

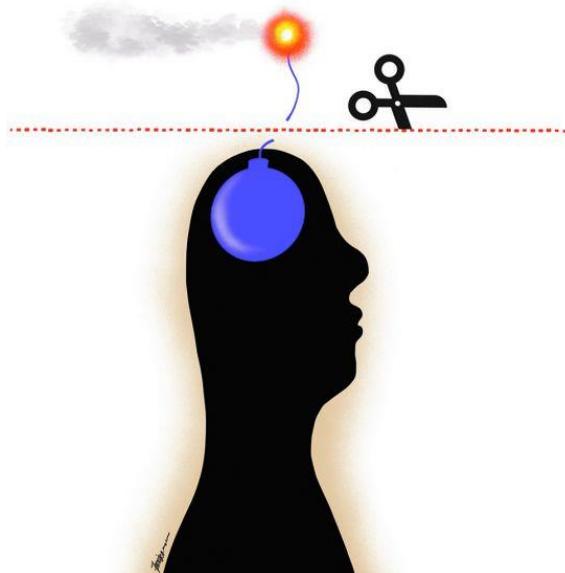
Home Ground

Wake-up call for Christian community

The recent detention of a 16-year-old Protestant Christian boy for plotting terror attacks against Muslims should stir Christians to face up to the extremist fringe of Christian ideologies and take steps to counter them



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Over dinner with the author of a book on Christian-Muslim relations this week, I ask Ms See Guat Kwee if she was surprised at news that a 16-year-old Protestant Christian boy had been detained for plotting terror attacks on mosques.

Ms See's 2019 book - *Christian-Muslim Relations In Singapore From Independence To Post 9/11* - is based on her master's thesis at Hartford Seminary, a well-known

institute for advancing Christian-Muslim understanding in the United States. I had read her well-researched book over the weekend and wanted to meet her. Was she surprised that a young Christian had been self-radicalised and detained?

Her answer: "Not at all. Whether Christian, Muslim or Buddhist, there is a strain of extremism in each religion. Why would we think that Christianity is exempt?"

She added: "Churches may think their young are well grounded. But no one drinks from a single well. And the Internet is full of places that push certain ideologies that can sound attractive to young people, advocating very bad ideas."

Her response was a stark contrast to that of Pastor Yang Tuck Yoong, the chairman of the Alliance of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of Singapore, with whom I had spent over an hour the same morning. His view: "In the church in Singapore, when this happened, everybody was shocked, because we never expected something like this to happen. Not in Singapore."

He reasoned it thus: No church in Singapore espouses the kind of far right violent ideology that views Muslims as spiritual and physical enemies to be eliminated. Churches here do not subscribe to what has been termed "Christian far right" ideology. They preach love and forgiveness.

He added: "Now with a click of a button, you have so many alternatives and you can listen to the far right stuff, and I can't stop that. But at least what I can do is make sure we provide a good foundation for our young."

At the church he founded, Cornerstone Community Church, youths aged 13 to 20 are split into small groups of about 15 each. Every five small groups belong to a zone; and every five zones belong to a cluster, each with its own pastoral leadership. They give monthly updates on their activities and the state of members' spiritual health. "It is a nearly perfect accountability system," said Pastor Yang with pride. "That is why I can say I am almost certain that this would not happen with a young person in my church."

The church's congregation of about 5,500 are served by 18 pastors. On its website, the church adds that it has "planted" 150 churches, schools, orphanages and bible colleges in 16 different bases around the world.

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN S'PORE

Pastor Yang's confidence is not unfounded. Church leaders in Singapore tend to be moderate in their teachings. Like every other religion, its key teachings are based on love and peace. Many have "formation" or "discipleship" programmes to give their youth a good foundation in the faith.

Many Christians have responded to news of the detention with shock, often with this comment: The youth could not have been influenced by any teaching of a Singapore church, since no church here would support attacking Muslims.

Some ask if the boy, although a Christian, had even gone to church; others wonder if he had personal or psychological issues that made him susceptible to such violent agendas and who would have gone on to surveil mosques, buy a tactical vest and check out weapons to plan the attack.

Government and religious authorities have stressed that this was an isolated case of a youth working alone.

At the same time, however, Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam has highlighted rising right-wing extremism as a worrying development worldwide and expressed concern about such views creeping into Singapore.

He added: "Violent impulses, I've said this many times, are not restricted to any particular racial group or religious group. It can occur among anyone. It's really a question of being exposed to hate speech and then being influenced by it." Fighting such extremism will be a "long battle" for the world and Singapore, he added.

RISING GLOBAL THREAT

Although scholars debate over definitions, right-wing extremists often refer to those who emphasise the superiority of a certain racial, religious or cultural group; and who group together to assert that supremacy in the face of threats from minorities, outsiders or foreigners. (Think of white supremacists in the US against non-white immigrants; Christian supremacists rallying against Muslims; India's nationalist Hindus organising against Muslims and those of other faiths.) At its far-right fringe, these right-wing extremists advocate violence to achieve their goals.

In an article in the Jan 15, 2021 issue of Foreign Policy, national security analyst Heather Ashby warned of the global threat posed by right-wing extremism: "From Brazil to the United States, Hungary to New Zealand, right-wing extremist ideas and groups are posing a grave threat to democratic societies."

In the nearly 20 years since 9/11, as the world focused on the threat from Islamic extremism, right-wing extremist ideas were able to permeate and take root.

Such ideas were fuelled by resentment against rising immigration of foreigners, especially Muslims, and mainstreamed by political parties which won power, including in Europe (Hungary) and Latin America (Brazil). Mr Donald Trump's presidency which culminated in the Jan 6 assault on the US Capitol by his

supporters, galvanised far-right supporters, including Christian groups who see him as protecting America from "secularists".

The Anti-Defamation League in the United States estimates that over the past decade, nearly 75 per cent of extremist-related fatalities in the US might be linked to domestic right-wing extremists; under 25 per cent due to Islamist extremists.

Far-right ideologies have spurred a string of terror attacks: the killing of 77 young people by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway in 2011; the 2015 attack in the US that killed nine black people in a church in South Carolina; and the deadly attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019.

Ms Ashby warns: "Rather than treating right-wing extremism as isolated incidents parochial to particular countries, it is time to recognise it as a global and evolving phenomenon. If the United States and the international community do not quickly mobilise resources to unite against this threat, they may lose an important chance to stem its spread."

THE THREAT WITHIN OUR SHORES

When I spoke to various people this week about the threat posed by right-wing extremists, especially those who espouse Christian origins, I heard a common refrain: "All these have nothing to do with Singapore."

While it is true that such ideas are not widespread here, it is not helpful to too quickly disavow the ideas of right-wing extremists as remote from Singapore and hence not likely to take root here. Whatever church leaders may prefer to believe, the sobering fact remains that those ideas entranced the mind of at least one teenager in Singapore. No one knows if there is another young mind similarly being seduced.

This young man grew up in a multiracial, religiously diverse country, where church leaders preach love. He went to school like any other teenager. And yet he was self-radicalised. He was the first Christian, but not the first youth to be radicalised. Since 2015, seven self-radicalised youths aged 16 to 19 have been picked up for terror-related conduct.

Prior to this, the focus had been on the Muslim community. But every religion has its extremist fringe.

Denial is dangerous. Singaporeans - including Christians and church leaders - have to wake up to the latent threat from right-wing extremism that seeps over cable wires into our homes.

Singapore cannot afford to be complacent. While recognising that right-wing extremism is a cultural import, we should be vigilant about the threat and scan our domestic environment to make sure it does not provide fertile ground for such ideas to take root.

Already, I see a few worrying social trends unfolding in Singapore that may create a nurturing environment for some of those ideas to take root.

First, a growing wave of xenophobia across Singapore, manifest in online discussions, chat groups and private conversations. In particular, the nascent but growing resentment against Indian nationals working in Singapore.

There are racial overtones in such anti-foreigner sentiment. Whether it is race-based or religion-based, attitudes of disdain towards others are the beginning of social problems that can cause conflict.

Xenophobia is fuelled by job anxiety, resentment towards newcomers, and status insecurity - precisely the kind of conditions that fuelled the rise of right-wing political parties elsewhere.

More worrying even than xenophobia is the question of whether religious organisations here are unwittingly inculcating attitudes and beliefs that can push people down the slippery slope towards right-wing ideologies.

Many right-wing ideas are based on beliefs in Christian or white supremacy. There is a conflation of white or Western culture with Christianity.

Some Christians in Singapore may be attracted to arguments they read online, about the superiority of Christian values and cultures. Such a "Christian supremacist" worldview can easily lead the susceptible to view non-Christians as inferior groups to be subordinated or led by superior Christian leaders.

Some Singaporeans have also asked if teachings upheld in some churches here - like the belief that Christianity is the only religion which ensures salvation - are conducive to religious harmony, if they are used as a basis for proselytising. To be sure, what is said of Christianity on this can also be said of other faiths that are similarly exclusivist.

So the same question asked of Muslim teachings and extremism needs to be asked of Christianity. Do some branches of Christian teachings smoothen the spread of exclusivist, extremist ideas that are harmful to multi-religious harmony? This is a complex and extremely uncomfortable question to ponder. And yet it is one that would benefit from more open discussion.

The Catholic church's Archbishop William Goh, for one, believes that the greatest risk of religious fanaticism comes from a hostile and extreme form of secularism. An overly secular society pushes religion into the marginalised, private areas, which leaves less scope for open, public sharing of faith encounters and discussions of commonalities and differences, he says.

"When religions are being privatised, we do not know exactly what the other religions also believe in. I've always advocated that the way to protect everyone, including the secularists, is what the government is doing - to create common space for dialogue so that those from different religions can understand each other and understand too how religion affects politics, government and state."

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

The fact that news of the 16-year-old's detention has been received with relative calm by Muslim groups is evidence of the strong state of inter-religious harmony here. Church leaders, like Pastor Yang, emphasise their friendly ties with Muslim leaders.

The Mufti of Singapore, Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir, said last week: "As a community that has often needed to explain itself and what Islam truly represents, we deeply empathise with your shock and anguish that someone who professes the Christian faith seeks to do the very thing that would desecrate it.

"The young man may be a Protestant Christian, but his hate and deep-seated enmity towards Islam and Muslims, and his anger and violent proclivities stem from far-right and extremist leanings acquired online that have merged with his misguided religious fervour."

It is not scripture and faith, but hate and extremism that sow discord, he added.

His comments acknowledge the pain of a peace-loving religious community when one of its own flock loses his way and contemplates, or carries out, violent acts. They also recognise that extremism, mixed with religious fervour, make for a potent mix.

Well-known interfaith advocate Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, founding board member of the Centre for Interfaith Understanding which is organising a webinar this evening on religious extremism, says: "Christian extremism should be seen as no different from other forms of extremism and hence, we must talk of extremism as a problem in all religions and not just 'them' (other religions, especially Islam).

"For far too long, we've not acknowledged this. This, to me, is the real danger and Christian leaders must step up and talk about it openly. There should be no shame in talking about it. As Muslim leaders learnt, we need to acknowledge the problem and

not sweep it under the carpet. This is the same message we should tell the Christian leaders. Both communities can then work in solidarity."

The Muslim community has been on this journey of facing up to its extremist fringe and countering it, for a while. For the Christian community, the journey is just beginning.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on February 05, 2021, with the headline 'Wake-up call for Christian community'. [Subscribe](#)

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