Teaching Apologetics to non-Western Learners

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Abstract

Apologetics is an indispensable tool for discipleship and evangelism and should be included in Bible school and seminary curricula. However, the task of teaching apologetics in a non-Western culture or to students with a non-Western worldview has its difficulties and challenges. From the perspective of teaching at a seminary in Thailand, the author shares some principles for teaching apologetics to non-Western students. Challenges include teaching to the wrong question, considering worldview assumptions, learning from students, and finding resources.

Key words: Apologetics; intercultural; curriculum; Thailand

Introduction

Apologetics is frequently rejected as irrelevant or even counterproductive in non-Western contexts. While it is true that apologetics as it has been conducted in the past, is generally identified with Western theology… properly construed, apologetics is unavoidable and that developing an informed and culturally sensitive apologetic is an indispensable task for the non-Western church. (Netland, 1988, p. 289)

Seekers have questions, and believers will continue to have questions as they study and grow in their faith. Seeing many Thai Buddhists become believers in Christ over the years, the process is often long, as seekers struggle with questions and issues — cognitive, social, cultural, and spiritual— before becoming convinced of the truth of the Christian message. I have found apologetics, or the presentation of reasons for the faith, to be an important part of that process (1 Pet. 3:15). Thus, I have developed an apologetics curriculum for a non-Western (specifically Thai context) that addresses the needs and questions of non-Western learners and students at the seminary level.

As Netland (1988) has asserted, apologetics is an indispensable tool for discipleship and evangelism and should be included in Bible school and seminary curriculum in both Western and non-Western countries. Some scholars have wrestled with how to approach apologetics cross-culturally (Netland, 1988; Detzler & Potter, 2011; Van den Toren, 2010, 2011).

In the seminary setting, instructors usually use one (or more) of five methodologies: classical, evidentialist, cumulative case methodology, reformed epistemology, and presuppositional apologetics (Cowen, 2000). Yet these methodologies are all from a Western modernist perspective, and do not always address the questions that non-Western students are asking.

This is a practical paper and not a theoretical examination of apologetic approaches — Western or otherwise. My goal in this article is to help instructors and professors rethink how they present some apologetics material as they take into consideration the cultural background of non-Western learners. Many students in Western universities and seminaries come from non-Western cultures and professors need to consider the questions and challenges these students confront in their context.

As a professor in a non-Western context (Thailand), my goal as a professor is not just to teach students to defend the faith and answer the difficult questions people ask. My desire is to develop scholars and thinkers who will develop new apologetic approaches that are relevant and effective within their non-Western cultural context. Every time I teach apologetics, I learn from my students and adjust the curriculum to reflect more accurately the thinking and questions of my students, and that thinking has changed over the years as new generations have different questions and presuppositions.

Apologetics is an important subject and needs to be taught in our churches as well as our Bible schools and seminaries. However, professors and teachers of apologetics need to take into consideration the worldview assumptions and actual questions that majority world students ask and will face in their churches.

The Three Essentials

Netland (1998) defined three essentials of apologetics that must be integrated into any course or presentation of this topic.

> (a) clarification of the essentials of the Christian message in response to accepted distortions of the gospel, (b) informed and appropriate response to specific criticisms of the Christian faith, and (c) a positive presentation of the gospel with the intent of eliciting a favorable response from an initially uncommitted target audience. (p. 290)

These three elements of apologetics will be worked out differently depending on the cultural context of the learners. The essentials of the Christian message are universal, but how we contextualize the message in response to cultural dimensions will be different.

For example, a course in apologetics may not want to begin, as is typical in a Western context, with evidence for the existence of God. Instead, it may start with a clear presentation of the gospel in distinction to prevailing ideas and worldviews. For example, in Thailand, Christians are held in high esteem. Christianity is an honorable religion that teaches good moral values, but so does every other religion. A Thai person might exclaim that all religions are good and teach good moral values. Thus, the apologist must show how Christianity is different and unique from other religions. How is Christianity different from Buddhism or from Islam? What is unique about the Christian faith?

Next, we must identify the specific criticisms of Christianity. I have found the main criticism of Christianity in Thailand is neither its traditional or non-modern moral foundation, nor the assertion of Jesus as God, nor the problem of evil, rather it is that Christianity is perceived as a foreign religion inappropriate for the Thai people (Hughes, 1996; Saiyasak, 2003; Tangsirisatian, 1999). To address these criticisms, I present Christianity as originating in a non-Western context, a non-Western religion emerging from the Middle East that holds values and traditions that are compatible with Thai values. All true statements. Judaism and Christianity grew out of a Near-Eastern cultural context that has more in common with Asia than the modern West (See Richards, & O'Brien 2012). Additionally, I introduce studetns to the long history of Christianity in Asia to demonstrate that Christianity is not solely a European or American religion (Frykenberg, 2008; Jenkins, 2009; Latourette, 1945; Moffett, 1998; Philip, 1998). Christianity was established in China as early as 631 CE and churches were established in Southeast Asia possibly as early as 500 CE (Latourette, 1945; Jenkins, 2009).

Students from Africa, South America, or the Middle East will encounter different criticisms of Christianity. For example, in a Muslim context, defending the deity of Jesus is important as is defining what we mean by calling Jesus the Son of God. Instructors need to be familiar with the cultural backgrounds of their students to address the questions and challenges they will face.

Finally, how we present the gospel to elicit a positive response will change from context to context. My course in Bangkok includes a review of research into how Thai Buddhists become Christian (Visser, 2008; Zehner, 2003; Hilderbrand, 2020) and an evaluation of methods and approaches that do not work (Martin & Visser, 2012, Dahlfred, 2020).

In the Thai context, calling for decisions or encouraging people to pray the sinner's prayer can be counterproductive as most Thai people have little knowledge of Jesus when called on to make a decision (Hilderbrand 2022). The better approach is to follow up with personal interaction and study so that a Thai person will learn more about who Jesus is and be prepared to make an informed commitment. In summary, apologetics should be practical and not just theoretical.

Challenges

Some of the struggles I have faced teaching apologetics in Thailand may be helpful to others who are teaching learners from a non-Western context. I address some of these challenges below.

Teaching to the Wrong Questions

A mistake that teachers of apologetics may make in a cross-cultural setting is to teach to the wrong questions. We may answer questions that no one is asking. One of those questions deals with the existence of God. This is a central question in the West, but not so much in Thailand. True, in Bangkok, atheism is on the rise so I do address these questions; but my emphasis is more on identity of the God of the Bible than it is on the existence of God.

One question asked by Thai people (and many non-Westerners) is "Who is the God of the Bible?" Where does He fit in the pantheon of gods and spirits that we know in our culture? How is this deity relevant to my people? Apologists must defend the Christian God as the "God of gods." "For the Lord [Yahweh] your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God (Deut. 10:17 ESV). Jesus is the "King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 19:16, ESV). The Christian God rules and reigns over all other gods. "God has taken his

place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods, he holds judgment" (Ps. 82:1, ESV).

In the classical apologetic sense, we must argue that the Christian God is the only self-existent being (aseity) who created everything we see and everything we do not see (Col. 1:16) including spirits and other gods.

Embracing the spiritual worldview of the "majority world," we can use the Old Testament to show that the Christian God is supreme. Spiritual struggles are analogous to the contest between Yahweh and Baal (1 Kgs. 17-18) or between Yahweh and Dagon (1 Sam. 5-6). We should not deny the existence of other gods or spirits (1 Cor. 8:4-5; Eph. 6:12) as this would be counterproductive in most non-Western contexts. We seek to show that the Christian God (Jesus as Yahweh) is the supreme God who created all things and controls all things whether in the spiritual realm or on earth.

We must also be careful about answering questions that would cause more confusion than clarity. Raising the inerrancy controversy can be confusing for students from a non-Western culture. According to Poythress (2012), inerrancy is an issue that is important to people with Western modernist assumptions — so it may not be as relatable to people from other cultural backgrounds. This is not to take away from the necessity and seriousness of defending the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture. If the Bible is trustworthy and authoritative, it logically follows that Scripture is inerrant in all that it affirms (Chicago Statements of Biblical Inerrancy). Professors should present the evidence for the reliability of Scriptures, but depending on the context, they may not elaborate on the historical Western, modernist debate.

Considering Worldview Assumptions

Worldview assumptions must be considered when developing appropriate curriculum, illustrations, parallels, or correlations. For instance, Westerners tend to be more unitarian in their approach to deity and often struggle with defending the Trinity. However, Trinitarian concepts are more easily integrated into many traditional Asian worldviews. Although care must be taken to avoid syncretism, I have found that Thai cultural stories contain trinitarian touch points that can be used as illustrations (Hilderbrand & Sritrakool, 2020), not to mention the well-known example of Siamese twins that delineate the concept of two persons sharing a common body (substance).

Furthermore, we must evaluate our students' understanding of the supernatural. Westerners are often very skeptical, adhering to a more materialistic worldview. However, in many non-Western contexts, the supernatural and miracles are accepted and assumed. In my present context, it is common to hear reports of holy men who claim to heal, levitate, and know the latest winning lottery numbers. Spirit doctors cast out demons from buildings and people. Fortune tellers are ubiquitous. People flock to idols of multiple gods to seek healing and blessing. The spirit world is part of everyday life and an element of lived experience.

Non-Westerners rarely question if miracles are real. They want to know if the Christian God can do the same. Is the Christian God as powerful or more powerful than the gods of their culture or religion? How do we teach this in an apologetics course? In my course we discuss prayer for healing and miracles as part of the apologetic project (Acts 14:3, 15:12; 1 Cor. 2:4; Heb. 2:4).

Again, the shift in emphasis is not only giving evidence for the existence of the Christian God or the reality of the supernatural, but towards defining and defending the Christian God as the supreme power who has authority over all other powers and spiritual entities (God's sovereignty).

Learning from Students

Non-Western students, especially those from an honor/shame culture, often do not ask questions or dare to engage with the professor (Ng, 2019). The assumption held by many students is that the teacher must teach, and the student must listen, learn, and accept, sometimes even memorize what the teacher says. However, instructors must learn from their students about the apologetic issues, problems, and challenges Christians are facing in their ministries, especially if the instructor comes from a more Western cultural orientation. Small group discussions in class and joint group answers help break down the hierarchical barrier as no one person is ever singled out. Answers are given as a group, so no one loses face.

Breaking students into discussion groups, I have students discuss the top questions and challenges they are hearing from church members and seekers? What are people asking about Christianity? What challenges are they facing? I learn something new every time and we learn together in class how to address those issues biblically, philosophically, culturally, and practically. Students, especially those who are in ministry already, have knowledge and experience that should be utilized for the whole.

Finding Resources

Do not overreact or overcompensate by rejecting all Western arguments and resources. Western materialistic skepticism is global — especially among urbanites throughout the world. Plus, many Western apologetic resources are very useful, even in a cross-cultural or non-Western context. Good arguments are still good arguments. However, the instructor should use wisdom to evaluate and maybe modify they ways in which some Western resources are presented. More material must be developed from a non-Western perspective, answering the apologetic questions of non-Westerners. In Thailand, we are producing some of these resources including apologetic videos in Thai that are posted online and shared. Scholarly material is needed, but churches also need resources at the popular level (i.e., YouTube videos and podcasts).

Conclusion

Apologetics should be an essential part of any biblically-based training — whether formal, informal, or non-formal. Christians should be trained to answer the questions their culture is asking and to defend the faith against cognitive and cultural challenges. We should not reject the giants of apologetics that have gone before, but we must adapt and adjust our material to fit the cultural worldview of our students.

Our role as instructors is to challenge subsequent generations to think critically about their own culture. Students should learn to evaluate and properly confront the challenges, questions, and criticisms of Christianity within their own cultural contexts. Thus, an apologetic can be developed that lowers the barriers to considering Christianity, and that strengthens the faith of believers. This is an exciting time for the non-Western church where Christianity is growing and expanding, people are wanting to know more, and people need rational, well-thought-out answers to their questions.

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