9:13, 12:6-7; Mk 12:33; Heb 10:1-7.

(Mk 12:33). If He is to delight in offerings and sacrifices, the person has to first do what is most honorable to God.

However, God knows the hearts of man. He knows that although people draw near with their mouth, and honor Him with their lips, their hearts are far from Him (Isa 29:13). He knows that they only fear God as part of the tradition of men. Nobody has been able to give Him the honor He deserves as the Almighty Creator God. To think that one can manipulate God's power as a means to get what they want in this life is to dishonor Him, because this "love" towards God is only based on the blessings He can provide, not God Himself.

**Failure to Honor God**. This failure to obey God that started with the first human beings, Adam and Eve, who dishonored Him and brought disgrace to the human race. All who came after them continued to increase this shame. When everyone failed to give God the glory and honor He deserves and instead gave that to the created gods, this is what it means to fall short of His glory (Rom 3:23). Since His people did not obey, their sacrifices meant to honor Him were unacceptable to Him.

**God Provided a Perfect Sacrifice Who Obeyed Perfectly**. When He created mankind, He gave them the honor to rule His creation as His representatives. However, all of humanity, including His people, failed to seek and worship Him properly. Nevertheless, He had a plan to restore them back to His perfect rule and blessing. Because of His great kindness towards His creation, He sent His Son Jesus into the world to complete what He required. Jesus obeyed perfectly and offered His life as a perfect sacrifice in the place of all humanity (Heb 10:5-7, 11-14). God approved in this sacrifice by bringing Jesus back to life and to an honorable status that is above all status.

**All Who Trusts in Him Will Never Be Shamed**. When the followers of Jesus saw that

God approved of Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf, they trusted in Him. Later, they began telling

other people who were worshipping other gods about Jesus the Son of God who is greater than

all gods. They said, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame" (Rom 10:11; 1 Pet

2:6). Since the virtue of tolerance is highly valued amongst the Malaysian communities to be

united in the midst of diversity, apologists could invite them to consider ethnic diversity but not

at the cost of compromising objective truth, that is, the exclusivity of the gospel, that every

nation under the rule of the one true God. The Christian story ends with many races under one

God: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every

nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the

Lamb [that is, Jesus], clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" (Rev 7:9).[63]

This is radically different from the culture's narrative of tolerance. Instead of a transcendent

unknowable God that humans try to feel their way toward him and find him, God left His

majesty, came down into the world, associated with the lowliest of the low, made Himself known

through His Son Jesus, and died in their place to restore them back into His perfect rule (Acts

17:27; Phil 2:6-8). When His followers understood His death, and when they were threatened to

recant their worship to Jesus, they professed, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is

no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

**Ask, And He Will Give**. Now that the ultimate sacrifice has been given to God, that is,

the proper form of worship that God required is satisfied through what Jesus did, everyone who

trust in Him are part of a new family. They are no longer under shame in Adam but honored in

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[63] See also Phil. 2:9-11.

Jesus. Now, being part of the new family, worship has changed from using God for selfish ends to using everything for God's honor. This is what one of the followers of Jesus said, "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him" (1 Jn 5:14-15).[64] This is radically different from the utilitarian cultural narrative, because instead of seeking first one's own prosperity and using God to get there, the Christian story seeks first God's honor and what is right to Him, confident that the Creator of all things will sufficiently provide for daily needs.

<div align="center">

**Engaging Filial Pietism: A Better Story of Filial Piety**

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**Inside**

*What In This View Can Be Affirmed and What Needs to Be Challenged?*

   **Definition of Honor and Shame**. As mentioned previously, Malaysia is an honor shame culture. The trichotomy of culture into honor-shame, guilt-innocence, and fear-power dimensions was initiated by linguist Eugene Nida and popularized by Roland Muller.[65] According to Georges, honor can be thought of as a "social credit rating measuring one's reputation. A person with a good rating among peers is honored with respect and deference."[66] Likewise, shame

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[64] Ps 37:4; Matt 6:33-34, 7:7-8; Lk 11:13; Jn 14:13-14; 15:7-8, 16; 16:23-24; 1 Jn 5:14.

[65] See Eugene Nida, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (New York: Harper, 1954), 150; Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Philadelphia, Xlibris, 2001); For a more comprehensive literature review, see Timothy C. Tennent. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2007), 79-82. Although this division of culture has been criticized within missiological circles in recent years for being oversimplified, it should be treated as a tool or lens for a more comprehensive proclamation of the gospel rather than a definitive set of anthropological data. As David Dunaetz advised, "In light of the uncertainty and complexity of what humans experience concerning honor and shame, we, as missionaries and leaders, need to humbly admit our limited understanding of the shame and honor that members of other cultures experience." David R. Dunaetz. "Approaching honor and shame with humility: Limitations to our current understanding." *Missiology* 49, no. 4 (2021): 411.

[66] Georges and Baker, *Ministering*, 40.

would be felt by a person or community with a low social credit. Honor and shame can either be achieved by one's action or ascribed by heritage.[67]

Shame is different from guilt because of the extent of self-condemnation. Christopher Flanders writes, "guilt involves a more articulated condemnation of a specific *behavior* (i.e., 'what I *did*') … "Shame, in contrast, involves a global evaluation of the self (i.e., "who I *am*") … what one does is not abstracted and externalized but is appropriated as an inherent part of the self. The focus in shame is on the resulting inadequacy of the self."[68] The terms "honor" and "shame" should be thought of as categories for the different manifestations of what each culture defines as honorable or not. In the case of the Malaysian culture, as the research mentioned above concluded, whatever is honorable is said to be "gaining face" while whatever is dishonorable is said to be "losing face."

As the apologist enter once again into the worldview of a non-Christian Malaysian, engaging the cultural narrative of filial piety should be done with consideration to two factors: the foundation for each community's development of honor and the manifestation of it. In the Chinese community, filial piety is most honored because it is rooted in Confucian ethics. In the Indian community, a similar form of piety is most honored because it is rooted in their philosophy.

**Chinese Community: Filial Piety.** Confucius lived in a time of turmoil.[69] During the Zhou Dynasty, the country was undergoing a political, social, and communicational crisis. The

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[67] Georges and Bakers, *Ministering*, 42.

[68] Christopher L. Flanders. "Shame." in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*. Edited by William A. Dyrness, Veli-Matti. Kärkkäinen, Juan Francisco Martinez, and Simon Chan. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2008), 815.

[69] The following paragraph is based on Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 606.

government's authority was decentralizing at the rise of lords warring against each other for

land. Schools of thought competed against each other to be the dominant ideology, splintering

into what is called the Hundred Schools of Thought. The definitions ascribed to the Chinese

language were becoming semantically ambiguous. Such disunity prompted people in the

government like Confucius to think of solutions that would regain stability. Corduan writes,

"Confucius wanted all people to return to the basic model of the ideal state as it was supposedly

lived out in the golden age a long time ago under the original ideal emperors. If everyone studied

exactly how people behaved back then and emulated their ways, then harmony, peace and

prosperity would result."[70] It is within this context that Confucius developed his ideal state:

> To rectify social disorder, Confucius taught the rectification of the Five Relationships
> that are of crucial importance in the constitution of society. These are the relationship of
> ruler and government official, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and
> younger brother, and elder friend and younger friend. He explained each role's
> responsibilities and prescribed how people in these relationships should behave toward
> each other.[71]

Although his teachings were ignored by the rulers of his time, they permeated into the

dynamics of family relationships. This became known as filial piety. When Confucius' disciples

asked what it meant, Confucius said, "Do not abandon [the rites] … When your parents are alive,

observe the rites in serving them; when they die, observe the rites in burying them; observe the

rites in sacrificing to them," "Give your parents no cause for worry other than your illness," and

"Nowadays this is taken to mean being able to feed your parents. But dogs and horses can do as

much. If you are not respectful, how are you different?"[72] Such devotion to one's parents has

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[70] Ibid., 623-24.

[71] Robinson and Rodrigues, World Religions, 375-76.

[72] Confucius. *The Analects: Translated with an Introduction and Commentary*. Translated by Chin AnnPing (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 2014), 2.5-7.

become deeply rooted into the Chinese mentality that it impacts one's whole life and goals. The

implications of proper duty were huge to the children growing up in a Chinese context, for the

responsibility to care for their parents motivate them to work and achieve success falls heavily

upon them in order to fulfill this role as a son.

**Indian Community: Dharma.** Similarly, in the Indian community, the concept of duty

is called *dharma*. This word has a different meaning in other religions that stemmed from

Hinduism.[73] It is one of the four goals, *moksha* (liberation from the vicious reincarnating cycle to

oneness with Brahman) being the ultimate one as discussed previously. The objective of *dharma*

is to "[understand] the meaning of duty or righteousness and its application in one's life."[74] This

is done in the context of the *karma yoga*, the path to liberation through the accumulation of good

actions. In this case, the fulfillment of one's responsibilities in the family is thought to be done

"in the spirit of renunciation [actions should be performed without attachment to its results], by

surrendering all acts to the greater power of the Absolute, [and because of that] karma is thought

not to accrue."[75]

**The Face of Honor: Dutiful Obedience to Parents**. Both the Chinese and Indian

communities have an honor shame culture that was forged from the tradition of their sacred texts

about obedience to the family, and in the case of the Chinese, obedience even pass the death of

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[73] "The term *dharma* comes from the root *dhr*, to uphold, to maintain, and dharma may well be defined as 'that which upholds and supports order.' Yet different parties could hold very different ideas of what constitutes 'order.' In the Vedas the term dharma referred to the sacrifice as that which maintains the order of the cosmos. In Buddhist texts it meant the teachings of the Buddha, and Jain sources spoke of a Jaina dharma… In the Dharmasastra literature [Hindu text], dharma referred to an overarching order of the cosmos and society, and to a person's duties within the world so constituted." Richard H. Davis, "Religions of India in Practice," in *Asian Religions in Practice: An Introduction*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, 9:8–55 (Princeton University Press, 1999), 25.

[74] Robinson and Rodrigues, *World Religions*, 242.

[75] Ibid., 246-47.

their parents through ancestral veneration. To go against the parents' wishes is to disrespect them

and rebel against the social order, which is thought to be the source of disharmony. Hence, the

cultural narrative "*I would become a Christian, but my parents have forbidden it*"[76] or "*I just

follow what my parents taught me to believe. I cannot go against what they say because that is

disrespectful*" resonates deeply with the psyche of Malaysians.

**Affirm**. The obligation to filial piety can be affirmed by the similarity in the biblical

values of respect for parents and tradition. Firstly, *the Old Testament Law teaches to honor

parents*. It is explicitly stated in the fifth Commandment (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). In fact, in the

Old Testament, whoever disobeys it will face severe punishment (Ex. 21:15, 17; Deut. 27:16).

Secondly, *the book of Proverbs teaches to listen to the father*. The first portion of this book of

wisdom is structured around a father exhorting his son to pursue wisdom.[77] Thirdly, *Jesus

affirmed the Law and modeled it* (Matt. 15:4; Lk 18:20). Even when Jesus was hung on the cross

about to die, He instructed one of His disciples to care for His mother (Jn 19:25-27). Fourthly,

*His disciple, Paul, instructed sons to honor their fathers* (Col. 3:20-21; Eph. 6:1-4; 1 Tim 5:1).

He lists disobedience to parents as one of the many factors of moral disorder in society (Rom

1:30; 2 Tim 3:2).

**Challenge**. However, the main difference between biblical and Confucian or Hindu filial

piety can be summarized in Paul's instruction in Ephesians 6:1, "Children, obey your parents in

the Lord." According to one commentator, the word "obey" is stronger than "submit" and

expresses "*unquestioning compliance* expected from children towards their parents."[78] If Paul's

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[76] Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 645.

[77] Prov. 1:8-9; 2:1-5; 3:1-2; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1, 7; 6:1, 20; 7:1, 24; 8:32; 10:1; 19:26; 23:22.

[78] Clinton E. Arnold. *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2010), 415. Emphasis added.

instruction were "Children, obey your parents," then it would be no different than the honor

shame context of his day regarding filial piety. According to Frank Thielman, in the Greco-

Roman and the Hellenistic Jewish world, children were expected to be dutifully obedient to their

parents. In the former context, it involves venerating them after their death. Additionally, both

contexts obligated children to provide care for their elderly parents, including burying them.[79] A

similar charge is found in his other letter to the church in Colossae (Col. 3:20).

However, the inclusion of the phrase "in the Lord" changes the nature of that instruction.

The phrase modifies the verb "to obey" rather than the "parents" (as in, children, obey your

parents who are in the Lord) because it has been used throughout the letter to refer to the union

that believers have with Jesus (2:21; 4:1; 4:17; 5:7). Since the address is to the children, as

Thielman concludes, "Paul must be talking about conduct that he expects of children because

they are 'in the Lord.' Because they have been incorporated into Christ by faith (1:13), they

should obey their parents."[80] This is a significant addition because it helps clarify the problem of

parents prohibiting their children to follow Jesus and avoids the potential abuse of misusing this

verse to suggest unlimited obedience to parents. In other words, by instructing children to obey

their parents because of their union with Christ, Paul's perspective of household codes differ

from his culture.

Paul juxtaposes two authorities in one sentence, God and parents. Those who are "in the

Lord" live to honor Him in obedience to His word. As another follower of Jesus puts it, "We

must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). In the context of filial piety, obeying God means

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[79] Frank Thielman. *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2010), 396. See also Lynn Cohick's excursus on children in the Greco-Roman world, especially the second point, in Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020), 318-20.

[80] Ibid., 397.

obeying parents in a spirit of submission (Eph 5:21, 6:1). However, where obedience to parents

goes against obedience to God, the latter takes precedence to the former. This is the cost of

following what Jesus said earlier in His ministry: "if anyone comes to me and does not *hate* his

own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life,

he cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26, emphasis added). The emphasis is less on "*love them less*"

but "*love God more*." In this way, the orthodox principle of honoring parents is held while

allowing for a new orthopraxy in a particular situation (commitment to God over family).

However, disobeying parents in this regard should be done in a respectful tone in accordance

with being under God's authority as opposed to a rebellious tone. The child is still obeying

authority, just that God's commands supersede the parents' authority.

**Outside**

*How Does Christianity Better Address Our Experiences, Observations, And History?*

   **God is a Good Father Who Created Man to Honor Him**. In the beginning of his letter,

Paul praised God for who He is:

> Blessed be the *God and Father* of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has *blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ…* He predestined us to *adoption as sons* through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, *to the praise of the glory of His grace*,[81]

God, Creator of all things, has planned from the beginning that He would create a world where

His creation would live in harmony, giving Him the honor that He properly deserves as their

King. He is the essence of the greatest and grandest honor possible. He gave His first creation of

mankind, Adam and Eve, the right and honor to represent His rule over the created world. They

were to be adopted into His family.

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[81] Eph. 1:3, 5.

**Man's Disobedience Resulted in Social Disharmony**. As Paul continued in his letter, he

reminded his readers of the time that they were separated from this blessing (Eph 2:12). As

Georges describes it, "Adam and Eve were disloyal to God. They forfeited divine honor to

pursue a self-earned honor. Their disloyalty to God created shame, so they hid and covered

themselves. Moreover, their sin dishonored God. God lost face."[82] They thought that they knew

how to run this world better than their Creator, who had previously warned that disobedience

leads to death, separation from the Source of Life. When God banished them, they did not

physically die, but they could not be a part of God's family. Mankind descended from them, and

shame was not only ascribed to them but was increased as they forgot their place as creatures and

acted like the Creator. Their disobedience to God's way of living caused a history of social

disorder and harmony.

**God Restores Man's Honor by Taking Their Shame onto Himself, Bringing Man**

**Back to His Family**. Amidst this, God in His kindness chose a man named Abraham that

through his descendants, would carry out His original plan. Through them, other nations would

be blessed. They too would be blessed if they obeyed God as their King. However, like Adam,

they continued to be disloyal.

At the right time in history, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ whose very essence is like His

Father, full of glory and honor, to be part of this shameful lineage of Abraham to carry out His

plan. He brought into effect the plan of restoration by taking the shame of humanity upon

Himself and died the death they deserved. God approved of Jesus' death by raising Him to life,

exalting His reputation so that all may know He is their Savior and Lord.

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[82] Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, And Fear Cultures* (Time Press, 2014), 38.

His death on the cross paved a way for His chosen people and all other nations to return

back to be a part of God's family. This was what Paul meant when he said, "For through him we

both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but

you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:18-19).

**Greater Eternal Honor Awaits from the Heavenly Father**! Paul wrote that it was

because of God's great love that He restored face to those who believed in Him, not because of

anything they did to try to gain face with God:

> But God, being *rich in mercy*, because of the *great love with which he loved us*, *even when we were dead* in our trespasses, *made us alive together with Christ* – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.[83]

He did not just bring back those who believed in Him to His family again. He gladly

announced that there will be greater honor awaiting them after their lifetime in this world. This

honor is greater than any kind of honor one can achieve in this world, because it comes from the

Source of all honor. This is radically different from the cultural narrative of filial piety. Instead

of dutiful obedience to all that the parents require, even pass their death, the Christian story of

filial piety calls for an obedience that, as Arnold puts it, "transcends the parental 'because I said

so' to a motivation rooted in a respect for the Lord Jesus Christ himself."[84] An example is given

from a Chinese man who became a follower of Christ, "Mother, I do want to honor your word. I

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[83] Eph. 2:4-7.

[84] Arnold, *Ephesians*, 415.

wish I could obey you, but I cannot follow you in this matter because I have believed in the

Lord."[85] It is a matter of loving God more, not loving the parents less.

### Conclusion

Imagine journeying through the present age of Malaysian culture. What would it look

like? What kind of narratives would be heard in the streets? How does Christianity tell a better

narrative? What kind of apologetic maps would be drawn for the interlocutor encountered in the

streets, marketplaces, or office buildings? These are the questions that the Inside Out apologetic

method seeks to answer by going *into* a person's story, engaging its cultural narratives, and

leading them *out* to the Gospel as more than just *a* better story, but *the* best story. Cultural

narratives that are surveyed in this thesis include a religious pluralistic "all-roads-lead-to-

heaven" and a dutiful devotion to the family narratives. Navigating through each narrative, the

Inside Out method tells a better story of worship and obedience to a greater God who rightly

deserves all praise and glory.

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[85] Watchman Nee. "Miscellaneous Records of the Kuling Training (1)." *Living Stream Ministry*, Accessed March 18, 2023, https://bibleread.online/all-books-by-Watchman-Nee-and-Witness-Lee/book-collected-works-of-watchman-nee-the-set-3-vol-59-miscellaneous-records-of-the-kuling-training-1-Watchman-Nee-read-online/24/.

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