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Discerning lessons of St. Paul's speech on Areopagus: Towards a Buberian cross-cultural dialogue in Indonesia

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi landasan teologis dan misiologis untuk dialog lintas budaya dalam lanskap pluralistik Indonesia. Mengambil dari amanat Lukas dalam Lukas 19:10, penulis berpendapat bahwa "pencarian jiwa-jiwa yang terhilang" membutuhkan metode kontekstualisasi yang terperinci, seperti yang dimodelkan oleh St. Paulus dalam kunjungan dan pidatonya di Areopagus. Dengan mengidentifikasi "altar bagi yang tidak dikenal" dalam mitologi Jawa—khususnya jika kita mempertimbangkan pemerintahan triad Bathara Guru, Semar, dan Togog (tanpa harus menggunakan sinkretisme)—dan memanfaatkan metafora matematika seperti cincin Borromean untuk menjelaskan sifat gotong royong (kooperatif) dari kemanusiaan yang saling terkait, sebuah jembatan dibangun untuk dialog ala M. Buber (cf. Paulus, 2006). Artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun doktrin-doktrin sensitif seperti Tritunggal dan Kristus sebagai Putra Bapa tetap menjadi salah satu batu sandungan bagi dialog misi yang serius, doktrin-doktrin tersebut dapat diperkenalkan sebagai "bagian yang hilang" yang memenuhi dan menawarkan jembatan, alih-alih hanya bertentangan, dengan kerinduan asli dan anomali sejarah.

ABSTRACT

The present article explores a theological and missiological basis for cross-cultural dialogue in the pluralistic landscape of Indonesia. Drawing from the Lukan mandate in Luke 19:10, the author argues that the "search for the lost" requires a sophisticated method of contextualization modelled by St. Paul at the Areopagus. By

Kata kunci:

Dialog lintas budaya, pidato St Paulus di Aeropagus, kasih karunia Tuhan, masyarakat shalom, mitologi Jawa kuno, Semar, wayang kulit

identifying "altars to the unknown" within Javanese mythology—specifically if we consider the triadic governance of Bathara Guru, Semar, and Togog (without having to recourse to kind of syncretism)—and utilizing mathematical metaphors such as the Borromean ring to explain the *gotong royong* (cooperative) nature of intertwined humanity, a bridge is built for Buberian type dialogue (cf. Paulus, 2006). The article suggests that while sensitive doctrines like the Trinity and the Sonship of Christ remain stumbling blocks for serious mission discussions, they can be introduced as the "missing pieces" that fulfil and offer a bridge, rather than merely contradict, indigenous longings and historical anomalies.

Keywords:
Cross-cultural dialogue, St. Paul's speech at the Aeropagus, God's grace, shalom society, Javanese mythology, Semar, shadow puppets

Introduction

The missiological heartbeat of the New Testament is captured succinctly in the words of Jesus: "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). For the contemporary church in Indonesia, this verse serves as a categorical imperative. It suggests that the "lost" are not merely those who are geographically distant, but those who are culturally and conceptually "unreachable" due to deeply entrenched worldviews.

To "seek" in the Indonesian context is to engage in an intentional, rigorous intellectual and spiritual journey into the heart of Nusantara's diverse traditions. It requires a refusal to give up on groups that seem insulated by ancient mythologies or modern secular utility. Instead, we are called to find the "*redemptive analogies*" already embedded in the soil of their history.

In the present article, we discuss among other things, how to discern lessons from St. Paul's speech at the Areopagus, a meeting place in the ancient Athena. Surely

there are already many articles discussing this theme, that this writer does not repeat all the similar materials (interested readers are advised to see, for instance, Hemer, 1989; Lontoh, 2025; Ribeiro, 1999). What is more interesting to this writer, is how to discern lessons of that St Paul's speech, especially with regards to continuous debates on the history of New Testament study and also Earliest Christianity, how they were formed etc., in particular considering comments and conclusions made by other researchers (of NT studies), suggesting that rationality and liberalism have eroded Christianity up to this time (Bruce, 1979; Ederle, 2011; Gresham Machen, 1923; Hwang, 2011). While for sure we would not address completely such a broad topic in this short review, it is our hope that the present article is partly to recover what is missing from other studies on this theme (see also, Christiano, 2024).

Methodology

This short comparative study utilises a qualitative, an approach rooted in a structural-functional framework. This methodology is designed to systematically categorise along with several social and historical examples regarding cooperative dynamics, the archetypal figures of Semar and Jesus Christ through a two-tiered analytical lens:

1. **Structural and Functional Analysis:** This examines the sociological and narrative roles of the figures, focusing on the paradox of divine power

manifested through lowliness, their roles as mediators, and their function as moral pedagogues.

2. **Ontological and Soteriological Distinction:** This addresses the metaphysical reality (*ontology*) and the cosmic outcome (*soteriology*) of each figure, distinguishing between the cyclic maintenance of cosmic balance in *Kejawen* and the linear, redemptive history of Christian theology.

The primary data corpus comprises canonical *Wayang Purwa* narratives and Javanese mystical texts for Semar, as well as the canonical New Testament (specifically, the Synoptic Gospels and Pauline epistles) for Jesus Christ. Although there are many narrative and figure variants across different kinds of Wayang, Wayang Purwa is the oldest and most original *Wayang* that has survived to this day.

Results

2. The Areopagus Precedent: St. Paul's Method of Contextualization

When St. Paul stood before the mostly Stoic philosophers in Athens (Acts 17), he did not begin with a condemnation of their idolatry. Instead, he demonstrated a masterful "theology of sight." He first walked through their city, observed their objects of worship, and found a specific point of contact: the altar to the *Agnostos Theos*—the Unknown God.

Paul's method offers three significant lessons for the Indonesian mission:

1. Observation over Condemnation: Paul studied the Athenian "mythos" until he found a crack where the Gospel could enter.
2. Affirmation of Intuition: He acknowledged that their poets and philosophers had correctly intuited aspects of the Divine (e.g., "In him we live and move and have our being").
3. The Filling of the Void: Paul presented Christ not as a foreign deity, but as the specific identity of the God they were already seeking in ignorance.

In Indonesia, every ethnic group possesses its own "altars." These are often found in folklores or ancestral stories that the modern adherents themselves may find difficult to articulate or "unpalatable" in a rationalist age, yet these stories hold the "missing piece" of their cultural identity.

3. Finding the *Agnostos Theos* in Indonesian Mythology

The Javanese worldview, particularly through the *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppet) tradition, offers a profound "altar" in its conception of the celestial and terrestrial hierarchy. The Javanese folklore tells us a known *triad* of Bathara Guru (the supreme teacher/ruler of the heavens), Semar (the divine buffoon who dwells among humans to prevent the *satriya* from straying), and Togog (the guardian of the lower realms),

and that mythology reflects a deep-seated intuition of "three-ness" in divine governance.

As V.-M. Kärkkäinen notes in *Tritunggal dan pluralisme agama*, we should be careful not to fall *into easy syncretism*. Bathara Guru is not the Father, nor is Semar the Spirit in a strict dogmatic sense. However, this "weak parallelism" is a gift for dialogue. It reveals that the Javanese heart already understands that the Divine is not a monolithic, distant unit, but a relational reality that cares for the sky, the earth, and the depths.

This is where the missionary can introduce the "Son of God" as the true bridge. Just as ancient Chinese annual records (such as the *History of the Latter Han*) recorded celestial omens—the sun and moon being eclipsed—during the exact period of the crucifixion, suggesting that the "*Son of the Most High*" had died for the sins of the people, we can point to these global "coincidences."

3.1 The Celestial Witness: The "Agnostos Theos" in Ancient Chinese Records

To further illustrate St. Paul's method of finding the "Unknown God" within a culture's own archives, we look toward the East. Beyond the shadow puppets of Java, there exists a startling historical "altar" in the official records of the Han Dynasty.

According to the *Hou Hanshu* (History of the Latter Han), specifically in the *Annals of Emperor Guangwu*, there are records of celestial phenomena that occurred

during the final years of the Emperor's reign (cf. Fan Ye). One particular entry (Vol. 1, No. 6) describes a significant solar eclipse followed by a halo:

"In the month of June, on the day of Gui Hai, the last day of the month, there was a solar eclipse. The Emperor avoided the Main Hall, suspended all military activities, and issued an edict of self-reproach... Yin and Yang have mistakenly switched, and the sun and moon were eclipsed. The sins of all the people are now on one man. Pardon is proclaimed to all under heaven." (cf. Fan Ye)

Remarkably, Western and Chinese scholars have synchronized these dates to approximately **31–33 AD**, the period of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Another record from the same era notes: *"The sun was eclipsed... a man from Heaven died."*

In a cross-cultural mission to the East, this is not merely a curiosity; it is a theological bridge. We can say to the seeker: "Your own ancestors, thousands of miles from Jerusalem, recorded the cosmic mourning for the death of the 'Son of the Most High.' You have already recognized his sacrifice in your history; let us now recognize his name in your heart." This fills the "missing piece" of their historical narrative, showing that the Gospel is not a Western import, but a global event that shook the foundations of every palace.

Similarly, we can tell the Javanese seeker: "The Semar you love, who walks with the suffering, is a shadow of the true King who became a servant to save the lost."

4. Borromean Rings and science behind *Gotong Royong*

Moving from mythology to social logic, we find a second starting point in the mathematical concept of the *Borromean ring*. In this topological structure, three rings are linked such that if any one ring is cut, all three fall apart. Historically used as a metaphor for the Trinity, it also serves as a perfect model for *Intertwined Humanity* (Christianto & Smarandache, 2025).

In Indonesia, this is lived out as *gotong royong*. It is a *soft rejection* of Bentham's utilitarianism, which seeks only the maximization of individual utility. Instead, *gotong royong*—much like the Swedish concept of *tillsammans*—posits that human flourishing is inherently collective.

In a previous work, *Koinomics* (Christianto, 2022), this writer argues that the economy of the Kingdom of God is not based on scarcity and competition, but on the "intertwin-ness" of the community.

Koinomics: Toward Geometry of the "Intertwined" Economy

The second pillar of this missiological approach is **Koinomics**, a term derived from *Koinonia* (fellowship/communion) and *Oikonomia* (stewardship/management). As detailed in *Koinomics* (2022), this is a direct paradox, in contrast to the "homo

economicus" view of Western utilitarianism (cf. the death of Homo Economicus, Peter Fleming's book).

Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism suggests that society is merely a collection of individuals seeking to maximize their own pleasure. In contrast, the Indonesian tradition of *gotong royong* suggests that the "Self" only exists in relation to the "Other." This is perfectly modelled by the Borromean Ring.

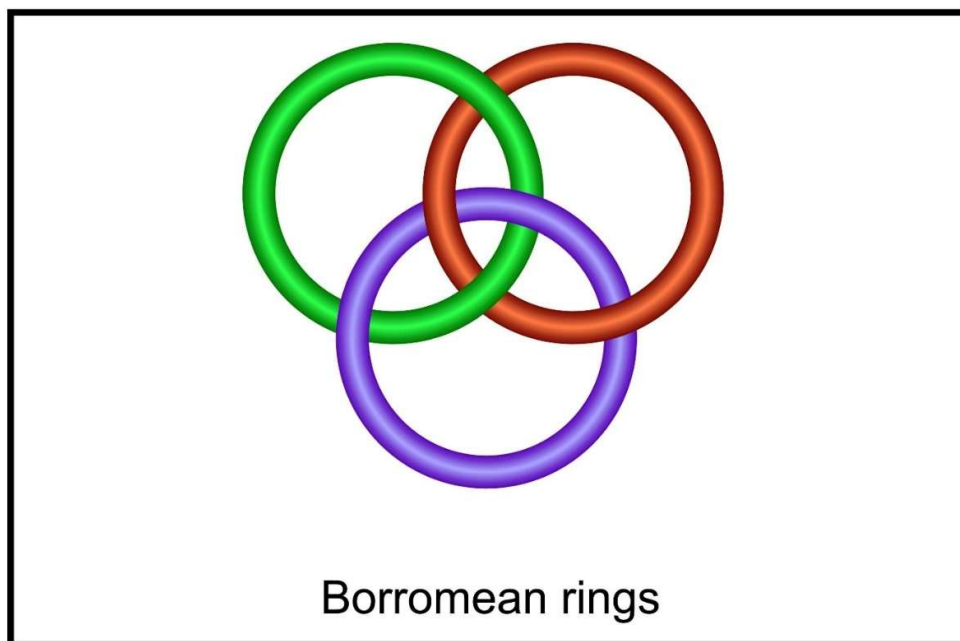


Figure 1. Borromean ring depiction.¹

A Plausible Theological Mathematics of Cooperation:

- Indivisibility: In a Borromean structure, the rings are not woven together in a standard chain. They are laid over one another such that their link is purely

¹ Source: Shutterstock

structural. If you remove the "Divine" ring, the "Human" and "Nature" rings fall apart.

- Non-Utilitarian Value: In *Koinomics*, the value of a transaction is not measured just by the profit of the individual (utility), but by the strengthening of the neat link between the rings.
- **Gotong Royong:** Whether in the Swedish term: "*tillsammans*" (togetherness) or the Nusantara "gotong royong," the underlying logic is the same: we are "intertwined." If my neighbor's ring is cut, my own stability is compromised.

This mathematical metaphor allows us to discuss the **Trinity** (the ultimate perichoresis model of intertwin-ness) without immediately triggering the "sensitive" tense debates that were often found in religious debate. We start with the economy of the village—the shared harvest, the communal repair of a roof—and show that this earthly *gotong royong* is a finite reflection of the infinite *Koinonia* of the Triune God.

When *Koinomics* was first published in 2022, the objective was to provide a theological alternative to the wide-accepted utilitarianism of modern economics. We sought to ground the Indonesian tradition of *gotong royong* in connection with the *divine relationality of the Trinity*. However, as we move toward 2030, a new dimension of this work has emerged: the historical and cosmic witness.

For those readers, who begin to ask: whether what we discuss here on intertwined humanity, gotong-royong etc, is merely a theoretical exploration or *a real world* phenomenon, let us point to at least 3 considerations, as follows:

- a. From a viewpoint of Earliest Christianity period, studies reveal there were social fabric at the time that were likely to contribute to what the Book of Acts chapter 2 tell us about how first Church in Jerusalem gathered and spreading the Gospel with high spirit. In modern time, scholars also reveal what makes Asian people are quite resilient in doing their economics matters, they called it "*a Bamboo network*." That can be linked to the concept of intertwined humanity (cf. Stambaugh & Balch, 1997; Weidenbaum & Hughes, 1996).
- b. And in recent times, there is also a subfield of economics studies, called economics anthropology, which reveals among other things, phenomena such as *suq* (read as "souk") in Morocco (cf. Clifford Geertz²), and also similar grassroot markets which are likely to attract visitors from other places, can also be found, for example in Jerusalem,³ and elsewhere.
- c. And in ancient time, especially in East Java, the eastern part of Java Island, there is known "*pasar kramat*" (*sacred market*), which can be found in Mojokerto, Banyuwangi, or Kediri in East Java, until these days. The buyers

² Clifford Geertz. *SŪQ: GEERTZ ON THE MARKET*. Chicago: Hau Books, published by the Society for Ethnographic Theory, 2022.

³ M.M. Foqara, "THE TRADITIONAL MARKETS IN JERUSALEM, A STUDY ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY," EGJSW Vol. 75, Issue 2, p. 15-25.

and sellers appear to use special coins formed by wooden pieces called *gobog* (see Photograph 1). From what this writer observed: the phenomenon of sacred market reveals a kind of relational-grounded-non-utilitarian approach to market which is quite distinct to modern market which focuses solely to maximize utility. In retrospect, that observation reveals another implication of intertwined nature of humanity in traditional towns in Java Island, which have been put to practice since several centuries ago, perhaps since the period of Majapahit.

Concluding, the "intertwined" nature of humanity is not merely a social preference or a local custom of Nusantara. It seems to be a sign of a universal reality signalled by the Heavens themselves. As previously noted, the present article introduces the "Agnostos Theos" (Unknown God) as recorded in the Han Dynasty records — the *Hou Hanshu*. By documenting the exact moment the "Son of the Most High" died for the sins of the people, the ancient Chinese records provide a historical anchor for the "missing piece" in our cultural myths.



Photograph 1. Situation on pasar kramat in East Java (private documentation).

5. Toward a Buberian Dialogue

The objective of this contextualization is to move toward what Martin Buber called the **I-Thou** relationship. In an **I-It** relationship, the missionary treats the "other" as a target for conversion—an object to be manipulated. In an **I-Thou** dialogue, there is mutual respect and "living presence." (cf. Paulus, 2006).

By starting with *gotong royong* and shared mythological echoes, we create a safe space. We acknowledge that the Trinity and the Sonship of Christ are sensitive, often misunderstood themes. However, when framed within the "intertwined" logic

of the Borromeo rings or the "servant-clown" archetype of Semar, these doctrines lose their "foreignness."⁴

In our forthcoming article, among other things we discuss a hidden dimension of Isaiah 53, re-reading the text not just as a prophecy about a suffering servant, but as a universal typology of the "*Sacred Servant*." This archetypal figure manifests across diverse cultures and mythologies, representing a profound, beyond-historical truth about the nature of divine service, sacrifice, and redemption. (Chandra & Christianto, 2026).

We can also discuss further, whenever the ones we speak to are ready, that conventional understanding of Isaiah 53 within Christian theology is deeply rooted in the New Testament. The early Christian community, seeking to understand the death and resurrection of Jesus, found a powerful interpretive key in this prophetic passage. Passages like "*He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities*" (Isaiah 53:5) and "He poured out his soul unto death" (Isaiah 53:12) are seen as direct foretelling of Christ's crucifixion. The text's emphasis on a vicarious atonement, where the servant's suffering redeems others, forms the very foundation of the doctrine of salvation. This interpretation is supported by numerous New Testament citations and allusions. The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is reading Isaiah 53 when Philip explains the gospel to him. The Apostle Peter, in

⁴ See our forthcoming article, R. Igusti Chandra & V. Christianto, "Semar, the Clown Servant, as a bridge to introduce Christ to the Javanese: A Comparative Theological Analysis of Semar and Jesus Christ," in review, *Theology J.* (Sage Publishing), 2026.

his first epistle, directly applies the text to Jesus: "*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God*" (1 Peter 3:18).

But that is not all the story that we can grasp from Isaiah chapter 53. Perhaps one of the most compelling parallels to the typology of the Sacred Servant is found in the Javanese figure of Semar. In Javanese mythology, Semar is a central and beloved figure, a clown-servant of the satriya brothers in the **Wayang** puppet plays. He embodies the concept of a figure of immense power who chooses to be "lowly." This typology directly resonates with Isaiah 53, where the servant, despite his divine origin and redemptive purpose, is described in terms that suggest a lack of physical distinction or worldly power. "*He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground*" (Isaiah 53:2).

More than that, the same parallelism, while surely Semar is not ontologically similar to Jesus Christ who descended from Father in Heaven Himself, seems to imply more on Eschatological meaning, or the way things are comprehended through the end times. Eschatology—the study of the end times—is often a source of theological friction, especially in a nation as religiously dynamic as Indonesia. Traditional Christian eschatology, with its focus on final judgment, the second coming of Christ, and the establishment of a new kingdom, can clash conceptually with Kejawen's emphasis on cycles of cosmic balance (*keseimbangan*) and spiritual unity (*manunggaling kawula Gusti*).

The Semar-Christ comparative model offers a **more grounded** approach for teaching eschatology by anchoring the debate in shared principles of spiritual phenomenology rather than dogmatic difference.

A. Kenosis and the Nature of Final Authority

The principle of Kenosis (self-emptying) demonstrated by Christ, and mirrored by Semar's voluntary descent from primordial deity (Sang Hyang Ismaya) to a grotesque servant (*punakawan*), provides a unifying narrative for the nature of final authority. The eschatological Christ is often portrayed as the King of Kings, yet his authority derives from his ultimate act of humility (the cross/passion). Similarly, Semar's authority to maintain cosmic balance is only activated through his state of subservience.

This shared functional structure allows teachers to emphasize that the final, most complete, and most powerful authority is realized not through raw force, but through **perfected service and justice**. This resonates deeply with Javanese cultural values that equate true authority with guardianship (*pamong*) and humility, making the New Testament vision of the triumphant Christ accessible through a familiar cultural lens.

B. The Mediation of Cosmic Balance (*Keseimbangan*)

For Kejawen believers, the end is not an abrupt break, but a culmination of spiritual efforts to restore *keseimbangan*. Semar's interventions in the Wayang are mini-eschatologies—small corrections to prevent the total collapse of order. In this context, Christ's eschatological role as the *Alpha and Omega* can be framed not just as destruction and new creation, but as the *ultimate* and *final* act of restoring cosmic balance—the definitive mediation that Semar's entire existence foreshadows but cannot ultimately complete.

The Wayang narrative holds that Semar is the older brother of Bathara Guru, a primordial deity who failed a challenge or made an error, resulting in his grotesque, earthy form and eternal servitude. This narrative of a high celestial being cast down into low, serving humanity, bears a striking structural resemblance to the narrative of the *shepherds* or *watchers* found in the **Book of Enoch** (part of the DSS corpus),⁵ who descended to earth and intermingled with humanity, becoming corrupted or taking on corporeal form (cf. see for instance, the sacred narrative in Genesis book, chapter 6).

In this hypothetical lens:

- The Fall: Semar's descent and permanent state of *punakawan* (servitude) mirrors the punishment of the fallen celestial beings.
- The Grace of Function: Crucially, Semar's fall does not result in pure

⁵ See for instance, J.T. Milik. *The book of Enoch*.

malevolence; rather, it transforms him into a Pamong (guide/guardian) for the land of Java. His descent is his redemption through service, mirroring the Kenotic principle.

This re-contextualization culminates in a plausible hypothesis: Semar, viewed through the apocryphal lens, must ultimately repent and surrender to the **King of Kings, Jesus the Messiah**, at the eschaton. This narrative holds profound significance as a declaration of "Good News" for Indonesian people too.

6. A prologue to the Borromean-type Dialogue: A Practitioner's Guide

For the churches in Indonesia, the challenge is often how to begin. Readers may wish to use the following framework to navigate the sensitive transition from "common tradition" to "theological truth."

Phase 1: The Altar of Cooperation (*Gotong Royong*)

- The Entry Point: Begin with the lived experience of community work. Do not start with "The Trinity." Start with "The Ring."
- The Metaphor: Use a visual of three circles—Nature, Humanity, and the Divine.
- The Buberian Shift: Ask, "If we remove the Divine from our village's *gotong royong*, why does the human intertwin-ness eventually fray into greed?"

Show that the "Third Ring" (the Divine) is the invisible tension that keeps the other two from falling apart.

Phase 2: The Redemptive Analogy (*Wayang and History*)

- The Shadow Pivot: When discussing spiritual governance, acknowledge the Javanese intuition of Bathara Guru, Semar, and Togog.
- The Bridge: Introduce the "Son of God" not as a foreign concept, but as the *True Semar*—the divine servant who truly "walks the Earth" to prevent the *satriya* (humanity) from making the ultimate mistake.
- The Historical Witness: Share the story of the Han Dynasty eclipse. Frame it as: "Your ancestors saw the sun go dark when the Son of God died. They knew the 'sins of all the people' were being paid for. That man was Jesus."

Phase 3: The Friendly Closing

- The Invitation: Close not with a demand for immediate dogma, but with an invitation to "*tillsammans*" (togetherness).
- The Logic: "If our history and our community traditions point to this 'Intertwined One,' perhaps we should walk together to learn more about Him too." In that sense, both of us, those who are doing mission and those who listen to him/her, are partners in dialogue, in the sense of Buber and also Hans G. Gadamer (cf. Paulus, 2006).

7. Concluding Remark

For sure, we understood that we could not expect that every dialogue regarding the nature of God will be easy. The "*stumbling block*" of sending the message of the Cross across different backgrounds remains. However, the mission in Indonesia shall be characterized by a "friendly dialogue" that appreciates cross-cultural differences.

By weaving together these two threads—the historical "Son of Heaven" in the East and the mathematical "Intertwin-ness" of the South—the church in Indonesia can offer a "friendly dialogue."

In other words, the best advise we can offer is that, we do not approach the common people of Nusantara as if they are empty vessels. We approach them as people who already possess the shadows of the Truth. We invite them to see that the Jesus we proclaim is the fulfilment of the eclipse their ancestors saw, and the source of the *gotong royong* they practice every day.

For instance, when we approach the common people of Nusantara with the Borromean model, instead of sending a Western concept; we are giving a profound theological name to the "*cooperative dynamics*" they already value in their villages and families.

By starting from the common traditions of working together and the hidden "*altars*" of our ancestors, we fulfil the mandate of Luke 19:10. We seek the lost not by

shouting from a distance, but by walking beside them, recognizing that the "missing piece" of their story has a name: Jesus Christ.

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